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February 2024

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No. 250

Jersey Tastes!

Sowing Seeds for Healthy School Meals



By Tom Castronovo
Executive Editor/Publisher
Gardener News

I've attended some New Jersey State Board of Agriculture meetings recently. They're a great place to hear about issues that the Board and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA) tackle.

The State Board has eight members, all of whom must be working farmers, with two members' terms ending each year to be replaced by two nominees from the annual State Agricultural Convention.

The Board serves as the policymaking body for NJDA, and oversees the annual State Agricultural Convention, where delegates from agricultural organizations vote on policy resolutions for the year.

Many of us involved in gardening have familiarity with some NJDA programs. Some know about the Department's Division of Plant Industry, which inspects nurseries to ensure plants sold to consumers or to garden centers are

(Cont. on Page 14)



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Around The Garden

By Tom Castronovo
Gardener News

A Few New Laws Affecting N.J. Agriculture

Here are a few new laws that Governor Murphy signed on January 8, 2024, that will affect the agricultural community in the great Garden State.

The first law expands wildlife fencing grants to farmers who lease land.

Farmers who lease their land can qualify for a state grant to install fencing to protect their crops from wildlife thanks to a measure sponsored by Assemblymen Alex Sauickie and Kevin J. Rooney.

The legislation (A5486/S3916) permits farmers who lease land for agricultural or horticultural purposes to apply for a grant from the State Agriculture Development Committee or the Department of Agriculture with permission from the owner. It expands a 2021 grant program that provides matching funds for fencing on unpreserved farmland and certain farms in the Pinelands and Highlands. Preserved farmlands already qualified for a similar grant under a 2017 law. However, all previous grant programs required the farmers to be landowners.

"All farmers deserve an opportunity to protect their valuable produce, especially from New Jersey's destructive white-tail deer," Sauickie (R-Ocean) said. "This law helps farmers secure their annual harvest so they can stay in this state for the long term and continue to contribute to New Jersey's prized agricultural industry."

To qualify, farmers must receive written permission from the landowner and agree to continue to use the land for eight years. If a commercial farm does not qualify for the SADC's farmland stewardship fencing grant program, it will be eligible for the agriculture department's matching grant program. Applicants could receive a grant equal to 50% of the project costs, not to exceed \$50,000.

"Millions of dollars in lost crops each year can be directly attributed to wildlife and the overpopulation of deer. More than half of New Jersey farmers report that deer are responsible for most of the yearly damage to their crops," Rooney (R-Bergen) said. "This law will equip farmers with the tools they need to ensure we keep the garden in the Garden State."

The second one is hailed by agricultural leaders as the "single most important positive piece of legislation," Assemblymen Alex Sauickie and Rob Clifton's bill promising fairer farmland assessments conducted for preservation was signed into law.

"This legislation is easily a home run and helps level the playing field for farmers," Sauickie (R-Ocean) said in testimony during a Senate committee meeting last year. "It will help the state meet its goal to preserve 500,000 acres of farmland and keeps the Garden State the state that it should be."

The bill (A4729) makes changes to the Farmland

Preservation Program's appraisal formula to include other relevant factors such as the value of farmland in nearby towns and counties and the importance of preserving farmland in the area. The State Agriculture Development Committee, which oversees the preservation program, would be required to use the appraisal process that results in the higher value as the basis for negotiations with the landowner.

According to a Rutgers analysis, real estate values increased by 3% a year, peaking at 15% in 2021, while easement values decreased by 20%.

"Reconsidering the appraisal process is vital to the future of farmland preservation in New Jersey," Clifton (R-Monmouth) said. "The preservation program is an investment in the Garden State. Farmers deserve to know they are making a wise financial decision."

Brian Wilson, the administrator for the Burlington County Agriculture Development Board, said he has been involved in the state's farmland preservation program for 18 years and sees the legislation having a great impact.

"I believe that this legislation is perhaps the single most important positive piece of legislation to come around in my 18 years here," Wilson said in a committee hearing on the bill. "It will certainly lead to an increase in both the numbers of applicants for the farmland preservation program and the number of farms that will be preserved here in the immediate future."

In addition, one high-ranking agriculture official said the new law will be a "national game-changer," likely to be copied by other states.

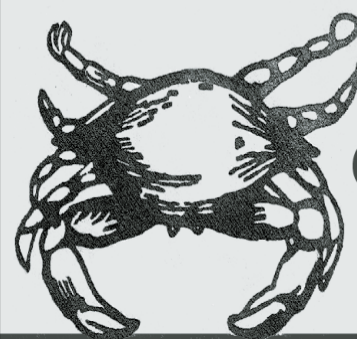
The bill is supported by the New Jersey Farm Bureau, North Hanover Township, Jackson Township Council, the Burlington County Agriculture Development Board, the Ocean County Agriculture Development Board, and the Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey.

Since the program's inception 40 years ago, New Jersey has preserved 248,009 acres of farmland.

The third are bill numbers (A111/S3201), which were also signed into law by Governor Murphy. This new law provides that any farmstand or location on a farm, or location used by a farm or other agricultural operation, to sell firewood obtained from property other than the seller's land would not be considered a lumber yard under municipal land use regulations or for other regulatory purposes. The bill also prohibits any firewood obtained from outside of the State from being sold or offered for sale at any farmstand or location on a farm, or location used by a farm or other agricultural operation, in the State unless the firewood is heat treated and certified as heat treated and pest free by the state of origin.

Happy trails, and happy Valentine's Day, Mom.

Editor's Note: Tom Castronovo is executive editor and publisher of Gardener News. Tom's lifelong interest in gardening and passion for agriculture, environmental stewardship, gardening and landscaping, led to the founding of the Gardener News, which germinated in April 2003 and continues to bloom today. He is also dedicated to providing inspiration, and education to the agricultural, gardening, landscaping and nursery communities through this newspaper and GardenerNews.com.



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As I'm writing this, it's been two years since the majority of New Jersey has seen measurable snowfall.

Now, there are plenty of you who might be thankful not to have to shovel heavy, wet snow. That's a chore many of us despise, especially those of us getting up in years and dealing with the way aging affects our back and legs.

However, that lack of snow is also part of a larger pattern of increasingly unpredictable weather conditions that provide challenges to even the most seasoned growers, whether they be involved in farm operations, nurseries, or home gardens.

Our state's hardworking farmers have become accustomed over the years to constantly adjusting to weather patterns – and on a longer-term horizon, to climate changes – that can have a massive impact on their crops and, in some cases, their livestock as well. For instance, long, drawn-out heat waves can reduce the amount of milk a dairy cow produces unless the farmer can find an artificial way of cooling down its habitat.

So, what would be the best way to ensure the plants you are growing in your garden can tolerate New Jersey's weather and thrive in their growth?

Clearly, plants that are already



NJ Dept. of Agriculture

By Joe Atchison III
Assistant Secretary of Agriculture

Jersey Native Plants are Beneficial for Many Reasons

accustomed to all the conditions of New Jersey – not only our weather patterns, but also the soils and other elements – will stand the best chance of continuing to thrive once moved into your garden.

Stated succinctly, plants that are native to New Jersey have a head start when growing in New Jersey. That was in the minds of legislators when they passed a law that bolsters the use of native plants.

The *Jersey Native Plants* program was part of legislation that encourages residents to think locally when planning their gardens and landscaping. These plants provide many benefits for gardeners, and it just makes sense to add them to your planting schedule this year. The legislation included direction to the New Jersey Department of Agriculture to create a marketing program based on the successful

and longstanding *Jersey Fresh* campaign for the fruits and vegetables produced by our farmers.

The benefits to our state's gardeners in choosing native plants are many.

Jersey Native Plants require less maintenance because they are acclimated to the growing conditions in the Garden State. They can save you money and time, because once they are established, they require less water and trimming. These plants promote local biodiversity and can even lend a helping hand to the environment by not requiring as much water or fertilizer as non-native plants.

They provide a wide array of colors, textures, and heights. Most of these native plants are non-invasive, meaning they are better at “getting along” with other plant varieties and will allow all your other plants to

grow and flourish.

They provide natural habitats for pollinators that are found throughout New Jersey, which need all the help we can provide as they themselves deal with changes in weather conditions. Native plants also have developed natural defenses against many pests and diseases, helping to stem the proliferation of those unwanted intruders.

The New Jersey Legislature continues to look carefully at environmental issues, including water usage and invasive species of both plants and pests. Recent legislation has charged the New Jersey Department of Agriculture with leading in the formation of an invasive plants task force to reduce the instance of such plants and establishing themselves to the detriment of native and other non-invasive plants.

This spring, the NJDA will be launching a pilot program to promote *Jersey Native Plants* and to provide retailers and growers with marketing materials that link to a website with even more information.

Once at that website, gardeners can learn more about the various plants' characteristics, including preferred growing conditions, amount of sunlight needed and height/width requirements to ensure you're giving your *Jersey Native Plants* all the room they need.

When shopping for new plants this season, be sure to add some *Jersey Native Plants* to your order.

They're good for both you and your garden, for so many reasons.

Editor's Note: *New Jersey Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Joe Atchison III is directing the Department, assuming the responsibilities of Secretary, until the State Board of Agriculture's recommendation for the new Secretary of Agriculture is approved by Governor Phil Murphy. Atchison is also the Director of the Division of Marketing and Development for the department. He can be reached at 609-292-3976.*

In the heart of New Jersey's thriving agricultural landscape, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) stands committed to fostering prosperity within the agriculture community. As we navigate the intricacies of the agriculture industry, it becomes imperative to address the misconceptions surrounding FSA's role and emphasize our dedication to being a proactive partner in your success.

The Direct Farm Operating Loans offered by FSA are not merely financial tools; they are strategic investments aimed at catalyzing growth. With a maximum loan amount of \$400,000, these loans serve as a cornerstone for new agricultural producers and seasoned professionals alike. Whether you are initiating a new venture, managing a family farm, or steering through the complexities of agricultural operations, FSA is here to empower your journey.

