

Carrots & Buckwheat and Pumpkins,

OH MY!

Farmers find new revenue streams with alternative crops.

ever thought about venturing into nontraditional produce? Alternative crops can provide additional

income, give your farming some variety and, when used in crop rotations, break up the cycle of diseases, weeds and insects. Of course, as with all new business endeavors, it's important to thoroughly research your idea beforehand and begin gradually.

That's how Don Schuster, a project economist with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, made his farm so successful. Schuster started his business inadvertently by growing pumpkins and raising exotic animals for fun. As the income from the pumpkins started to increase, he took the plunge and Schuster's Playtime Farm of Deerfield, Wis., was born. When the pumpkin income began to dwindle, "we started adding things like hayrides, a bonfire pit and a large corn maze. We started slowly and we've grown slowly," he says.

These days, the farm's income greatly exceeds what Schuster earns at his part-time university job. This financial success could be attributed to the fact that new ideas and expansion are always in the works. Schuster also sells Indian corn and twenty varieties of squash, and he has concessions, a petting zoo and a round centennial barn available for rent. "We're selling a memory," he says. "We make our money because of the package deal – the hayrides, concessions and different activities." Most successful alternative-crop farmers add an extra something to their product, Schuster says. "Niche markets are often here today, gone tomorrow. You have to be careful what you get into," he adds. Having studied a variety of alternative markets in his work at the university, the best advice he has is to start slowly and feel out the market. "Talk to other people in the business, and don't be afraid to try something new."

---- Sarah Ludwig Rausch