

The <http://www.wvagriculture.org/> Market Bulletin

Gus R. Douglass, Commissioner
Janet L. Fisher, Deputy Commissioner Steve Hannah, Deputy Commissioner

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New Year Full of Activity

As this is being written the bitter cold weather still has its grip on West Virginia in this early part of February, but it has not slowed down any activities here in the Capitol City. The ongoing legislative budget hearings and committee hearings often must be responded to on short notice, and there are several conventions and meetings that happen in the months of January, February and March. I consider these the most demanding months of the year, although these events give me the opportunity to speak to audiences on the many activities the WVDA staff is involved in to share our vision in both supplying food and protecting our food supply.



Beekeepers from throughout the state met with Senator Truman Chafin (D-Mingo) on Agriculture and Conservation Day at the Legislature January 22 to thank him for his support of the apiary industry in the past and to ask for his help in providing funding for permanent apiary inspector positions in the Department. Beekeepers noted that one of third of the food we eat is pollinated by honeybees and that well in excess of 1,000 West Virginia bee colonies are currently in other states helping to pollinate crops.

Recently we had the opportunity to display our mobile biosecurity laboratory to the public and legislators. This completes our rapid response mobile units that can be deployed anywhere in West Virginia or across the nation if needed in an emergency. Our efforts now will focus on honing our skills in utilizing the new technology that we have available to us to do onsite testing for diseases, bacteria

and viruses.

I receive many reports of research from our colleges, universities and private institutions on their efforts to prolong our lifespan by the prevention and control of diseases. Last month I commented on cloning research. We know there is success in the genetic manipulation of hogs wherein the organs of swine can be substituted for human organs. Cows are even being genetically engineered to produce human proteins in their milk, including insulin and drugs to treat cystic fibrosis.

This month I have interesting information from *Reuters Limited* on chickens engineered to make cancer drugs. The chicken research

is being done by the same institute that cloned Dolly the sheep. They are now producing tumor-fighting eggs. The chickens produce the cancer drugs in their egg whites. The drugs include a monoclonal antibody (lab-engineered immune system proteins) and a human immune system protein used to treat cancer and other conditions. Their research involved using a virus to infect very early chicken embryos. The virus inserted the genetic material into the DNA of chick embryos in newly laid eggs. The researchers hatched these chicks and found the male chicks had indeed incorporated the new DNA in their semen. These cockerels were then bred with normal hens. They have now bred several hundred chickens that can produce the desired proteins. I marvel at the rapid pace and scope of the advances in science today. It is truly fascinating.

Tune the television on to the world news and you'll hear much being said about the research of synthetic fuels, both liquid and gaseous, from renewable resources. This industry recently got a boost from both the President and the United States Department



Gus' View . . .

of Agriculture (USDA). Loan guarantees in the amount of two billion dollars for cellulose ethanol production should bring this source of renewable energy to use much sooner now. This can be an opportunity for West Virginia as more than half of a tree is left when we harvest the logs from our mountainsides. This leftover cellulose is a resource for the raw materials needed to produce biofuels.

The recent 75th Anniversary Convention of the West Virginia Fairs and Festivals was a wonderful event. The Civic Center in Charleston hosted the 79 young women vying for the crown of Miss West Virginia Association of Fairs and Festivals, and the queens of past conventions attended as well. I enjoyed visiting and reminiscing with the past queens as I have crowned many of them over my years of serving as Agriculture Commissioner.

I especially enjoyed visiting with Mary Ellen O'Dell who was named the first queen of the West Virginia State Fair in 1956. Mary Ellen was originally from Clay County and has remained active in West Virginia. She and her husband, Howard, now reside in Jackson County and she writes a weekly food column for the *Jackson Star-News*.

The pageant with the 79 ladies seeking the title of queen was a beautiful event. My congratulations to Talia Markham whom the judges selected as queen.

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Department of Agriculture Unveils New Mobile Laboratory

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) rolled out the crown jewel of its homeland security arsenal at Agriculture and Conservation Day at the Legislature January 22.