In the dynamic world of agriculture, adaptability is key. Recognizing the diverse financial needs of farmers, the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Direct Farm Operating Loans extend beyond traditional applications. Here's how you can strategically leverage these loans for restructuring existing financial commitments and promoting sustainable growth:

Loan Restructuring for Financial Agility:

- FSA's Farm Operating Loans



USDA Farm Service Agency

By Bob Andrzejczak
State Executive Director

Empowering Agricultural Growth: Direct Farm Operating Loans

offer an opportunity to consolidate and restructure existing debts. Whether you're looking to streamline payments, renegotiate terms, or manage multiple loans more efficiently, these loans provide the flexibility needed to optimize your financial landscape.

Favorable Interest Rates:

- One standout feature of FSA's Farm Operating Loans is the attractive interest rates they offer. As compared to commercial loans, FSA's rates are designed to be more favorable, reducing the financial burden on farmers. This aspect significantly enhances the feasibility of restructuring existing loans under terms that are advantageous for your operation.

Enhancing Operational Efficiency:

- Beyond restructuring, these loans empower farmers to invest in measures that enhance overall

operational efficiency. Whether it's upgrading equipment, adopting sustainable practices, or diversifying your enterprise, the funds can be strategically allocated to fortify your agricultural business.

Long-Term Sustainability:

- The focus isn't just on immediate financial relief. By utilizing Farm Operating Loans for restructuring, you are positioning your farm for long-term sustainability. The goal is to create a financial framework that withstands challenges and fosters a robust, resilient agricultural enterprise.

In essence, FSA's Farm Operating Loans go beyond the conventional, offering a strategic tool for restructuring existing debts and catalyzing growth. Consider reaching out to your local FSA office to explore how these loans can be tailored to meet the specific needs of your farm.

One key aspect that warrants

clarification is the perception of FSA as the “lender of last resort.” I wish to dispel this notion unequivocally. FSA is not a fallback; we are your committed partner, eager to work with you to achieve your goals. Our focus is on collaboration, not contingency.

Creditworthiness often raises concerns, but let me assure you that FSA does not rely solely on credit scores to determine eligibility. We recognize that life brings its share of challenges, and our evaluation considers a comprehensive view of your financial history. Whether you are a seasoned operator or a newcomer to the industry, we are interested in your commitment and dedication to sound financial management.

Navigating the FSA application process can be intricate, and that's where our dedicated Farm Loan Team comes into play. These professionals are not paper pushers;

they are allies ready to guide you through the intricacies, assist with form completion, and connect you with additional resources. They understand your challenges because many of them are farmers or come from a farming background.

Our “Your Guide to FSA Farm Loans” booklet serves as a comprehensive resource for those seeking detailed insights into FSA programs. You can find a PDF copy of the booklet on [Farmers.gov](https://www.fsa.usda.gov). However, nothing beats a direct conversation. Reach out to our local FSA offices, where our knowledgeable professionals are ready to assist you.

At FSA, we are your collaborators, committed to fostering growth and prosperity within New Jersey's agricultural community. Your success is paramount to us, and we stand ready to support you in every step of your journey. Let us grow together.

Editor's Note: *Bob Andrzejczak is the State Executive Director of the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) in New Jersey. He can also be reached at 609-587-0104 during regular business hours. For more information, please visit <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/New-Jersey/sed-biography/index>*



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From the Director's Desk
Rutgers Outreach
Provided by Brian Schilling
Director

Farm Viability in New Jersey: A Time to Act

It has been said that agriculture is "our wisest pursuit."

Some New Jersey farm families have been farming in this state since the time Thomas Jefferson first penned those famous words in a letter to George Washington. This speaks to the resolve, ingenuity, and adaptability of those in the farming industry. It speaks also to farmers' deep, long-standing commitments to the land and resources that enable farming, as well as to the communities that rely on them.

Farmers in our state and across the country, from those who have farmed here for many generations to those newer to the industry, are all owed the gratitude of the American population for (to quote Clinton-era USDA Secretary Dan Glickman) making the U.S. a "food sufficient nation." Imagining the contrary to be true—a nation incapable of feeding itself—is simply unfathomable. This is among the reasons that I often struggle to reconcile the acknowledged importance of agriculture to this country's prosperity and national security (i.e., domestic food self-sufficiency) with the reality that too many farmers find their economic viability threatened by a range of complex market, land use, regulatory, and other factors. These add to the ubiquitous farming challenges stemming from Mother Nature's unpredictability, ranging from unfavorable weather to evolving pest, weed, and disease pressures.

My message over recent years, and in this article, is not one of doom and gloom. Rather, it is a call to action. Roughly a year ago, during a legislative hearing on farm viability, I commented that, "despite the many significant challenges facing New Jersey's farming industry, the decline of agriculture in New Jersey is not an inevitability." I stand by those

words.

New Jersey agriculture has long benefitted from forward-looking farm leaders, elected officials, and academicians who see the essential importance of supporting our state's agricultural industry. As I write these words, I think of the many land use and economic pressures faced by farmers as we emerged from the second World War and the subsequent decades that witnessed historically high losses of farms and farmland. These leaders' foresight—and commitment to action—resulted in farmland assessment, right to farm and farmland preservation statutes, each of which I consider a cornerstone support for farming in our state.

In the early/mid-1990s, I cut my professional teeth working as a staff economist for the FARMS Commission, an expansive initiative to examine the status of New Jersey's farming industry, identify critical challenges, and develop strategies for supporting its future. The work of the Commission was substantial and impactful. Over my 30+ year career, I consider this joint effort a high-water mark for broad-based industry-government-university cooperation to advance agricultural retention and development. It comprehensively documented the needs of the industry and presented ambitious, but actionable, solutions, including stronger right-to-farm protections and better-funded farmland preservation programs.

As has occurred several times in the past, it is again time for industry leadership, agency and legislative leadership, and university expertise to mobilize and focus attention on the challenges (and opportunities) facing the state's farming industry and establish a bold and progressive plan of action to ensure its prosperous future. Farm viability—the ability of a

farm family/business to meet its economic needs—is the key to the retention and development of agriculture in the Garden State.

Why the urgency? According to the USDA, New Jersey's agricultural industry comprises 9,883 farms, of all sizes, who operate and manage more than 730,000 acres of land and sell more than \$1.1 billion of agricultural products. Many know these statistics. Less well known is the fact that only 383 farms account for 75% of agricultural products sold in the state. These farms account for 84% of the nursery/greenhouse/floriculture sector's sales, 82% of fruit and berry sales, and 79% of vegetable sales. I refer to these farms as a proverbial economic heart of the industry, and many report that they are struggling under the confluence of rising input costs, flat prices, and other business factors. Further attrition within this cohort of New Jersey farms would dramatically impact the economic viability and the physical and cultural landscape of agriculture in New Jersey.

For more than a century, Rutgers Cooperative Extension has supported the state's agriculture industry. We are committed to doing our part to increase the economic viability of farming by providing research and extension work that informs agricultural policies, helps the industry modernize through development and adoption of new technologies and production/business practices, supports natural resource stewardship, explores new market possibilities, combats evolving disease, pest, and weed pressures, and responds to challenges presented by shifting climate conditions. I look forward to reporting on these efforts over the coming year.

I wish all in the agricultural industry a safe, productive, and prosperous 2024.

Editor's Note: Brian J. Schilling, Ph.D., is Director of Rutgers Cooperative Extension and Senior Associate Director of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station.

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LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY NEWS

Hudson and Camden County 4-H Team Up to Prepare the Next Generation of Urban Food and Agriculture Changemakers

Over the next five years, a new generation of food and agriculture changemakers will be prepared to participate in and lead urban agriculture activities, better understand food systems and address social justice issues in Jersey City and Camden.

This is made possible by a \$638,144 grant awarded to the Department of 4-H Youth Development, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, by the USDA-National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) for the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) program. The goal of CYFAR is to improve the quality and quantity of comprehensive community-based programs for children, youth, and families in urban areas as supported by the Cooperative Extension system.

A pilot program will be initiated in spring 2024 for a cohort of teens, ages 14-18, to apply to participate in Changemakers, a 9-month leadership and skill-building program to engage urban teens in community-based food systems education and urban agriculture. The program will also include a focus on social justice and food security, modeled on successful programs that the counties have previously implemented. This educational experience for youth will culminate in the development and implementation of a Food Systems Action Plan in which they become Changemakers in their own communities.

“This CYFAR funding creates new possibilities for 4-H programming in Camden and Jersey City. The New Jersey 4-H program looks forward to building new partnerships and delivering high-quality 4-H learning experiences that help young people develop important leadership and life skills, while improving food security in their communities,” said Rachel Lyons, chair of the Department of 4-H Youth Development, Rutgers Cooperative Extension.

The CYFAR program aims to aid land-grant and Cooperative Extension systems to develop and deliver educational programs that equip limited-resource families and youth with the skills they need to lead positive, productive, contributing lives. Interested schools, youth and community leaders are welcome to reach out with questions by contacting Claudia Urdanivia at HUDSON4H@njaes.rutgers.edu or Sharon Kinsey at sbkinsey@njaes.rutgers.edu

The 4-H Youth Development Program is part of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, a unit of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. 4-H educational programs are offered to all youth, grades K-13 (one year out of high school), on an age-appropriate basis, without regard to race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, atypical hereditary cellular or blood trait, marital status, domestic partnership status, military service, veteran status, and any other category protected by law.

Announcement: Ruth Carll is New State Program Leader in Consumer Horticulture and Master Gardener Program

Announcement from Nicholas Polanin, chair, Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR)

Please join me in welcoming our newest ANR faculty member, Ruth Carll, who joined RCE on January 2 in her new role as the State Program Leader in Consumer Horticulture and Master Gardener Program.

