



Hello!

My name is Ellie Andrews and I am the new Specialty Crops Advisor for Sonoma, Marin, and Napa counties. I began this position in January 2023. I hope this introduction letter helps provide some information about my background and how I am currently approaching my role in this position. I'd like to invite commercial specialty crop growers located in Sonoma, Marin, and Napa counties to reach out and connect!

Originally from Ohio, I completed my bachelor's degree in field ecology with a focus on plant biology. I have always loved plants and being outside, so this program was a great fit for me. It took me to a variety of field locations to learn about plants, fungi, soil, and how everything fits together in different ecosystems. After taking a class about sustainable agriculture during my senior year, I interned on a small farm where I gained experience planting vegetables, working in the start house, and small-farm day-to-day operations. This motivated me to get more experience with organic farming after I graduated.

From there, I was fortunate to work on several small-scale certified organic farms that focused on specialty crops such as mixed vegetables, winter greens, cut flowers, herbs, microgreens, and culinary mushrooms. This enabled me to gain experience and practical skills with a wide variety of high value crops that were unique in the region. I packed CSA boxes, made deliveries to local restaurants, and saw behind-the-scenes of the local food network. During this time, I also worked at restaurants that source locally, which helped me understand what restaurants were looking for when buying produce. These experiences with food and agriculture left a major impact on me and helped me think more about how I wanted to contribute to local food systems.

One of the growers I worked with during this time had a background in plant pathology. She could look at a diseased plant in the field, take an educated guess about possible causes, and implement effective management approaches. This was amazing to me. When I looked at the same moldy pepper for instance, all I saw was a "sad plant." I felt clueless and fascinated, which meant I was on to something. Seeing this skill set inspired me to seek out more specialized training to better understand and manage plant health. Around the same time, I learned about the role that Extension can play in supporting local growers, and our Extension advisor for my home county suggested I should consider graduate school.

At this point, I became interested in what applied agricultural science has to offer growers, so I did a master's degree in Plant Health Management from Ohio State University while working for Ohio State Extension. This was an applied, hands-on interdisciplinary degree where I got to learn about integrated pest management, plant pathology, and soil fertility all while gaining experience working in Extension. This was great for me because I got to work with growers directly through my job while simultaneously learning the science behind agriculture in class and labs. During this time, I volunteered with a variety of organizations focused on building local food systems and supporting small farms. This was when I realized that I not only enjoy growing produce, but I also wanted to find ways to use science to help make growers' jobs a bit easier.

From there, I wanted to gain experience with agricultural research particularly with tree crops since my prior experience was mainly with annuals. My interests in tree crops, water dynamics, nutrient management, and agroecology brought me to UC Davis. Being more of an in-the-field person, I wanted my research to be





applied and focused on sustainable management practices that growers find relevant. In December 2022, I completed a PhD in Horticulture and Agronomy at UC Davis where my research focused on using organic matter amendments to improve nutrient cycling, soil-plant water dynamics, and soil microbial communities. I worked with three fantastic grower collaborators who hosted on-farm field trials for my research, which was funded by a Western SARE grant. I developed skills in soil and plant sampling, nutrient analysis, water status monitoring, microbiology, data analysis, and communication that I am looking forward to applying in my new position.

I really enjoy the interdisciplinary nature of applied agricultural sciences and I am excited to use my skill set to serve specialty crop growers in Sonoma, Marin, and Napa counties. I have training and experience with nutrient and water management, plant disease diagnosis, and integrated pest management. I can provide support for specialty crop growers who want to implement practices that build soil health, such as organic matter amendment application, cover cropping, and strategies for reducing soil disturbance. I have worked with farm equipment on small and large operations and can help growers find scale-appropriate equipment. In addition, I can assist growers with variety selection, diversification, crop planning, and climate adaptation strategies. I am looking forward to working with local processors, marketers, and organizations focused on the local food system sustainability as well. In this region, specialty crops include high value fruits, vegetables, olives, cut flowers, specialty grains, etc., essentially all crops excluding grapes and forage since there are separate advisors dedicated these areas.

After spending the last several years in the Central Valley, I am new to the region and have a lot to learn. I would greatly appreciate any input and feedback from specialty crop growers, producers, marketers, and organizations involved in food system sustainability. During my first year as Specialty Crops Advisor, I will focus on conducting a needs assessment to learn about growers' goals, understand any barriers to meeting those goals, and ensure my outreach and research program is oriented to support growers' core priorities. I am learning about these topics through farm visits, informal interview conversations, surveys, and small focus groups. To the growers who have already shared a bit about your specialty crop operations with me, thank you.

You can contact me at [eandrews@ucanr.edu](mailto:eandrews@ucanr.edu) if you are interested in participating in the needs assessment or if you have any questions or feedback. Looking forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,

Ellie Andrews