The day marked the official introduction of the WVDA's new mobile laboratory to the public and provided an opportunity for state Homeland Security officials and the public to learn about the half-million dollar semi-trailer and its capabilities.



"To our knowledge, this is the only facility of its type in the country dedicated primarily to agricultural use," said Commissioner of Agriculture Gus R. Douglass. "With this mobile laboratory, we can move our entire diagnostic capability wherever it is needed, which will result in quicker turnaround time on samples and increased biosecurity during a disease outbreak."

The mobile laboratory will be permanently stationed at the Moorefield Regional Agricultural Complex, in the heart of West Virginia's poultry industry. It will be used on a daily basis there to process samples from ongoing surveillance, including avian influenza and water quality monitoring programs.

It can also be readily used to perform testing for human diseases.

"About half of the animal diseases out there can also affect humans, and that's certainly the fear when it comes to the Asian bird flu," said WVDA's State Veterinarian Joe Starcher. "This facility can test for human diseases, animal diseases, or both."

Mobile Lab, continued on page 12

Gus' View...

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She is the daughter of Tom and Teresa Evans of Ripley, and she represented the Lincoln County Fall Festival in Hamlin. What an honor she has won as the 75th queen. In the coming months she will tour West Virginia, visiting many of the fairs and festivals. She holds both the title of Miss West Virginia Association of Fairs and Festivals and the State Fair of West Virginia, where she will preside during fair week.

Another event making its mark in the promotion of West Virginia and its agribusiness industry was the 2nd Annual Cast Iron Cook-Off held January 26-27 at Stonewall Resort. The mission of the Cast Iron competition is to showcase and promote West Virginia's Appalachian heritage and new Appalachian cuisine; the culinary talent of today and their establishments; food products, food producers, and food-related products. The Cook-Off also highlights the culinary hot spots as tourist attractions, the resorts and other fine dining establishments. The event encourages and promotes the culinary talent of tomorrow by furthering high school students' interests in pursuing culinary studies by providing funds for scholarships. An emphasis is placed on

New Appalachian Cuisine evolving from our Appalachian roots, but is also reflective of a new appreciation of other cuisine styles and nutritional concerns.

The competition features seven teams comprised of a professionally trained chef and sous chef (sous is a French word for under and this chef takes command of production) and eight amateur culinarians. I served as a judge and as each team had to develop four dishes, I had the opportunity to sample 28 dishes ranging from salads and entrees to desserts. The overall winner was Team Provence, representing Provence Market & Café in Bridgeport. Congratulations to Team Chef Anne Hart who prevailed again this year. Dale Hawkins, Executive Chef at Stonewall Resort, chairs this wonderful promotional event which utilizes locally grown and produced foods.

Its official now that Don Michael, Coordinator of Agricultural Education and longtime leader of the FFA in West Virginia, is retiring February 28, 2007. Don has had a commendable career and his success in maintaining the FFA program for young men and women in public speaking, parliamentary procedure and business practices is envied by FFA leaders in other states, especially the statewide Ham, Bacon and Egg Sale promotion activities. Don is not leaving the state scene entirely as he will become the Director of Governmental Affairs for the West Virginia Farm Bureau. I look

forward to working with Don in this capacity. Rest assured he will remain committed to the agriculture programs that are so dear to our heart.

The pressures of the times have caught up with the farm supply cooperative Southern States as they have been forced to close 115 stores in the past six years. These closures have followed the same trend that has forced some of its traditional clients out of business-urban sprawl. We are losing the Southern States store in the Eastern Panhandle located in South Martinsburg. This store has been in business since 1937, but profitability had been declining for years. At the end of fiscal year 2000, the Richmond, Va., based company owned or managed 327 stores. The number is now down to 212 operations. This shows how much farmers contribute to the economy which is now being replaced by housing developments and other urban expansion.

My next few days will be spent in Washington, D.C., meeting with delegations and Agriculture Commissioners, Directors, and Secretaries from across the U.S. looking toward the future in developing the 2007 Farm Bill.