Ruth is an innovative leader in the botanical garden and preservation community, with extensive experience and success in development and expansion of community engagement throughout her career. Ruth has a Masters Degree in Botany from Arizona State University, and has previously served as an Adjunct Faculty member at Maricopa Community College, Director of Programming at the Desert Botanical Garden, and as Executive Director of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy (all in Arizona), before most recently as the Senior Naturalist with the Monmouth County Parks System here in NJ.

In her new role here at NJAES/RCE/ANR, Ruth will provide statewide leadership and collaboration across working groups, stakeholders, and Extension Departments and Specialists in support of improving and expanding consumer horticulture outreach, education, and engagement, including the Rutgers Master Gardener (RMG) program.

This new position within ANR has been part of our Strategic Plan since 2013, and we are very excited to have Ruth join us in this exciting effort.

Distinguished Professor Lily Young Receives Daniel Gorenstein Memorial Award

Lily Young, a Distinguished Professor of Environmental Microbiology at Rutgers University–New Brunswick, received the Daniel Gorenstein Memorial Award for outstanding scholarly achievement and exceptional service.

Young – a Board of Governors Professor who is a faculty member of the Department of Environmental Sciences at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (SEBS) – has conducted research as an environmental microbiologist at Rutgers for more than 30 years.

“Receiving this award is a most unexpected and meaningful recognition from the Rutgers community that I can think of,” said Young. “And coming from my colleagues, it is particularly meaningful and humbling. I am very thankful and a bit overwhelmed.”

Elected to the National Academy of Engineering, among the highest professional distinctions bestowed to engineers, Young has held a number of positions at Rutgers, including associate dean for graduate studies at SEBS, chair of the Department of Environmental Sciences, dean of international programs at SEBS and provost for faculty development and excellence at Rutgers–New Brunswick.

Young is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Academy of Microbiology. The professor, who has received more than \$20 million in grant funding over the past 25 years, focuses her research on microbial transformation of organics, metals and minerals in the environment.



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In the Chef's Corner

By Andy Lagana
Chef

Spiedini with Stuffing and Sautéed Spinach

Hello *Gardener News* readers. For this issue, I am bringing my Italian heritage to the table with one of my favorites – Spiedini. Spiedini translates in English simply as skewers. They are essentially fancy Italian meat kebabs that can be customized in just about any way you see fit.

Below you will see how I like to prepare them.

The ingredients needed include 2 lbs. of flank steak, NY strip or filet mignon, and salt and pepper to taste. For the accompanying stuffing, you will need ¾ cup of extra virgin olive oil (EVOO), 1 onion chopped, 1/3 cup water, 1 tablespoon of tomato paste, ¼ cup chopped parsley, 2 oz. of grated Pecorino Romano, 1 teaspoon of salt, 1 red onion, bay leaves, 1 cup of Italian bread crumbs (I like Progresso), a lemon wedge and more chopped parsley to garnish.

I buy a whole piece of beef whether it be flank steak, NY strip, or filet steak. I do prefer the flank steak because of the higher fat content and better flavor. You will need to chill the piece in the freezer until it starts to freeze, and then using a sharp knife, slice no thicker than ¼ inch. If you do not feel confident, ask your butcher. Be sure to specify that the beef needs to be thin!

The steak is to be pounded thin (to about ⅛ inch) and cut into small pieces, approximately 2 inches x 4 inches. Sprinkle each with a little bit of salt and freshly ground black pepper then refrigerate until you are

ready to roll the spiedini.

For the stuffing, fry a small onion in 2 tablespoons EVOO until translucent for 3-4 minutes. Add water and cook until softened, 3-4 minutes. Add tomato paste, and fry briefly. Then add breadcrumbs, stirring to combine and toasting over medium heat. Remove from the heat, cool, and add the remaining EVOO, parsley, finely grated Pecorino Romano cheese and salt to taste.

Now it is time to assemble and bake this dish. Preheat the oven to 350°F/180°C and have a large baking sheet ready. Peel and quarter the red onion, then separate the red onion layers. Set aside until needed.

Take one of the pounded slices of beef and lay it on a work surface. Place about a tablespoon of the breadcrumb mixture on the short end of the slice of beef, roll up tightly, folding in the sides and sealing the filling in as you roll. Repeat with the remaining beef slices and breadcrumb mixture.

Thread four rolls onto a wooden skewer, placing a bay leaf and piece of onion between each roll. Pour the EVOO on a flat plate, and do the same with the breadcrumbs on a separate plate. Dip all the skewered spiedini in olive oil then in the breadcrumbs. Press the breadcrumbs so they stick, and tap off any excess.

Arrange them on a baking sheet and drizzle any leftover oil over the spiedini. You may need to use extra if there's no oil left. Place in a preheated oven for about

20 minutes or until golden on the surface. Turn them halfway through cooking to have an even browning of the breading.

Alternatively, spiedini can be shallow fried in olive oil in a large skillet until cooked through. This is the way I actually prefer it. Serve with lemon wedges and a sprinkle of fresh chopped parsley.

As an accompaniment, I like sautéed spinach with Parmigiano Reggiano. You will need one large bag of baby spinach, 2 cloves of minced garlic, 1/8 cup white wine, 2 tablespoons of EVOO, 1/8 cup chicken stock, salt, pepper and grated Parmigiano or Pecorino cheese.

Heat a sauté pan to medium - high heat. Add 1 tablespoon of EVOO and garlic to the pan, and sauté until golden. Add white wine and the bag of spinach. Season with salt and pepper - crushed red pepper is also a nice option. Cook until fully wilted and remove from heat to a nice serving platter. Garnish with Parmigiano or Pecorino, and EVOO.

With regard to wine pairing, my choices include a Pinot Noir or drier wine such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah/Shiraz, Merlot and Sangiovese. I am partial to Sangiovese, which has a vibrant acidity, sour cherry flavors and herbal Mediterranean notes of oregano and thyme. This grape makes wines that are earthy, rustic and scream Italy! You will often notice a note of roasted tomato, orange rind or black tea too. Buon Appetito!

Whole Foods Market Unveils New Pollinator Health Policy for Fresh Produce and Floral

Whole Foods Market announced a new pollinator policy for its Fresh Produce and Floral purchasing to support pollinators in recognition of the critical role they play in our food system and the environment. The company has long championed pollinator health through its commitment to organic agriculture, which prohibits toxic persistent pesticides.

As part of the new pollinator policy, by 2025, the company will:

Require all fresh produce and floral growers to implement an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) system, which prioritizes preventative and biological pest control measures and reduces the need for chemical pesticides; prohibit the use of nitroguanidine neonicotinoids (clothianidin, dinotefuran, imidacloprid, and thiamethoxam) in all potted plants they sell; and encourage all fresh produce and floral suppliers to phase out the use of nitroguanidine neonicotinoids.

In addition to honeybees, Whole Foods Market recognizes native pollinators, such as bumble bees, wasps, and butterflies, are critical to the food system and an important indicator of biodiversity.

“We understand the important role pollinators play in our food system and, through this policy, will build on our long legacy of supporting biodiversity and pollinator health,” said Karen Christensen, senior vice president, Perishables & Quality Standards at Whole Foods Market. “This is another critical step forward in our journey of climate-smart agriculture as part of our purpose to nourish people and the planet.”

The company engages its foundations and internationally recognized third parties to create campaigns that raise awareness of pollinators and their impact. In addition, its Whole Kids Bee Grant Program helps schools and non-profit organizations receive support for educational beehives and bee programming so students can observe bees up close and learn more about the vital role of pollinators. Since 2014, the Whole Kids Bee Grant program has awarded more than 850 educational beehives to schools and nonprofits with support from The Bee Cause Project.

Whole Foods Market continues to work across the industry to encourage all fresh produce and floral suppliers to phase out the use of nitroguanidine neonicotinoids, which are particularly harmful to pollinators, and pave the way for other solutions. Whole Foods Market suppliers like Rainier Fruit continue to demonstrate their commitment to advancing pollinator health by maintaining 150 acres of dedicated pollinator habitat, in addition to 325 acres of Bee Better Certified® orchard in partnership with the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation.

“Every single piece of fruit we grow requires pollination. We wouldn't have a crop without honeybees, so pollinator health is of utmost importance for us as farmers,” said Mark Zirkle, president of Rainier Fruit. “We're appreciative of Whole Food's advocacy and look forward to continued efforts towards more sustainable agriculture.”

For more information on how Whole Foods Market is protecting pollinators and raising awareness for the critical role they play in our lives, visit <https://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/mission-in-action/environmental-stewardship/pollinator-health>.

Winter is the best time to view and assess our woody landscapes. Shade and ornamental trees display their architecture, undisguised by the absence of foliage. Have you noticed how much more of your trees' structure you see in the winter landscape?

The seasonal lack of foliage allows arborists a pristine view of trees and ornamental plants, allowing for more thorough assessments of their primary structural components. Arborists are accustomed to getting a close-up look while climbing, but trunk and limb defects are easier to identify from the ground when dormant, since they are not hidden in the foliated canopy. Proper identification of dead, conflicting, storm damaged, and over-extending limbs informs pruning goals. This is also an excellent time to enhance trees' structure through pruning. Structural pruning of newly established trees is critical in extending their longevity.

Overall site conditions are also more apparent during this dormancy period. Where natural areas interface with our landscapes, clues are offered guiding plant choices for different sites. Consider enhancing natural areas with native but rare plants to create



Tree Notes

By Bert Kuhn
NJ Licensed Tree Expert (LTE)
Licensed Tree Care Operator (LTCO)

Don't Delay, Call a Qualified Arborist Today!

diversity for wildlife including pollinators. Are you looking to build or fill out your current landscape? Block objectionable views? Enhance privacy? Site assessments are the cornerstones of successful landscapes and are often best performed at this time of the year.

