

COUNTY & REGION

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Blueberry festival left without its top feature

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PEMBERTON TOWNSHIP — The birthplace of the cultivated blueberry won't have any blueberries of its own at its annual blueberry celebration Saturday.

Blame Mother Nature for the foul-up.

The organizers of the 19th annual Whitesbog Blueberry Festival report that the village's popular pick-your-own blueberry field has been left barren by spring frosts.

"It's unfortunate, but there's no blueberries in the field to pick this year," said Sue Goldstein, public relations coordinator for Whitesbog Preservation Trust, which hosts an annual spring festival celebrating the village's history as the birthplace of the cultivated blueberry.

Almost any Pemberton Township student can recite the story of how the sweet juicy, blueberry was developed in 1916 by U.S. Department of Agriculture researcher Frederick Coville and Elizabeth White, the daughter of

Whitesbog Village cranberry grower J.J. White, from the sour huckleberry of the area.

Whitesbog historians say the village, deep in the Pinelands off Route 530, once was home to more than 80 acres dedicated solely to blueberries.

Goldstein said most of those fields were abandoned long ago, but a few continue to bear wild versions of the fruit.

"We had our one field (by the village) pollinated, but we are kind of at the mercy of the weather since we don't have anyone to look after the crop," she said. "We're trying to find a farmer to come in that would be interested in working the field.

We'd also like to restore at least one other (blueberry) field.

Despite the lack of Whitesbog-grown blueberries, Goldstein said the festival will go on as planned. The festival runs from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

She said the trust planned to import fresh blueberries from a Pemberton Township farm to sell. Visitors also will be able to sample varieties of blueberry foods, including pies, doughnuts, muffins, fritters, sundaes and cheesecake.

Visitors will have plenty to do, including games for children, village tours and presentations of Pinelands music and stories.

"It's a real shame, but it's happened before," Goldstein

said. "In fact, last year people were a little disappointed because there weren't really enough blueberries to pick."