As this is written, we have no new calves born at the farm. We're hoping the calving season will hold off until this cold weather moves on. Keep warm.

Wash. Eat.






(how easy is that?)

Pick a better snack™



Serving Suggestions

-  Spread celery stalk with cream cheese and sprinkle with dried cranberries.
-  Cut stalks and fill with low-fat cream cheese. Make into a "car" by adding carrot slices for tires and steering wheel.
-  Cut celery into bite-sized pieces and put in a salad with tangerines and grapes.

Provided by the West Virginia Nutrition Network, funded in part by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

Can Honeybees be Managed by the Calendar?

George Clutter, State Apiarist
WVDA Marketing & Development Division

Determining what your honeybee colony needs throughout the year can be a challenge. Each beekeeper must look inside their hives, not on the calendar to make decisions. Colonies vary depending on weather, climate zone within the state, honey flow and race of the colony in question.

Climate zones within the state may cause beekeepers in Huntington to perform tasks such as spring stimulation and supering a full three weeks before beekeepers in Harmon. In each area beekeepers must watch the weather and progression of blooming plants to determine when to start these tasks. Spring seasons can be very different, some being early and others late.

Spring stimulation should begin in late winter/early spring before maple trees bloom. Beekeepers must look inside each hive to determine what kind of stimulation, if any, should be made. A strong colony may require little if any stimulation. Stimulating a strong colony with plenty of honey or pollen stores will cause excess swarming and a diminished honey crop. The type of resources within the hive must be taken into consideration. A honey bound colony should not be fed corn syrup or invert sugar just as a pollen bound colony must not be fed pollen substitute.

Terramycin dusting to prevent American Foul Brood should be done as soon as weather permits in the spring in order to have all three

applications completed six weeks before the first honey crops.

Surplus supering should take place on production strength hives shortly before early honey crops such as Autumn Olive, Locust and Yellow Rocket. Beekeepers must watch the weather and progression of these blooms in their area each season to determine the correct date. The number of supers for each colony will range between one and five supers, depending on colony strength. Beekeepers must examine each hive during each honey flow adjusting the number of supers as needed, adding supers to some colonies and removing some from others based on their progress.

Swarm control divisions must be made in April, May or June to prevent swarming. Some colonies may be split several times while others can not be split at all depending on the season and vigor of each queen.

Colonies should be checked throughout the season for Varroa mite levels. Spring treatments may be necessary for some colonies while others may not need to be treated until late summer or fall. Some colonies may not need to be treated for Varroa mites at all if they cannot be found on drone brood or adult bees in late fall. Any time deformed wings or damaged brood is found, surplus supers should be removed and the colony treated.

Winter preparation must begin in mid-summer. Each colony will need 70 pounds of

honey and a young cluster to winter. If colonies are not properly stimulated throughout August and September, not enough young bees will be born to carry the colony through to spring. Tracheal mite treatments must be applied in late summer to early fall while temperatures are high enough to activate the miteicides Menthol or Mite-Away II. Some colonies require no tracheal mite treatments. Buckfast, Russian and Carnolian colonies have developed a natural resistance to this mite. Colonies headed by Italian queens have little or no resistance and must be treated.

Fall feeding, when necessary, should begin in early September. Warm syrup is easier for honeybees to move and process than cold syrup. As temperatures decrease, syrup will be processed and stored at a much slower rate. In years with a fall honey flow, no feeding should take place. Honey bound colonies with no clustering space in the brood nest will die just as surely as a colony with inadequate food stores. Three more rounds of Terramycin should be applied in late fall.

As you can see beekeeping is a series of judgment calls. To be a successful beekeeper you must learn to know what your honeybee colony needs and how to give it to them.

Davidson Installed as Secretary of Professional Association

WVDA Communications Officer Buddy Davidson was installed as secretary of the West Virginia Chapter of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) at a dinner at the Charleston Marriott November 15.

PRSA is the world's largest organization for public relations professionals. Chartered in 1947, PRSA's primary objectives are to advance the standards of the public relations profession and to provide members with professional



development opportunities through continuing education programs, information exchange forums and research projects conducted on the national and local levels.