The first prerequisite for hiring a qualified arborist is to determine if they are properly licensed with the state of New Jersey. For a thorough site assessment, you are better off choosing a New Jersey Licensed Tree Expert or NJLTE. They are tested for competency in all types of tree pruning, removal, stump grinding, tree establishment, fertilizing, cabling, lightning protection, consulting, diagnosis, and risk assessment and mitigation. Proof of insurance and thirty-two hours of continuing education

every two years are mandatory for arborists to maintain this state license. We've now seen how this has protected trees and helped arborists remain engaged and educated in the latest research.

Does your property contain large trees which are a cause of concern? Hazard tree identifications are performed with greater ease as all structural components can be analyzed from the ground. New Jersey Licensed Tree Experts can also assist with tree risk mitigation, to help put your mind at ease. Take advantage of this time by scheduling an assessment with an experienced, qualified arborist.

Not only does this time of year offer excellent opportunities for assessments, it's also an advantageous time to perform many tree services. Most inquiries or interest in our services come

when the weather turns warmer and property owners venture outside, but the work is best done when the trees are dormant.

By scheduling assessments and estimates now, you proactively beat the spring rush. Often this equates to greater value for the customer as tree companies are not backed up, and many services are performed more efficiently with a lack of foliage. This assures your woody landscapes are safe and in healthy condition entering the spring.

Have some gnarly trees causing concern? Overgrown ornamentals in need of pruning? Are you suspicious of insect or disease problems and left wondering why certain trees are not growing as vigorously as others? These are questions an experienced arborist can advise upon. Don't delay, call your qualified arborist today!

Are you interested in trees, arboriculture, or tree climbing? Are you in need of continuing education credits? Then please consider attending the Garden State Tree Conference, or GSTC held February 29 and March 1, 2024, at Harrah's resort in Atlantic City. This conference is open to everyone and offers four different tracks of education featuring the best speakers in arboriculture. There will be a climbers' tent outside, where novice and experienced climbers can learn from the best. This year's trade show will be the biggest yet, with exhibitors displaying the latest and greatest equipment. This conference is also known for its happy hour and parties at night and this year's will take that to a new level! If you have an interest in arboriculture and learning from the best, this is the place to be. Online registration is available here: <https://www.njaisa.com/gstc-2024>

Editor's Note: Bert Kuhn is President of the New Jersey Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture and CO/Owner of Action Tree Service (# NJTC768009), based out of Watchung, NJ. He can be reached at 908-756-4100

I cannot recall how many times I have failed to understand simple plant physiology! For example, I once thought Asters had petals typical of most flowering plants. I was wrong. With Dogwoods, I mistakenly thought the showy flowers had petals, and I was only partially correct in thinking the showy portions of Magnolia flowers were petals.

Yes, it no longer comes as a surprise when I am wrong. However, I was truly surprised to learn the beautiful foliage of the Japanese Umbrella Pine, *Sciadopitys verticillata* are not needles, but modified stems!

As you may have guessed, Umbrella Pine is also not a true pine. Rather, it is the sole member of the Sciadopityaceae or Umbrella Pine Family! It was originally placed within the Taxaceae or Yew Family, followed by the Cupressaceae or Cypress Family. It is now believed the Sciadopityaceae is a distant and much older relative to both of these families. One challenge in determining the tree's family heritage is due to the age of the genus. Plants of the Sciadopityaceae are thought to date back between 230-250 million years to the Triassic



Morris County Park Commission

By Bruce Crawford
Horticultural Manager

Sciadopitys – A Beautiful Plant That May Fool You

Period. The genus initially developed numerous species that spread over a wide range including North America, Europe and Asia. Since then, the species has dwindled to one, which is currently found in the clouded, mountainous regions of central Japan at elevations between 1,500-3,000 feet.

The plant was first described and named *Taxus verticillata* by the Swedish physician and naturalist Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828) in 1784. In 1842 it was renamed *Sciadopitys* by the team of Phillip Franz von Siebold (1796-1866), a German physician/botanist and Joseph Gerhard Zuccarini (1797-1848), a German professor of botany. The genus name is derived from the Greek *Sciados* for shadow or umbrella and *Pitys* meaning Pine. The

species name is from the Latin meaning whorled, referring to the arrangement of the green 'foliage' around the stems. The plant was first brought to the United States in 1861 by Dr. George Hall (1820-1899), a physician who subsequently became a plant trader. The plant was given to the Historian Francis Parkman Jr. (1823-1893) who is credited with providing the common name!

Beautifully pyramidal in form, it is the 'foliage' not the form that attracts the most attention. In fact, the foliage is composed of not one, but two distinct types of 'leaves': the long glossy 'leaves' that appear in whirls of 20-30 around the branches and small scale-like structures found along the stem. It is those whirls of 'leaves' that resemble the spokes of an Umbrella that I failed to

understand when observing the plant. Most authorities now believe these 'leaves' to be photosynthetic stems called cladodes that serve the function of leaves. The pliable and flattened cladodes are 4-6" long by 1/8" wide and have a glossy, plastic-like appearance. Running the length of both the top and bottom is a prominent central groove, with the lower groove attractively colored silver from the numerous stomata. The whirls of cladodes persist for 3-4 years before being shed. Far less noticeable are the small scale-like remnants of the true leaves. No longer photosynthetic, the tan structures appear at the base of each cladode and sporadically along younger stems.

The plant remains rare in commerce due to the modest annual growth of 4-6" when

young. Often promoted as a dwarf plant for rock gardens, it grows with more exuberance once reaching 6' tall. In fact, in Japanese woodlands it can reach 100' tall and live for over 600 years! With age, the lower branches decline, revealing the attractive reddish-brown bark that peels off in long strips. Hardy in zones 5-7, it prefers well-drained, humus rich soils with an acidic pH. Best protected from strong winds, it otherwise prefers full sun to partial shade.

Part of gardening is gaining an appreciation of the plants themselves and how they adapted to an ever-changing world. That is what makes beautiful plants like Japanese Umbrella Pine great fun. Neither a Pine nor a conventional evergreen, its glossy 'foliage' may fool you but, it tells a story every garden should share!

Editor's Note: Bruce Crawford is a lover of plants since birth, is the Manager of Horticulture for the Morris County Parks Commission, and a Past President of the Garden State Gardens Consortium. He can be reached at BCrawford@morrisparks.net



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This year's conference is open to anyone interested in trees and promises to be the best one yet. It will be held at Harrah's Resort and Casino February 29th and March 1st featuring speakers Chris Luley, Lindsey Purcell, and Jason Grabosky. It will be loaded with Continuing Education Units (12 CEUs) for NJ Licensed Tree Experts and Licensed Tree Care Operators. There will be four tracks of breakout sessions including one dedicated to Spanish speakers and more exhibitors than ever before, exhibiting indoors and outdoors.

Novice and experienced climbers alike will appreciate the climbers' tent with live, hands-on instruction. Of course, our conference is also known for its parties and you will not want to miss the Modern Equipment party in the pool this year!

For those needing extra credit, check out the additional day of training offered on Wednesday February 28th, with Lindsey Purcell's Certified Arborist Crash Course (6 CEUs).

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Jersey Tastes

Sowing Seeds for Healthy School Meals

(Continued from page 1)



free of pests and plant diseases.

Many are aware of the NJDA's branding programs, including the first and most well-known state-sponsored branding effort in the country, *Jersey Fresh*, and offshoots like *Jersey Grown*, *Jersey Raised*, and soon, *Jersey Native Plants*.

At one recent State Board meeting, it wasn't talk about plants and gardening that caught my attention. I was fascinated by discussions of the Department's Division of Food & Nutrition. I never knew how many efforts there are in New Jersey to help ensure that "food insecure" people get the help they need, especially access to fresh, healthy agricultural products for themselves and their families.

That becomes even more important when the food insecure people are children. Hungry children just don't learn as well as those who come to school well fed and with either a packed lunch or enough money to buy lunch in the cafeteria.

Beyond the amazing work the Division of Food & Nutrition does in helping to ensure that food banks, soup kitchens, pantries, and other community-feeding organizations have sufficient foods for their clients, the school-feeding programs (which I'll address in more detail) have taken on a more prominent role since they were moved at the state level from the Department of Education to the Department of Agriculture in 1996.

I came away from that State Board of Agriculture meeting enthralled with what this Division does. I wanted to know even more. As I did my research, I was filled with a sense of wanting to share with our *Gardener News* readers the knowledge I had gained about all the Division's very important programs.

Meeting Students' Nutrition Needs

If there's one place above others that the Division of Food & Nutrition's efforts have shown huge growth and improvement in recent years, it's in the school-feeding programs. And not just in making sure that students get fed, but that they understand why healthy eating habits are important. This connects New Jersey farmers with school feeding operations as places where farmers can provide fresh and even value-added products.

That last part – the deeper connection between farmers and schools – is aided in our Garden State because New Jersey is one of only four states where the Department of Agriculture, not the Department of Education or another agency, administers school feeding. Texas and New Jersey were the first two, then Florida and Nevada (both of which, by the way, reached out to the NJDA for advice on how to ramp up their programs).

In New Jersey, one of the major success stories

has been the growth of school breakfast participation through efforts to ensure the program is being made available to students. Just a few years back, not even a decade ago, New Jersey was in the bottom fifth of states reaching students with breakfast in schools, while it since has moved to the top 20 percent.

Division Director Rose Chamberlain and then-Secretary of Agriculture Douglas Fisher pinpointed that most schools had trouble offering breakfasts because they had to arrange for students to go to the cafeteria before classes started, and there just wasn't time in the day.

NJDA worked with the New Jersey Department of Education to empower schools throughout the state to provide "breakfast after the bell," which exponentially increased the number of schools providing breakfast.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program



Another part of creating the next generation of healthy eaters of farm products is the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program, where kids get to sample a featured fruit or vegetable and learn about it. In the 2023-2024 school year, a record-high 222 New Jersey schools are participating in the program.

