

Blueberries top topic at library discussion

Geneticist tells of his efforts to make sturdier crops

By **DORANN WEBER**
Correspondent

When it comes to the subject of blueberries, Dr. Mark Ehlenfeldt's an expert.

And Ehlenfeldt shared his expertise with the attendees of a program at the Pemberton Community Library Friday, as he ran a slide show presentation on the varieties of blueberries, where they grow, and how they are produced from field and factory to market.

Ehlenfeldt works with the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a FDA research geneticist. He is also the president of the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, which recently held its annual Blueberry Festival to celebrate the role the fruits have played in the local community — as blueberries were first commercially cultivated at Whitesbog.

As a research geneticist, Ehlenfeldt is a blueberry breeder and works on developing new blueberry varieties. Much of his work is dedicated to breeding blueberries that are more disease-resistant and hardier, as the blueberry industry moves from hand-picking toward mechanical harvesting. Mechanical harvesting can be more abrasive to the blueberry, he said.

"If you are going to harvest blueberries mechanically, you will need a blueberry that will stand up to the kind of treatment it will get during machine harvesting, something that is less susceptible to disease. They do get a little abused in the process of machine harvesting," said Ehlenfeldt.

Around the country approximately two-thirds of blueberry crops are machine-harvested, Ehlenfeldt told those gathered at the library. But in New Jersey, considered a fresh-market state, the situation is reversed. Two-thirds are hand-harvested, Ehlenfeldt said.

"If you look at cost figures for production for a



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Librarian Ursula Redgrave and Dr. Mark Ehlenfeldt pick the winner for a gift basket at Pemberton Community Library's blueberry event. The winner was Laura Tull.

grower in New Jersey selling fresh-market fruit, the hand harvesting costs are about 50 percent of his total input costs," Ehlenfeldt said.

During this season, Ehlenfeldt is doing a lot of evaluation of plants, since it is the actual production season.

"In our test plants, we do yield harvest to determine the productivity of new selections. We also do various fruit quality evaluations. We run a firmness evaluation on a lot of the fruits that we harvest," said Ehlenfeldt, who also said he runs studies to see how well the fruits store.

After this season is over, during the winter, new seedlings are grown in Rutgers' Research Center Campus greenhouse, located in Chatsworth. Those seedlings will be put into the fields in the spring, and will be allowed to grow for about three to four years before approximately the best 2 percent are picked to be saved, Ehlenfeldt said. Those plants will undergo further evaluation.

"A lot of what I do throughout the year is making crosses between good

parents, producing new seedlings, growing those seedlings out, and putting those seedlings in the field," said Ehlenfeldt. "For the real production of the variety, you're probably talking about a minimum of 12 to 15 years from seed to a finished variety that is released to the growers."

At the end of the program, guests were able to sample different varieties of blueberries. Many of the guests were surprised at how different-looking and different-tasting the various blueberries were. Some blueberries were sweet, some tart. They varied in size, color and texture.

Several guests said they were also surprised to learn that there are approximately 170 varieties of blueberries.

A gift basket brimming with goods from the Whitesbog General store was raffled off, and Laura Tull took home the prize.

Eric Zino, assistant library director of Burlington County College, was also on hand and brought along archived books, literature and information from the college's Pinelands Preservation room, located at BCC's own library.

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STEVE MARSH
Dr. Mark Ehlenfeldt looks on as Linda Cooper, Laura Tull and Dorothy Moffitt sample varieties of blueberries at last week's Pemberton Community Library event.

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