



Third Year Sees Big **BOUNCE** at Annual Strawberry Festival Sale



The early spring weather throughout much of West Virginia this year resulted in roughly double the number of strawberries for the 2016 West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) sponsored retail strawberry sale during the 75th West Virginia Strawberry Festival.

“There is so much history associated with this event, and it’s very gratifying when I see the support the community has expressed for bringing fresh, local berries back to the West Virginia Strawberry Festival,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick. “I only see this project continuing to grow in future years.”

This year’s sale had just shy of 300 pints of berries from five West Virginia growers – a substantial jump from the 160-170 pints from two growers from the past two years, according to WVDA Communications Officer and sale organizer Buddy Davidson. The sale netted \$1,355 for state strawberry growers. A portion of the proceeds went to the Upshur County FFA club for its help with the sale.

“We had such an early spring that growers got a jump-start on production, but if the weather had cooperated just a little bit more, we could have had substantially more berries,” said Davidson. “I had two other growers who were expecting upwards of 100 pints each of berries, but the cloudy, wet weather leading up to the festival prevented them from getting ripe in time.”

Grower Mike Smalley of Webster County was the only grower to have outdoor-grown berries at the festival, despite the crazy weather. “I had eight inches of snow on these berries the last week in April. We’ve had seven inches of rain since May 3. I was able to hurry the berries along a little by using some row covers,” he said. “My berries are definitely fresher. In fact, anything grown in West Virginia is better than what you get from California, Florida, North Carolina or anyplace else for that matter.”

Jarred Hitt of Gallipolis Ferry also was proud of his berries. “The strawberries you buy in the grocery store are grown in Florida or California. My berries are actually grown in WV. It’s good to know where your food is coming from. The berries you buy in the grocery store are kind of sour. My berries are sweet!” he said. “So far the berry business has been very profitable. You can sell them easy. They taste good and people really love them.”

Davidson noted that this was the first year the WVDA opened two locations on Main Street. “Although we had a tent on Kanawha Street for the Fireman’s Parade last year, putting one at the Stockert Youth Center really worked well,” he said. “We had a lot of general foot traffic at the Courthouse location, but the Stockert location proved to be really popular with the bands and other out-of-town groups that participated in the parades. I’d really like to thank SYC and Director Deborah Brockelman for their cooperation, and for the educational work they’re doing with kids in their own greenhouse.”

Davidson also said he continues to bump into growers unaware of the sale and the festival’s auction. He urged any growers who are interested in participating to contact him at 304-541-5932, or bdavidson@wvda.us.

He also noted that fresh berries and other produce will soon be showing up in farmers’ markets throughout the state. The more adventurous can visit one of the state’s many “pick-your-own” operations, a list of which is currently under construction at www.agriculture.wv.gov.