"The United States Department of Agriculture allocates funding to New Jersey for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, to provide fresh produce to over 105,000 students in 57 districts throughout 16 counties during the school day, and the students also receive nutrition education," said Director Chamberlain. "Additionally, NJ has a unique incentive program where schools purchasing local are awarded an increase in funding."

The COVID Experience

The COVID-19 pandemic showed how nimble and adaptable the Division's school-feeding programs could be when pressed during a health emergency, Director Chamberlain said.

With schools closed, many students could have lost access to the only nutritious meals they got. But the Division worked with the USDA, implementing more than 100 "waivers" it granted, to create flexibilities

in how programs normally work, establishing a network of drop-off points and pickups so those nutritious foods would still get to students.

Summer Meals

Transitioning from in-school feeding to getting meals to students when school closes for summer is business as usual for the Division. This commitment even made New Jersey number-one nationally last year for summer meals!

"The 'Summer Food Service Program' provides free, nutritious meals and snacks to help children in low-income areas get the nutrition they need over the summer months when they're not going to school daily," said NJDA Assistant Secretary Joe Atchison III.

Farm-to-School Connection



Another piece of the Division's work with schools is the "Farm-to-School" program. Schools can partner with farmers to provide over 100 types of agricultural products to food-service operators.

It also has "School Gardens" activities, helping teach students that food comes from soil and toil. They learn the sciences behind farming, which open their eyes to professions that aren't necessarily working in a field. And they begin to appreciate the nutritional values of fresh products, as well as gain a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, the environment.

CACFP

I also learned that the federally funded Child and Adult Care Food Program provides nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children (Cont. on Page 22)

It's unbelievable that it is already February! The New Jersey Landscape Contractor Association (NJLCA) is gearing up for our next event, the Landscape New Jersey Trade Show and Conference at the Meadowlands Exposition Center on February 28th.

This one day, one stop shop offers an amazing trade show consisting of over 300 exhibit booths and some of the best educational content in the landscape industry. Classes range from pesticide training, fertilizer classes and tree care to organics, plant material, hardscapes, and business education. In addition, attendees can meet with new and returning vendors to discuss the latest developments in equipment, soil amendments, hardscape materials and more. Finally, attendees have an opportunity to network with others in the industry, including peers and leaders, to learn from them how they tackle challenges, adapt to the ever-changing industry, use new techniques, and talk about client relationships.

Continuing education, at the trade show and outside of it, plays a pivotal role in advancing the landscape, hardscape, and horticultural trades. In an ever-evolving industry like ours, where new technologies, materials, and methods continually emerge, staying updated through ongoing education becomes imperative.

Adapting to Innovation: Embracing technological advancements is crucial in the outdoor living industry. Continuous education allows professionals to learn about the latest tools, software, and techniques, enabling them to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, and ultimately produce higher quality work.



The NJLCA Today

By Gail Woolcott
Executive Director

Lifetime Learning

For instance, understanding autonomous mowers or the latest in design software can reduce your labor needs and help with efficiency.

Compliance and Safety: The outdoor living industry is subject to evolving regulations and safety standards. Staying informed through continuing education ensures that professionals are well-versed in current legal requirements, safety protocols, and environmental considerations. This knowledge not only ensures compliance but also significantly reduces workplace accidents and liabilities.

Skill Enhancement and Specialization: Trade show education provides ways for contractors to increase their skills and hone them. Whether it's mastering a new edging technique, learning about sustainable landscape practices, or gaining expertise in project management, ongoing education provides attendees with the skills demanded by our evolving industry.

Quality Assurance: The outdoor living industry relies heavily on delivering high-quality results. Continuous education ensures that

professionals are up-to-date with the best practices, resulting in improved craftsmanship, reduced errors, and ultimately, satisfied clients. This commitment to excellence can enhance the reputation of both individuals and companies within the industry.

Networking and Collaboration: Trade shows, workshops, and seminars also provide valuable networking opportunities. Engaging with peers, mentors, and industry experts not only fosters collaboration but also opens doors to new partnerships, innovative ideas, and potential business opportunities.

Networking isn't just about collecting business cards or making connections; it's about fostering genuine relationships, sharing knowledge, exploring opportunities, and building a support system that propels your business forward.

Addressing Industry Challenges: Challenges within the landscape, hardscape, and horticulture sectors, such as labor shortages, sustainability concerns, and technological disruptions, necessitate a proactive approach. Continuous education equips contractors

with the knowledge and skills to tackle these challenges head-on, fostering adaptability and resilience in the face of industry-wide changes.

Fulfilling Client Expectations: Clients also increasingly expect landscape professionals to deliver more than just a green lawn. They seek expertise in energy efficiency, eco-friendly landscapes, and innovative hardscape designs. Continuing education allows professionals to meet these evolving client demands by staying informed about the latest trends and practices.

Therefore, attending trade shows and participating in continuing education is the cornerstone of success in the outdoor living industry. We like to think that as an association, offering these options at our trade shows and beyond, empowers individuals to adapt to technological advancements, comply with regulations, enhance skills, advance careers, ensure quality, foster collaboration, tackle challenges, and exceed client expectations.

We hope to see all industry professionals at the Landscape New

Jersey show at the end of this month, as well as at many of our continuing education opportunities throughout the year! Have a very happy Valentines Day and can't wait for the Spring!

Editor's Note: Gail Woolcott is the Executive Director for the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. Gail received the New York State Turf & Landscape Association 2022 "Person of the Year" award on December 1, 2022. Gail also received a proclamation from the Westchester County, New York Board of Legislators proclaiming December 1, 2022 as "Gail Woolcott Day" in Westchester County. Gail has also been presented with a community service award from the Borough of Fairview, New Jersey for her assistance in leading the 9-11 Memorial Park project and the Legislative Champion of the Year award from the Federation of Employers and Workers of America. She can be reached at 201-703-3600 or by emailing gwoolcott@njlca.org.

Eastern Redcedar is Not a Cedar

By Hubert Ling
Contributing Writer

It's a juniper, *Juniperus virginiana* to be precise. True cedars are in the genus *Cedrus* and are not native to the US. An obvious question we have to ask is: Should you encourage or discourage this tree? The answers to this question are as varied as the people we ask. Let's look at the negatives first.

Redcedar is an aggressive pioneer tree species which rapidly takes over abandoned property or uncultivated fields and may present a threat to prairie and scrubland ecosystems. In addition, redcedar is the alternate host for the cedar-apple fungus; no redcedar should be grown within 1000 feet (or more) of an apple orchard; after 35 years of trying, I am giving up on apple trees since I am surrounded by redcedars.

On the plus side, redcedar is an aromatic, rot resistant

wood, which makes a great flute, recorder, or cabinet, and carves easily. Giant redcedar logs were used to construct the Cahokia Woodhenge circles by pre-Columbian natives in Illinois. Native Americans also used rot resistant redcedar for boundary markers to separate hunting territories, and the French named their Louisiana city, Baton Rouge, which means red stick after redcedar.

Early Colonial Americans used the durable wood for shingles, benches and tables, fencing, coffins, log cabins, and above water structures on boats. Before 1940 almost all pencils were made from this wood, and I remember sniffing the pleasant-smelling shavings after sharpening a pencil. Aromatic cedar chests are renowned for moth repelling properties. The deep rose-purple heartwood is reasonably stable, but the light tan sapwood tends to crack extensively when thick

sections of trunk are air dried.

Redcedar is the most widespread conifer in the US; it is native to all of the Eastern US, much of Eastern Canada, and is found in every county in NJ, CT, and MA. Its adult size is usually 30-40 feet and 10-20 feet wide, but under very favorable conditions may reach 90 feet tall. Redcedar naturally grows in neutral sand, loam, or clay soils in sun or semi-shade. It is cold, drought, damp soil, salt spray, and heat resistant so you can understand why it is such a common conifer. The trees are also wind resistant and played an important role in resisting soil erosion during the Dust Bowl drought conditions in the 1930's. Male and female cones develop on separate trees, and young plants have short, needle like leaves while older trees have small, flattened, triangular scales. Dozens of cultivars are available with a choice of foliage color and mature size, with height down to 12

feet and spread to as narrow as 2 feet.

The dense branches of the eastern redcedar provide important refuge and shelter for small mammals and birds, such as quails, bobwhites, ruffed grouse, pheasants, and turkeys. The soft, silvery bark peels off in long, flexible strips which squirrels and other small mammals use for their nest materials. The berries (fleshy silvery-blue cones) are an important source of food for more than 50 bird species as well as a variety of mammal species, including mice, rabbits, foxes, raccoons, skunks, opossums, and coyotes. This tree is the larval host for dozens of lepidopterans and the cedar waxwing bird is so named because of its love of redcedar cones. The twigs and foliage are often eaten by mule and deer.

Native Americans used the fragrant wood, needles, and cones for sweat baths, colds, coughs, infections, sore

throats, and worms. Smoke from burning redcedar was believed to repel evil spirits during purification and healing rituals. However, Peterson's guide to Medicinal Plants lists redcedar as potentially toxic. Redcedar was frequently used as a Christmas tree in the past but its widespread use as such is generally restricted to the southern US today. Indoors the tree adds a pleasant aroma to your holiday festivities. *Juniperus communis*, a related species, which is also native to NJ, is the source of 'berries' used to flavor gin.

If you need a windbreak, decay resistant poles, flutes, or an easy to grow tree, consider redcedar; it deserves a place in your woodlot.

Editor's Note: Hubert Ling is Horticultural Co-Chair of the Native Plant Society of New Jersey. He can be reached at milhubling@verizon.net.

Evergreen groundcovers play an important aesthetic role in the winter landscape. There are many perennials and low growing woody plants that have attractive evergreen leaves throughout the winter and, in some cases like the hellebores, may also flower.