As secretary, Davidson will be responsible for recording and distributing the minutes of the organization's meetings. He just finished a term as membership committee chairman.

April Auctioneer Exam

Thursday, April 12, 9 a.m.

Gus R. Douglass Agricultural Center
at Guthrie, Building 2.

Contact Sandy Marinacci at 558-3550.

Directions to the Ag Center are available
at www.wvagriculture.org

Horn and Antler Show on Tap for State Farm Museum

The West Virginia State Farm Museum will host its first-ever "Horn and Antler Show" April 21, 2007, from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Proud hunters are encouraged to bring their own trophy racks to display. Registration will be from 8-9 a.m. and cost is \$2 per rack.

Organizers are expecting 500 racks and more than 30 companies have registered to sponsor the event. There will be demonstrations and activities for the kids, including turkey calling. Door prizes will be awarded every 15 minutes and refreshments will be available for sale.

The West Virginia Farm Museum is located five miles north of Point Pleasant along Route 62. For more information contact Lloyd Akers, 304-675-5737 or organizer Donald Click, 304-675-3829.

CALIFORNIA ALMOND POLLINATION

A New Source of Income for West Virginia Beekeepers

Paul Poling, Apiary Specialist, WVDA Marketing & Development Division

While many people were busy filling shopping carts and preparing packages for Christmas on December 23, 12 West Virginia beekeepers were filling a trailer with 312 hives of bees packaged on pallets and destined for California to pollinate the almonds which bloom in February. This was the first of three loads scheduled to leave West Virginia for the almonds this season. Moving beehives from West Virginia to California is a very big task, but the 12 beekeepers proved that they could successfully cooperate to bring about what could be coined as the next "California Gold Rush." All the beekeepers needed were some encouragement and a little help from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture's (WVDA) Marketing & Development Division and apiary staff to help coordinate their efforts.

In August, WVDA's apiary staff was contacted by an almond grower looking to rent 1,200 hives at \$80 each. A number of beekeepers in central West Virginia were contacted to see if they would be interested in pursuing the contract through a cooperative agreement. A meeting was held in Weston at the W.Va. Honey Producers Coop, and negotiations began between the growers and beekeepers. Articles in the two leading bee journals were indicating that hive rentals were exceeding \$140 each. After a month of negotiating, the almond grower and cooperative beekeepers made an agreement based on the bee population in the colony. With their final agreement a hive has the potential of yielding a \$180 rental fee.

The 12 beekeepers who worked cooperatively are excited with this new opportunity and several are talking of doubling and tripling their number of hives for next year. The cooperative beekeepers who sent their bees could only supply the grower with 620 hives this season, half of what the grower asked for. This was in part due to the nectar dearth that occurred this past season which left beehives short on bees and many dying from starvation. Beekeepers that provided hives with supplementary food were able to prevent some loss and maintain fair to good bee population.

To date, more than 900 hives of honeybees have been certified by the WVDA's apiary staff and shipped to California for pollination to two different almond growers. An apiarist in the Eastern Panhandle secured his first contract for 300 hives this season with an almond grower who has contacted apiary staff for the last 2 years looking to rent bees from West Virginia. Both almond growers who received bees from West

Virginia have requested additional hives for the next season. As the shortage for beehives needed to pollinate almonds continues in California, the price for hive rentals will likely increase.

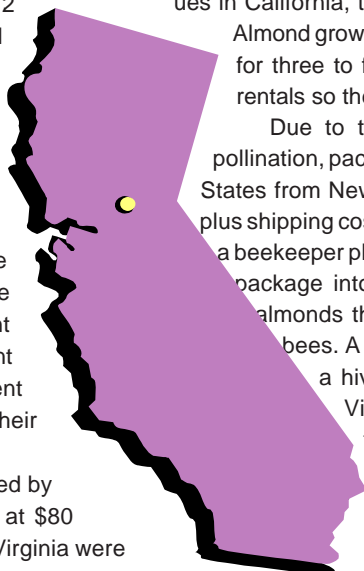
Almond growers are currently seeking pollination contracts for three to five years to lock in prices and secure hive rentals so they don't find themselves without bees.

