

Whitesbog fest draws blueberry lovers by score

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PEMBERTON TWP.

It was time to celebrate a fruit and its place in history. Thousands gathered Saturday at Whitesbog, the site of the Burlington County farm where the first wild blueberries were cultivated more than 85 years ago.

The once wild-growing berry, which thrived in the sandy soil of the Pine Barrens, was tamed in the early 1900s by farmer Elizabeth White, who hired local "Pineys" to help her find the biggest berries to cultivate.

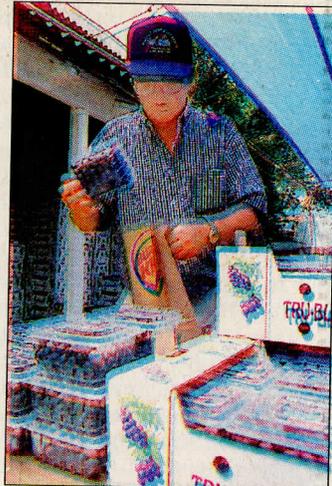
Some visitors came to Whitesbog Saturday to take tours of the historic village or to buy homemade crafts from vendors. But for others, like Walter Rosario, who was picking the fruit out of the pint and popping it into his mouth, the day was all about relishing the fruit.

Rosario, who is from North Jersey, had already scarfed down a piece of blueberry cheesecake and was eyeing a piece of blueberry marble cake. His girlfriend, Shannon Castellano of Browns Mills, was hoping to take a wagon ride to a restored blueberry field to pick some berries.

"I'll do the picking," Castellano said. "He'll do the eating."

The row of tables selling blueberry treats, such as muffins, pies, scones, fritters, jam, bagels, doughnuts and funnel cakes, were busy most of the morning and early afternoon.

Nearby, 2-year-old Jillian Faulhaber was happily getting her first taste of a blueberry



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Volunteer Everett Robbins of Mount Holly sells blueberries by the pint at Saturday's Whitesbog Blueberry Festival.

bagel as mom Marie and grandmother Selma Halpern of Pemberton Township sat on a shaded picnic table.

"We're having a great time," Halpern said as she watched her granddaughter.

The women said they were looking forward to trying some of the blueberry goodies.

"We've got the fritters stashed in a bag," Faulhaber said. "They're for the ride home."

Blueberries are no longer grown commercially at Whitesbog. But a group of local volunteers has kept blueberries growing in a restored field to ensure that some of the fruit still grows at its birthplace.

"All cultivated blueberries in the world started here," said Ted Gordon, a Pine Barrens botanist and historian. "The history of the origin is really what we are celebrating here."