There are several beautiful evergreen ferns. The Christmas fern, *Polystichum acrostichoides* is a native fern with dark green foliage. The fronds are upright and 12" long but become more flat in the winter. This fern is clump-forming but will form large masses over time. Like most ferns they are resistant to deer. The Christmas fern can thrive in deep, dry shade. The autumn fern, *Dryopteris erythrosora* has upright, fine textured fronds that have an orange tint as they emerge. It will thrive in both deep shade as well as areas with considerable sun. Both the *Polystichum* and the *Dryopteris* have received Gold Medal Plant distinctions from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

The very diminutive *Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nanus,' dwarf mondo grass can be used in large masses or is a great choice when a groundcover is needed to fill in the gaps between stepping stones. Reaching only 1-2" tall, this small perennial has dark green, grass-like leaves.



Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

By Andrew Bunting
Vice President of Horticulture

Evergreen Groundcovers

It can be slow growing in the beginning, but then becomes a tightly knit mass. It is great for creating a solid evergreen covering under shrubs or can be used as a niche planting in a rock garden. It will thrive best in part-shade to full-shade.

Microbiota decussata, the Siberian cypress is a coniferous groundcover. In some respects, it has arborvitae-like foliage that spreads across the ground with arching branches. It only reaches 1-1 ½ feet at maturity. It was promoted about 20 years ago, but has not established itself as a common groundcover, however, recently I have seen some nice plantings. It will thrive best in partial shade with well-drained soil either being planted in sandy soil or on a slight hillside or bank. In the winter, the dark green foliage turns an attractive bronzy color.

Sedges, *Carex* have been gaining in popularity in the last 10 years. This grass-like plant

is being promoted as a versatile groundcover for a myriad of conditions. Sedges are deer resistant. *Carex cherokeensis* has semi-evergreen to evergreen very narrow leaves. It forms a robust clump and can be used with in combination with bold foliaged perennials like hostas, hellebores and *Brunnera*, the Chinese forget-me-not. *Carex rosea*, Rosy sedge or curly wood sedge is a clump-forming sedge with very fine foliage. This native sedge is versatile in the garden and can grow in both dry and moist situations, as well as dry shade. The *Carex* EverColor® series are robust sedges with dense clumping foliage and long elegant grass-like leaves. Many of the selections have colored or evergreen leaves. 'Everillo' has long arching golden-yellow leaves. It can be successfully used planted in masses to brighten a shady part of the garden or used individually as punctuations of color. It

also can be used in a winter container where the leaves gracefully arch over the edge of the container. 'Everglow' has bicolored leaves with green edges and a yellow center. 'Everest' has a green center and white edges.

Entire books have been written on hellebores, *Helleborus*. Hellebores are grown for their durable and attractive winter foliage and amazing flowers that come in nearly every color and bloom from winter to late-winter and early spring. One of the more old-fashioned selections of hellebores is the Christmas rose, *Helleborus niger*. In warm winters it sends a central clump of flowers. The flowers are only 6" tall and have five robust petals and can either be light pink or pure white. They grow best in shade to part shade and are deer resistant.

Rohdea japonica is an under-used perennial that is extremely tough and tolerant of

very shady and dry areas. It has bold strap-like leaves that grow in dense clumps and reach about 1 foot tall. They can grow and colonize up to the base of trees where growing conditions are very inhospitable. They can be propagated by dividing existing plants, but also grow relatively well from seed propagation.

Editor's Note: Andrew Bunting is Vice President of Horticulture for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. He is one of the most recognized horticulturists in the Philadelphia, Pa., region and a highly regarded colleague in the world of professional horticulture. Bunting has amassed a plethora of awards, including the American Public Gardens Association Professional Citation, Chanticleer Scholarship in Professional Development, Delaware Center for Horticulture's Marion Marsh Award, and the Certificate of Merit from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. In addition, Bunting has lectured extensively throughout North America and Europe, and participated in plant expeditions throughout Asia and Africa. Learn more at <https://phsonline.org/team/andrew-bunting>

1-800-Flowers.com® Announces the Peony and Philodendron as 2024 Flower and Plant of the Year

Symbolizing love and growth, 1-800-Flowers.com® has named the graceful peony and the bold philodendron as its 2024 Flower and Plant of the Year. 2024 marks the seventh year that the floral and plant authority has selected a flower and plant of the year.

"Looking ahead to 2024, we've selected the peony and philodendron as our Flower and Plant of the Year to help our customers express themselves, bring joy, and cultivate meaningful connections with the important people in their lives," says Abhay Patel, Brand President of 1-800-Flowers.com. "Peonies, with their vibrant and delicate petals, are the perfect gesture for romantic and celebratory occasions, while the philodendron with its striking foliage, inspires plant and decor enthusiasts to bring nature indoors."

USDA and Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History Strengthen Scientific Partnership

The Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) are joining forces to protect U.S. plant health from invasive species. The National Museum of Natural History's Sant Director Dr. Kirk Johnson and APHIS Associate Deputy Administrator Matthew Rhoads have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This MoU celebrates the expanding relationship between the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) and APHIS in exotic insect, seed, and plant identification, agricultural quarantine inspection, entomological and botanical curation, and more.

APHIS and the Smithsonian work together to protect agricultural and natural resource health through invasive species identification. The collaboration advances the scientific community's knowledge and resource collection of

exotic insect species as well as weed seeds and other contaminant plant parts.

"Together, we ensure accurate and timely pest species identification, which supports a strong agricultural economy and protects our natural resources," said Matthew Rhoads, associate deputy administrator for APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine. "This collaboration also reinforces our shared dedication to ground-breaking science and benefits both agencies, the nation, and the international scientific community."

This MoU provides USDA entomologists and botanists laboratory space in the museum and access to the Smithsonian's collections and libraries, and in turn, these scientists will invest their expertise in the curation and enhancement of those collections, which rank among the finest and most comprehensive in the world. The NMNH entomology collection, for

example, includes more than 35 million specimens, while the United States National Herbarium houses a world-class collection of over five million plant specimens at the museum.

This strategic partnership will focus on providing identification of and information about arthropods and plants of agricultural importance while simultaneously providing scientific services to a wide array of researchers, stakeholders, and the public.

Johnson added, "I am excited to renew the collaboration between the National Museum of Natural History and APHIS. This MoU provides the framework for our organizations to conduct mutually beneficial scientific work together while advancing our collective knowledge. Strengthening our collaborative work together ensures the accuracy, currency, and continued growth of our expansive arthropod and botanical collections."

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USDA Scientists Work to Ensure Nutritious and High-Quality Potatoes are Available During the Winter Season and All Year Round

Scientists at the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) use innovative technology to study the lifecycle of potatoes (including development, production, and postharvest storage), ensuring a high-quality supply year-round for snack food processing facilities, restaurants, and grocery stores.

Potatoes are one of the main crops grown in the U.S., with a production of approximately 22.5 million tons annually. Fall is the primary season for harvesting potatoes, accounting for 90 percent of the total production. Since many locations cannot support year-round potato cultivation, most potatoes intended for processing, such as frozen french fries or instant mashed potatoes, are harvested in the fall and safely stored until needed. Storing and maintaining potatoes at their top nutritional quality while meeting consumer and market demands is essential for the industry.

Yet, potato producers face several critical challenges, including climate- and disease-related challenges during crop production and long-term storage. Maintenance of post-harvest quality is of prime concern to the potato industry because post-harvest crop losses through physiological and disease-related processes routinely reach 10-15 percent. These challenges include factors such as early sprouting, as well as slow wound-healing of potato

tubers inadvertently damaged during the operational process.

Have you opened your home pantry and found potatoes sprouting? Immediately after harvest and for an indeterminate period thereafter, potato tubers are physiologically dormant and will not sprout even when they are placed in growth promoting conditions. The length of tuber dormancy period is determined by the genetics of the potato cultivar, and environmental conditions during the crop production and post-harvest storage—including temperature, humidity, light, and air composition. Premature sprouting or incomplete wound-healing adversely affects potato processing quality and nutritional value, resulting in lower producer prices or even complete market rejection by the industry and fresh market.

Munevver Dogramaci, a research plant physiologist and lead scientist of the Potato Research Program at the Edward T. Schafer Agricultural Research Center in Fargo, North Dakota, and Darrin Haagenson research plant physiologist at the Potato Research Worksite in East Grand Forks, Minnesota, collaborate with growers and universities to address these post-harvest physiological challenges, as well as to evaluate advanced potato breeding material for postharvest storage, food quality, and safety characteristics.

"Currently, there is no method that is 100 percent efficient to control the physical deterioration of the potato tubers during storage," said Dogramaci. "Potato tubers are at their peak nutritional quality during harvest, but it is essential to store them under specific conditions to maintain this quality."

A better understanding of physiological processes will help scientists improve post-harvest storage methods, preserving nutritional value, processing quality, and the marketability of potatoes.

Dogramaci also noted that unintended wounding of tubers, like cuts and bruises, can also occur during harvest and post-harvest operations. "This results in rapid quality loss that impacts the tuber's texture, ability to retain water, and an increase in its susceptibility to diseases during storage," Dogramaci explained.

Paul J. Collins, a research geneticist for the ARS Eastern potato breeding program based in Orono and Presque Isle, Maine, is working to develop new varieties for chip processing and table markets with improved agronomic attributes, disease resistance, climate resiliency, and quality traits. Successful varieties developed by this program include Atlantic, a variety that is widely grown across the U.S. for potato chips and is within the top ten most popular

potato varieties grown in the nation.

"Potato breeding seeks to identify new potato varieties that can provide benefits throughout the value chain," said Collins. "Farmers can benefit from disease resistance traits, resilience to climate variability, and improved yields. Processors and retailers are interested in maintaining quality and uniformity. Consumers are driven by improved nutrition and flavor. Within the breeding program, we see huge variability for all of these traits. The challenge and fun of potato breeding is finding a new variety which makes everyone in the value chain happy."

Want to learn more? Watch the latest episode of "Cooking with Science"! USDA-ARS scientists share exciting facts about their work while Chef Mark Mills demonstrates how to incorporate potatoes into safe and nutritious recipes!