Due to this shortage of bees needed for almond pollination, package bees are being imported into the United States from New Zealand. Almond growers often pay \$110 plus shipping cost for a four-pound package with queen, have a beekeeper place his hive in the almond orchard, install the package into it and care for it. After pollination of the almonds the beekeepers will take home the package bees. A four-pound package of bees when placed in a hive will only cover 4 to 5 frames. Our West Virginia beekeepers are aware of the value of their hives which have bees covering over 10 frames and will likely continue to negotiate for a higher price per hive.

Registered 2006 West Virginia beekeepers were sent a letter in late December to re-register their hives with the WVDA.

They also were given a questionnaire asking if they would be interested in sending beehives to California for pollination next season and the number of hives that they would be willing to send. The WVDA's apiary staff is prepared to assist beekeepers in cooperatively coordinating shipments of honeybee colonies to California for pollination. One of the services that the WVDA can provide is assisting in locating almond growers who are looking to rent colonies. In addition, apiary staff will do inspections for disease, grade colonies for bee population, and provide a Red Imported Fire Ant inspection that is necessary for crossing the border into California. The WVDA also provides assistance in areas of planning and preparation.

Beekeepers still face the challenge of parasitic mites and disease, but with the additional income from almond pollination, that challenge can be financially met where in the past it's been a problem. The income received from honey in years when the crop is small often leaves commercial and sideliners beekeepers without the ability to purchase the treatments to control mites and disease in their hives. This past season is a good example as beekeepers are struggling due to the shortage of honey production throughout most of West Virginia. The almond pollination in California may be just what we need financially to help strengthen our beekeeping industry, increase the number of commercial beekeepers here in West Virginia and create new jobs in our agricultural community.



Pleasing Potato Recipes

Jean Smith, Director, Marketing and Development Division

To me potatoes are a comfort food! They warm you, fill you up and in some cases remind you of special occasions when life was grand! Remember Grandma's mashed potatoes with all of the family or Mom's special potato salad at a summer picnic? Nutritionally, potatoes are a good source of Vitamin C, Vitamin B6 and Niacin, as well as being low in calories, cholesterol free and a good source of dietary fiber. What a bargain!

How do you prepare the perfect potato?

Consider the following tips:

* Remember it is best to eat potatoes with their skins. The skins are packed with vitamins and fiber.

* If you decide to peel the potatoes for dishes such as mashed potatoes, boil them in their skins and then peel . . . you will still receive the benefits!

The perfect baked potato is prepared by:

* Washing the potato well and drying. Pre-heat the oven to 425°F. Pierce each potato in several places so the steam can escape. Place potatoes directly on the oven rack or a baking sheet. Bake 40-55 minutes or until fork tender. Jean's tip: I also like to pierce the potatoes, lightly coat with vegetable oil, roll in Kosher salt and place on a baking sheet – just like your favorite restaurant baked potatoes!

* For hash browns: Heat butter or olive oil in medium nonstick skillet on medium heat. Add coarsely shredded potatoes; cover and cook until the bottom is golden brown, adjusting heat as necessary. Turn potatoes over carefully to brown opposite side. Season with salt and pepper. Note: For crispier potatoes, turn one time.

I hope the following recipes become family favorites. — *Bon Appetit!*

What's Cookin'

March 2007

Recipes

Chicken and Potato Skillet

- 4 medium potatoes
- Vegetable Cooking Spray
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 4 green onions, sliced
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice, divided
- 2 tablespoons grated lemon peel, divided
- 2 teaspoons dried basil leaves
- Salt to taste
- Pepper to taste
- 4 chicken breasts, boned and skinned
- ¼ cup chicken broth
- ¼ cup chopped parsley

Wash potatoes, dry and pierce with fork several times. Bake in microwave 6 minutes on HIGH. Let cool 2-3 minutes; cut into ½" chunks. Spray 12" nonstick skillet with vegetable cooking spray; heat oil in skillet over medium-high heat. Place potatoes in skillet with cut sides down. Cook, turning occasionally, about 6 minutes until golden brown. Mix in onions, 1 tablespoon lemon juice, 1 tablespoon grated lemon peel and dried basil. Cook another 2 minutes tossing potatoes lightly. Season with salt and pepper. Remove potatoes from skillet and keep warm.

