

# Grow Red

Fresh, local strawberries are needed for this year's West Virginia Strawberry Festival to stock a "Strawberry Market" planned for the May 14-22, 2016, event.

The Strawberry Festival board, the City of Buckhannon and the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) are working cooperatively with private farmers to have fresh, local berries for sale during this year's 75th anniversary.

"This great festival is an excellent opportunity for local farmers to benefit from the visitors that pour into Upshur County each May," said Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. "But like the other tremendous food-related opportunities in our state, we need more growers to become involved."

While local growers have continued to produce small amounts of berries for the traditional strawberry auction and other festival events, retail sales of West Virginia berries has been nearly non-existent for decades.

Over the past two years, a limited number of growers have provided berries for the WVDA-organized sale. But the demand has proven far greater than the supply.

"With the help of the Upshur County FFA Chapter, we sold about 200 pints of berries over two days the first year," said sale organizer Buddy Davidson. "The second year, we sold the same amount of berries in half the time. If we could just get the berries, I'm confident we could open up two or three more sales locations."

He pointed out that local organizations could use upwards of a thousand pints of wholesale berries for their strawberry shortcake fund-raisers that are currently supplied by local grocery stores.

"Nothing against local grocery stores, but most people who visit the Strawberry Festival don't really know what a fresh, picked-ripe strawberry tastes like. When they try a sample of our berries, lots of times there's an actual look of surprise that comes over them."

He also noted that the berries bring \$5 a pint, which may sound like a lot in farmers' market terms, but it doesn't deter buyers much considering the price of surrounding concessions.

The early timing of the festival has been problematic for growers in recent years, who have had a difficult time getting ripe berries in mid-May. However, the increasing prevalence of high tunnels – low-cost, unheated greenhouse structures – makes fresh berries in mid-May a more practical proposition than in the past.

At one time, the area grew a surplus of strawberries that were shipped out of state following the festival. One undated historical report in the archives of the Upshur County Historical Society notes that more than 1,500 gallons of berries were shipped to Pittsburgh. It also said that farmers would be supplying cherries, raspberries and currants "later in the season." But over the years, that supply was replaced by berries from large-scale, out-of-state producers.

"This is a great opportunity for West Virginia's farmers and really all they have to do is grow the berries and get them to Buckhannon," said Davidson. "We have a prime location beside the Courthouse for our tent. The WVDA and FFA handle all the labor. And we mail the farmer a check in the end."

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