USDA-ARS scientists Charles Cantrell (Mississippi), Patricia Slininger (Illinois), and Tianbao Yang (Maryland) also do important work with potatoes.

The Agricultural Research Service is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's chief scientific in-house research agency. Daily, ARS focuses on solutions to agricultural problems affecting America. Each dollar invested in U.S. agricultural research results in \$20 of economic impact.

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Germinated in 2003

I recently read an article in *The Colorado Sun* about New York City billionaire real estate investor, Stefan Soloviev, who has bought up over four hundred thousand acres of farmland in Kansas, New Mexico, and eastern Colorado over the last twenty years or so. He did so with the hopes of revitalizing both a depressed area of the country and an industry that had grown somewhat stagnant. He followed his initial investments in land with investments in agricultural infrastructure such as grain storage and transportation. As of now at least, he seems to be succeeding.

Of course, he is not the first business magnate to parachute into our nation's heartland and start collecting farms and farmland like they are stamps or baseball cards. Ted Turner, John Malone, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates, and a host of others have all taken their fortunes that were made elsewhere and used them to amass great swaths of productive farmland and open space across the United States. And while all of these "Captains of Industry" have their own reasons for why they chose to invest in agricultural real estate, one commonality that they



The Town Farmer

By Peter Melick
Agricultural Producer

Farmland: Investment or Hobby?

share is that farming is not where they made their fortunes. While they have net worths and real estate holdings that rival some foreign countries, for many of these investors, these agriculture portfolios are nothing more than a hobby or a side hustle.

It is not necessarily detrimental to agriculture for these agricultural lands to be owned by "non-farming" investors. In fact, there may actually be some benefits to the farming industry by having a certain amount of farmland owned by non-farming investors. First of all, this outside ownership can be a stabilizing factor in farmland values. This is because when commodity prices rise and fall, farmland values will not necessarily follow and reflect those markets as closely as they

would if they were owned by the growers themselves. Also, because some of these outside owners may have ulterior motives for owning property, they might not be so concerned with using land at its highest and best value and might be content to keep ground in agriculture instead of selling it for development, for example.

But some of these "ulterior motives" may not be in the best interest of agriculture. As an example of this, a few years ago, a wealthy businessman from the Midwest owned a very large beef cattle ranch in Montana. When he became elderly and decided owning the ranch was no longer in his best interest, he decided to sell the ranch. The environmental group that he sold it to wants

to curtail most of the active agriculture on this property and turn it into the "American Serengeti," a place where wolves and buffalo can roam free (even though they will be feeding on the livestock and pastures of the remaining ranchers in the area). Don't get me wrong, I am all in favor of selling to the highest bidder. But the environmental group was able to leverage their non-profit status and loopholes in the tax code so that it made their offer that much more attractive. That, and the fact that this absentee owner chose to sell to this group, and in the process took thousands and thousands of productive ranch land not only out of production but was able to stick it to his neighbors as well!

New Jersey is not immune

from this either. There is a great deal of farmland in New Jersey that is owned by people who are not farmers. Many of these people enjoy other outdoor pursuits such as hunting, fishing, equestrian activities, or just plain old privacy. But these folks turn to local growers to farm their properties for them. The property owners get their properties maintained and get to qualify for Farmland Assessment, while the farmers get to increase their acreage. And these arrangements allow us to keep the "Garden" in the "Garden State" for a little while longer!

Editor's Note: Peter Melick is co-owner of Melick's Town Farm in Oldwick and a 10th-generation New Jersey farmer. Peter is a member of the Tewksbury Township Committee, Hunterdon County, NJ. He also served as a director for the New Jersey Farm Bureau and is a past president of the New Jersey State Board of Agriculture. Peter has also been featured on NJN, News 12 New Jersey and on the Fox Business Network.

Happy New Year! It's a time for resolutions, new opportunities, good health and a better-than-last-year looking ahead feeling. What will be new for you this year? I am sure at this time of year you are not thinking about your lawn.

I am writing this article a few days before Christmas, and we just had a super rainstorm with a lot of flooding in the northeast. There was no snow to speak of from January to spring last year and there has been no real snow since Thanksgiving to now. Will we be experiencing big snow storms from Mother Nature when you read this article? If so, maybe you used a lot of ice melters to keep your driveway and sidewalks safe. Is your leftover bag of ice melt hard as a rock? If you use too much ice melt you might have some damage to your lawn and surrounding landscape beds. This damage may require some over-seeding come springtime.

I know it's hard to get motivated but take this time to prepare before spring when you will be going full speed



Turf's Up

By Todd Pretz
Professional Turf Consultant

What's new with you?

with your lawn and landscape projects. Is your mower ready to go or did you forget to drain the fuel, change the oil and spark plug, clean the under deck and sharpen the blade? Is your spreader full of rock salt or properly cleaned-up and lubricated and ready to spread your first spring application? Do you still have too much leaf cover that should be raked off of your lawn? Remember to keep off your lawn if possible so you don't have footprints remaining until spring.

What about a soil test? I know I sound like a broken record, but this is a must if you are having trouble growing a great lawn over the years. Even if you have a great lawn, it is wise to test your soil every

two to three years like a blood test to make sure everything is in ideal working order to make the best of your lawn program. Remember, up to 70% of your fertilizer can be wasted if your soil pH is not in the 6.2 to 7 range.

Did you over-seed last fall to fix damaged areas or did you decide to wait until this coming spring? Bare spots should be over-seeded as soon as possible in order to avoid weeds encroaching into the area. Open bare soil is an invitation for weeds to take over. Remember, applying grass seed in the spring takes time to germinate, grow and fill in bare spots. Spring weather tends to be cool and wet, so have patience and have

realistic growth expectations when seeding in early spring.

Does water sit on your lawn for hours or days after a good rainfall? Perhaps you need to address these drainage problems. Do you need to divert some water to the back of the yard away from the house foundation? You don't want this water entering the basement. Applying a soil conditioner that has Calcium Sulfate Dihydrate (gypsum) can help relieve soil tension for better drainage and also neutralize salt damage to soils. Moss frequently develops over the winter months; do you have any? Moss growing is an indication of poor drainage, excessive shade, or perhaps low soil pH. Moss that is

actively growing can be treated with a moss control. These are usually iron-based materials that kill the moss but do not harm the grass. Be careful to blow off, not hose off, any iron products from sidewalks, driveways, patios, etc. in order to avoid any staining possibilities. Trimming low growing branches will help the grass to dry out faster and will help the grass grow better with less shade.

The Super Bowl is on February 11, 2024. This is a must watch to finish out a cold, dreary winter, even if you only like to watch the commercials and the half-time show. Who is our dream team to win it all? If I tell you I'm rooting for the Eagles and you are not, will you still read my articles in 2024? Remember, warmer weather is just around the corner!

Editor's Note: Todd Pretz is Vice President of Jonathan Green, a leading supplier of lawn and garden products in the northeast. For more information, please visit: www.jonathangreen.com

NORTHEASTERN ASSOCIATION OF STATE

The Northeastern Association of State Departments of Agriculture convenes the following 10 states: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Spotted Lanternfly Treatment Funding Available to all New Jersey Counties, Municipalities from 2024-26

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture has announced that grant funds are available to counties and municipalities to battle the spotted lanternfly (SLF) from 2024 to 2026. Interested counties and municipalities may apply to receive funds from the Department. The Murphy Administration, in partnership with the Legislature, has provided funding to the Department to reduce SLF populations and minimize its spread.

A total of up to \$50,000 per county, and up to \$20,000 per municipality, is available on a first-come, first-served basis for reimbursement of eligible costs incurred for SLF chemical treatment activities. A letter to counties and municipalities, the notice of funds availability, and the application can be found at <https://www.nj.gov/agriculture/news/hottopics/approved/topics220413.html>.

“We were pleased that many counties and municipalities took advantage of this funding opportunity in 2023,” NJDA Assistant Secretary Joe Atchison III said. “The expanded time frame for this funding will allow for an extended application opportunity, especially in areas where this threat may appear for the first time. The more participants we have in the program increases the chances of significantly reducing the populations of this invasive pest.”

While adult spotted lanternflies cannot survive winter temperatures, they lay egg masses that survive the winter and hatch in the spring, usually in late April or early May. The Department asks the public to look for and scrape egg masses with a credit card or hard-edged object when possible. Each spotted lanternfly egg mass holds approximately 50 nymphs that will emerge in the spring.

To find how to scrape egg masses, and other information about the spotted lanternfly, go to www.badbug.nj.gov.

While the spotted lanternfly does not harm humans or animals, it can feed on about 70 different types of vegetation or trees. The pest's preferred host is the Tree of Heaven, an invasive plant that has been in the United States for decades. The spotted lanternfly is native to Asia and was first found in the U.S. in Berks County, Pa., in 2014. It is considered a plant hopper and can fly only a few feet at a time. However, the spotted lanternfly is an excellent hitchhiker and can travel on almost any kind of transportation for several miles, which has caused it to spread to several states.

NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

State Agriculture Commissioner Traveled Nearly 3000 Miles to Visit Taste NY Markets and Promote New York Farmers, Small Businesses, and Producers

New York State Agriculture Commissioner Richard A. Ball today highlighted milestones the Taste NY program reached during its 10th anniversary year, 2023, as the State celebrated with a series of events and special promotions. Taste NY Welcome Centers and several other Market locations welcomed over 2.3 million visitors through their doors and reported net sales of over \$5 million in 2023. Since its launch in 2013, the Taste NY program has grown significantly, bringing over \$100 million in economic impact to New York State agricultural producers across the State during its ten years.

Commissioner Ball said, “We traveled far and wide across the Empire State in 2023 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of our Taste NY program and it was certainly a memorable year. Taste NY’s goal is to promote our state’s farmers and food and beverage producers. It’s wonderful to see that come to fruition through over \$5 million in sales at our Welcome Centers and Markets last year – and counting – in addition to over two million visitors who were introduced to the best of New York State by shopping local at Taste NY. I thank all the market staff members, partners, and of course, our producers, who have participated in the program and helped us to celebrate Taste Turns 10. We look forward to another decade of supporting New York’s small agricultural businesses through Taste NY.”