Spray skillet again with vegetable cooking spray; heat skillet over medium heat and add chicken. Cook for 10 minutes until chicken juices run clear, turning chicken one time. Raise heat level of cooking to medium high and deglaze skillet by adding chicken broth and gently scraping any bits left on bottom of the pan. Stir in chopped parsley, remaining 2 tablespoons lemon juice and 1 tablespoon of lemon peel. Season with salt and pepper. Return potatoes to skillet and toss to heat through.

Recipes

Spud'licious Pound Cake

- 3 cups granulated sugar
- 3 sticks butter
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 8 ounces sour cream
- 1 large potato, cooked and mashed
- ½ cup unsweetened cocoa
- ½ cup orange juice
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 teaspoons orange extract
- ¼ teaspoon salt

- 5 large eggs
- Cream cheese icing (*recipe below*)
- Raspberries/strawberries for garnish

Cream Cheese Icing:

- 1 3-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- 1 tablespoon milk
- 2 cups Confectioners' sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease and flour 10" tube pan. In large bowl, beat sugar and butter with mixer on low speed until ingredients are blended. Increase speed to high; beat 3 minutes until light and fluffy, scraping bowl often with rubber spatula. Reduce mixer speed to low; add flour and next 8 ingredients. Beat until well mixed, constantly scraping bowl. Increase mixer speed to high; beat an additional 2 minutes. It is necessary to continue scraping the sides of bowl. Spoon batter into prepared pan.

Bake for 1 hour and 30 minutes or until toothpick inserted in the cake center comes out clean. Cool cake on wire rack 15 minutes. With spatula, loosen cake and remove from pan; cool completely on rack. When cake is completely cool. Move from rack to cake plate; frost with cream cheese icing (*recipe below*). Garnish with berries if desired.

Cream Cheese Icing: In small bowl, beat softened cream cheese and milk with mixer on low speed. Beat mixture until smooth. Beat in Confectioners' sugar and vanilla extract until well blended. If mixture is too thick, add a few drops of milk at a time until the desired consistency is reached.

Place icing on cake top, allowing to drizzle down cake sides. Garnish with berries if desired.

Fayetteville Farmers' Market: Interested producers and buyers for a Farmers' Market in Fayetteville are invited to an organizational meeting, March 5, 2007 at Beauty Mountain Hostel. The meeting will begin at 5 p.m. For directions or additional information, contact Meredith Gregg at 304/574-4726 or W.Va. Department of Agriculture Marketing Specialist, Cindy Martel, at 304/469-9738.



Look for another potato recipe, "Potato Breakfast Squares" in the April *Market Bulletin*.

State Pumpkin Takes Top Prize

Reprinted from the Tyler Star News

All eyes are on the silver trophy cup on the dining room table, each set mirroring admiration and a little envy.

Sitting like a proud father in front of the award Jim Bowen, owner – at least for a year – of the Southern Cup, which is bestowed upon the southeastern United States' largest pumpkin grower each year.

For 2006, that was Bowen, who has an engraved plaque attached to the bottom of the cup's wooden base announcing his record pumpkin's 1,020-pound weight. It measured 8 feet, 3 inches from blossom end to stem ground-to-ground and 7 feet, 3 inches over the top. Those measurements translate into 14.17 feet circumference, and it weighed 8 percent heavier than it measured.

The Southern Cup contest is different than most that involve pumpkin growing. Director Joe Mills harnesses technology and word-of-mouth to learn who has the biggest gourd each year. As long as the measurements are official and sanctioned, the grower is in the running. Bowen took the prize for 2006, and the only pumpkin in the contest's history to weigh more was the 1,157-pound gourd Scott Wotring of West Virginia grew in 2005.

