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## PUPILS' LABOR BEARS FRUIT



SAED HINDASH/THE STAR-LEDGER

Susan Marchese of Emery's Berry Patch in New Egypt, Ocean County, prepares to box blueberry pies for pupils at Veterans Memorial Elementary School in Brick Township. The pupils campaigned for yesterday's designation of the blueberry as the state fruit.

## Blueberry earns sweet honor

BY MARYANN SPOTO  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The Hadrosaurus is New Jersey's official dinosaur, square dancing its official folk dance. And now, thanks to a group of fourth-graders in Brick Township, the highbush blueberry is the state's official fruit.

"New Jersey has a strong history as the Garden State," Gov. James E. McGreevey said yesterday during a bill-signing ceremony at Veterans Memorial Elementary School in Brick at which he made the designation official. "Naming the blueberry as our official state fruit is a fitting

tribute to our culture and heritage, especially because it was first cultivated here in Whitesbog."

Fourth-grade teachers Gail Damiano and Suzanne Kurasz took on the project last year with their classes when, in their study of New Jersey history, they realized New Jersey did not have an official fruit.

Starting with Assemblyman David Wolfe (R-Ocean), the children — now fifth-graders — also pleaded their case to the town council, the board of education, the county freeholders and to two state legislative committees. They attended the state Blue-

berry Festival to gather signatures for petitions, and they met with blueberry farmers.

Damiano said she was well aware of the cranberry's close connection to New Jersey history; that bitter red berry even appears in school textbooks. But there was no ignoring the numbers when it comes to the blueberry.

Generating 42 million pounds of blueberries last year and nearly \$47 million in sales, New Jersey is second only to Michigan as the largest producer of blueberries in the country. It is the third largest producer of cran-

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VIC YEPPELO/THE STAR-LEDGER

Visiting the school yesterday, Gov. James E. McGreevey signed legislation making the choice of the blueberry official.

15-year-old girl in February. Three Roxbury High School graduates and a senior are due in juvenile court Jan. 20 to face charges that they forced the girl to perform a sex act.

The NJSIAA committee de-

viewing a plan submitted by Roxbury school officials about six months ago to determine whether it meets the requirements, Loper said.

Vito Gagliardi Jr., the school board attorney, said the lapse in

2002 season, when it became aware that the one-day event violated the association's bylaws, Gagliardi said.

*Maura McDermott covers Roxbury. She can be reached at [mcdermott@starledger.com](mailto:mcdermott@starledger.com) or (973) 539-7910.*



VIC YEPELLO/THE STAR-LEDGER

John Marchese, owner of Emery's Berry Patch in New Egypt, unloads blueberry pies for the pupils of the Veterans Memorial Elementary School in Brick yesterday.

## BERRY

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### Pupils' labor bears fruit

berries, behind Wisconsin and Massachusetts.

Cranberries, not native to New Jersey, had long been farmed in the bogs of the Pinelands by the time the blueberry was cultivated in 1911. But blueberry production had its origin in New Jersey when Elizabeth C. White cultivated for mass production the wild blueberries that grew on her father's cranberry plantation in Whitesbog.

"There seemed to be just more heritage with the blueberry in New Jersey than the cranberry," Damiano said. "I was surprised when I did the research. The facts prevailed. The blueberry won."

John Marchese, whose family owns Emery's Blueberry Patch in New Egypt, said the new designation won't catapult blueberry sales because the fruit, which is in season from mid-June to late August, is already extremely popular. But, he said, it's nice to be an official part of history.

"It's a Cinderella story if ever I heard of one," said Marchese, whose farm provided 30 blueberry pies, torts and crumbles for the bill-signing yesterday. "I truly understand the magnitude of what the kids did. It's forever. These kids have done something that is permanent."

Theresa Lettman, project manager for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, said cranberry farmers don't feel slighted by the blueberry designation. The only reason it hadn't happened sooner, she surmised, is "probably because nobody took the initiative."

"It's great that the kids made it happen," she said.

The blueberry became the 11th designated icon since the adoption of the state seal and flag. The first was the violet as the official flower in 1913.

Until yesterday, the last icon added to New Jersey history books was the A.J. Meerwald, an oyster schooner based on the Delaware Bay, designated the official state ship in 1998.

Fifth-grader Alyson Jordan, 10, said she never thought her class would get the venture off the ground.

"We're just kids," she said. "I didn't think we could do it when we started, but now I know anything can happen if you try."

Her classmate, Tim Veltre, 10, marveled at the process.

"It's amazing," he said. "Finally a dream come true for all our hard work."

## SEARCH

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room, closed the door, which automatically locked, and ordered them to strip, place their hands up against the wall, squat and cough.

criminal prosecution is not warranted," Smith said.

Griggs deserves a hearing to figure out his job status, said Bergrin.