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of Taste NY, Commissioner Ball held nine open house events at Welcome Centers and Taste NY Market locations, traveling nearly 3,000 miles across the state —greater than the driving distance from the New York State Museum to the California State Museum—to highlight the program and the diverse farmers and food and beverage producers that are its backbone. At each of these events, which took place in the Finger Lakes, Long Island, the North Country, the Capital Region, the Southern Tier, the Mohawk Valley, the Olana State Historic Site, the Hudson Valley/Catskills, Western New York, and Central New York, local producers were invited to sell and sample their products for guests and members of the media.

Several Welcome Centers additionally hit sales milestones of their own this year, with the Long Island Welcome Center and the Capital Region Welcome Center each generating over \$1 million in sales in 2023 alone and the Western New York Welcome Center reaching the \$1 million mark since its opening in 2018.

Taste NY highlights the quality, diversity, and economic impact of food and beverages grown, produced, or processed in New York State. Taste NY aims to create new opportunities for producers through events, retail locations, and partnerships, such as at The Great New York State Fair in Syracuse and the PGA Tournament in Rochester. Over the last 10 years, Taste NY has supported nearly 2,000 food and beverage producers participating in the program through retail outlets, events, and sponsorships. In 2022, 311 new producers were onboarded to the program through New York’s Welcome Centers. Taste NY’s food and beverage businesses also support the state’s farmers by using New York grown and produced ingredients in their products.



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DEPARTMENTS OF AGRICULTURE NEWS

DELAWARE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Celebrating a New Record

The Delaware Department of Agriculture (DDA) announced today that last year’s farmers markets hit an all-time high sales record of \$4.14 million.

In 2023, sales from all 17 Delaware community-run farmers markets totaled \$4,144,951, up \$437,136 from the previous record set in 2022.

“The success of a farmers market relies on three key points – the farmers who grow various products to bring to market each week, an interactive market manager who engages their community to support our family farms, and consumers who want to purchase the freshest, locally grown food to feed their families,” said Delaware Secretary of Agriculture Michael T. Scuse. “We are fortunate to have fantastic farmers markets throughout the state that serve as prime examples of how a community supports Delaware’s agriculture industry.”

Delaware farmers’ markets are run locally by municipalities, business groups, farmers, or market associations. The Department of Agriculture provides support and marketing assistance.

Fresh produce comprised 52% of total sales, with the remainder coming from products such as meats, cheeses, jellies, breads, salsa, eggs, or honey.

“I believe this sales record showcases the fact that residents and visitors to our state want to continue to support the family farms that produce Delaware Grown fruits, vegetables, meats, and value-added products,” said DDA Marketing Specialist Kathy Jackson. “When farmers bring these products to our farmers markets, it is easy, convenient, and enjoyable for consumers to buy directly from the source.”

The 2024 market season will begin in May, with most markets open by the end of June. A current list of the 2023 markets is online at Delaware Grown, <https://delawaregrown.com>, and will be updated in late April for the 2024 season.

DDA will open registration for the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program beginning in May 2024 for Delaware residents who are 60 years or older and meet the income eligibility requirements.

Farmers and others interested in becoming vendors or community groups interested in starting a local market can contact Department of Agriculture marketing specialist Kathy Jackson at (302) 698-4625 or by email at kathy.jackson@delaware.gov

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Ag Industry Leaders to Kick Off 108th PA Farm Show

Lt. Governor Austin Davis, Agriculture Secretary Russell Redding and other Shapiro Administration cabinet officials were joined by U.S. Senator Bob Casey, Congressman Glenn “GT” Thompson, Senator Judy Schwank, other state and local officials and Pennsylvania agriculture industry leaders to officially open the 2024 PA Farm Show. The 2024 Farm Show theme, Connecting Our Communities, celebrates the best of Pennsylvania agriculture — the industry that supports 593,000 jobs and contributes \$132.5 billion to Pennsylvania’s economy every year.

“Governor Shapiro and I are 100 percent committed to supporting the Commonwealth’s number one industry – agriculture,” said Lt. Gov. Austin Davis. “The Shapiro-Davis Administration has demonstrated that support, not just through words, but with action and resources. In our 2023-24 budget, we allocated \$31 million to continue the battle against hi-path avian influenza, funding to create new Centers for Plant Excellence and Organic Excellence and investments in workforce growth opportunities at career and technology centers across Pennsylvania.”

“In a world wounded by divisions, Agriculture connects us all as Pennsylvanians, as Americans and as human beings in a civil society,” Secretary Redding said. “The Pennsylvania Farm Show is an eight-day pause to celebrate what unites us across geography, identities, cultures, and generations. We are proud to welcome scores of friends and neighbors from across town, across the state, and across the world to celebrate the more than 593,000 hardworking Pennsylvanians who feed us and feed our economy every day of the year.”

The Pennsylvania Farm Show draws scores of visitors to our capital city every January to connect with the people and products who make Pennsylvania agriculture great. The largest indoor agricultural expo in the nation, featuring nearly 6,000 animals, 12,000-plus competitive events and exhibits, nearly 250 commercial exhibits and hundreds of educational and entertaining events.

The 2024 Show ran from Saturday, January 6 through Saturday, January 13 at the Pennsylvania Farm Show Complex and Expo Center in Harrisburg.

CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Connecticut Department of Agriculture (CT DoAg) Announces Release of Agricultural Enhancement Grant to Address Gaps in State’s Agricultural Industry

The Connecticut Department of Agriculture is pleased to announce the 2024 Agricultural Enhancement Grant Program (previously known as the Farm Viability Grant) is now available for eligible Connecticut municipalities, groups of municipalities, regional councils of governments, and/or agricultural non-profit organizations for projects that directly impact or foster agricultural viability. Applications are due February 16, 2024, at 4:00 p.m.

“The name change of this program reflects that we are continuing to revise our programs to better serve the interests and needs for the future of agriculture in our state, said Agriculture Commissioner Bryan P. Hurlburt. “We encourage interested organizations to apply to this program to support innovative and collective projects to increase youth engagement; the diversity of agriculture, both by who is growing and where they are growing; improving food system access; and improving farmland access. These projects will meet the needs of this ever-changing industry.”

The Agricultural Enhancement Grant is a matching grant program for Connecticut municipalities, groups of municipalities, regional councils of governments and agricultural non-profit organizations for projects that directly impact and/or foster agricultural viability. Funding for the Agricultural Enhancement Grant is provided through the State of Connecticut Agricultural Viability Grant Program, established in 2005 through Public Act 05-228, An Act Concerning Farmland Preservation, Land Protection, Affordable Housing, and Historic Preservation.

Grant guidelines and forms can be found at www.CTGrown.gov/grants under Agricultural Enhancement Grant.

Jersey Tastes

Sowing Seeds for Healthy School Meals

(Continued from page 14)

and adults enrolled at participating childcare centers, day care homes, and adult day care centers. It also provides meals served to kids participating in afterschool programs, residing in emergency shelters, and adults over age 60 enrolled in day care.

Technology Aids the Effort

As I delved into these issues, I learned that one of the major reasons the Division of Food & Nutrition can do all that it does is the way it has incorporated technology into its daily routine. The Division's web-based system means school food-service providers now get reimbursed for their expenses in a matter of days, compared to the multiple weeks it took in a paper-based system.

I could go on and on about all the things the Division does, and maybe in a future story I'll do a similar deep dive into its programs to keep food pantries and other agencies stocked up through its work with the six "Emergency Feeding Organizations" (EFOs), including the State Food

Purchase Program that helps make more of those purchases come from local farms and processors.

Governor Murphy Recently Signed Legislation Expanding Access to School Meals for New Jersey Students

Advancing efforts to eliminate food insecurity among New Jersey's young learners, Governor Phil Murphy signed legislation on January 16, 2024, expanding eligibility criteria under the Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act, A5684/S4055. Under the legislation, public and non-public schools participating in the National School Lunch Program and/or federal School Breakfast Program will provide a free school lunch and/or breakfast to students whose families have an annual household income of up to 224 percent of the federal poverty level, which will make over 60,000 families newly eligible.

"Access to nutritious food is a basic necessity for our kids," said Governor Murphy. "We have made great strides in our fight against food

insecurity, working together with those on the front lines to ensure our most vulnerable community members have access to a warm meal and empowering our schools to meet the needs of their students. Expanding student eligibility under the Working Class Families Anti-Hunger Act will provide more of New Jersey's young learners with a free school lunch and breakfast so that they can go to class ready to learn, rather than wondering where their next meal will come from. Thank you, Speaker Coughlin, for your partnership in bridging the gap in food access."

"All students deserve access to healthy meals and this legislation provides a clear path for those in need," New Jersey Department of Agriculture Assistant Secretary Joe Atchison III said. "Having nutritious food available at school each day allows children to perform better academically as well as during extra-curricular activities. This necessity is something no child should ever have to worry about."

Assembly Speaker Craig J. Coughlin and Senate Majority Leader M.

Teresa Ruiz are prime sponsors of the legislation. Additional prime sponsors include Senator Shirley Turner and Assemblymembers Shanique Speight, Carol Murphy, Shama Haider, and Benjie Wimberly.

For now, do yourself a favor and visit the Division's portion of the NJDA website at: <https://www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/fn/>.

Editor's Note: Tom Castronovo is executive editor and publisher of Gardener News. Tom's lifelong interest in gardening and passion for agriculture, environmental stewardship, gardening, and landscaping, led to the founding of the Gardener News, which germinated in April 2003 and continues to bloom today. He is also dedicated to providing inspiration and education to the agricultural, gardening, landscaping, nursery, and outdoor living communities through this newspaper and GardenerNews.com.

Full Moon

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