Bowen was also the winner at the Middle Island Harvest Festival Pumpkin Contest – not too shabby for his second year. It was purchased by Doug Doak of Aleris.

Keith Frum, who placed fifth at the Chillicothe, Ohio pumpkin contest, is responsible for Bowen's interest.

"Keith gave me the first plant," Bowen said.

From that, his largest pumpkin topped out at 563 pounds in 2005. He also had one each at 450 pounds and 430 pounds.

Having been bitten by the pumpkin bug, Bowen joined the unofficial "big pumpkin growers" club in Tyler County and began attending seminars. The seminar cost was \$20 and \$10 for three seeds from a Neptune 837, which yielded Bowen's winner.

"Only one of the seeds germinated." Bowen said.

But one was enough. Now, any seeds from his prize pumpkin will be known as 1020 Bowen's.

The Southern Cup wasn't the last stop on the pumpkin circuit. Bowen placed second in Milton's West Virginia Pumpkin Festival with another yield from the year's crop. First went

to friend and fellow big pumpkin grower Bob Christen of Buck Run.



L-R: Gene Boor, a fellow large pumpkin grower and multiple-time winner of the "Largest Pumpkin Contest" at the West Virginia Pumpkin Festival presents the Southern Cup to Jim Bowen in December 2006.



BOWEN'S BABY – Jim Bowen won the Southern Cup for the largest pumpkin in the southeast states with his 1,020 pounder in 2006. He also placed first at the Middle Island Harvest Festival with the same gourd. In addition, he placed second at the West Virginia Pumpkin Festival in Milton with his 924-pound pumpkin.

Christen's giant gourd came in at 941 pounds and Bowen's at 924 pounds.

Gene Boor is the instigator behind Tyler County's pumpkin madness. He has won the West Virginia Pumpkin Festival seven of the 10 years he has competed.

First, Frum sat at his feet, then ventured off to spread the word and catch Bowen's and Christen's ears. As a group, they attend giant pumpkin growing seminars and share secrets, though Bowen is stingy with his pig manure,

which cradles and helped feed the 2006 champ.

But, as a whole, the three disciples defer to Boor. And, they are seeking recruits for a club. Small at first, but possibly one that will grow into something more grand.

"It's not just about growing them, but what it does to people when they see it." Bowen said.

"I told people mine was growing 36 pounds in a day and they'd look at me like I'd been drinking fermented pumpkin juice. That's a pound-and-a-half an hour. People claim you can hear them grow but it's awesome to see what it does to people. You're going down the road with one on the trailer and people passing you giving a thumbs up," he said. "With all the turmoil in the world, it's nice to see people with a smile on their faces – and a pumpkin put it there."

Boor echoes the sentiment. His refrain is, "I've never met another person growing a giant pumpkin who was grouchy."

And, oh, the yarns they can spin with the experience.

While Bowen has bragging rights for the year, he's had to overcome much good-natured ribbing involving a dry cistern and weak tailgate last summer.

When the well went dry, he found himself hauling 250 gallons of water a day to nurse his three babies through the dry spell. "It's more than I wanted to do, but Mr. Boor kept encouraging me and it paid off," Bowen said. "Guess it just goes to show that even a blind hog will get an acorn once in awhile."

But the mishap occurred when Bowen thought the water tank on the back of his truck shifted too close to the vehicle's cab.

"I guess I stepped on the gas a little too heavy and the tank went sliding back and took off the tailgate and fell onto the road," he said. "It was so heavy; I couldn't even push it off to the side of the road. I went to

punch a hole in it to get it back on the truck, but I didn't have anything with me, so I had to go home and get a hammer."

But there is some compensation for the hard work. Last year's top seed – just one seed, a 1068 Wallace – sold for \$850.

Yet, most of the growers aren't doing it for the money. They enjoy the challenge and fellowship. Those interested in joining the clan may do so by calling Boor at 758-4825; Frum at 758-2040, evenings; Christen, 337-8723 or Bowen, 758-2019.