Vegetable Contests at the new Okeechobee County Fair

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Add another event to the list of Florida's County fairs: Okeechobee County just completed its first ever county fair in early March. While there has been a Youth Livestock show in the county for many years, construction of a new County Agri-Civic center has allowed for a bon-fide County Fair to begin operation in south Florida.

This first-time event included two activities of interest to those involved with vegetables: an open Vegetable Exhibit and a Vegetable Judging and Identification Contest.

As Okeechobee's County Horticulture Agent, I have been working here for a few years with County 4-H Agent Debbie Clements and CED Pat Miller to expand the opportunities for youth and adults in horticulture. With the expansion of our county's commercial acreage of vegetables and the on-going interest in home gardening, time was ripe for these events at our new County Fair.

Vegetable Exhibition

At this year's Fair, we had three different competitions for local vegetable gardeners. Exhibitors had to pre-register their exhibits before the Fair, and were provided with ribbons and cash premiums for first, second and third place entries.

An exhibit evaluation card was developed to provide comments on the quality of the entries to the growers. (Contact me if you would like a copy!) Youth and adults were judged in separate divisions; unfortunately there were no youth entries this year.
The first exhibit category was a table display using a variety of produce raised by the exhibitor. A minimum of 5 different fruits or vegetables raised in the garden were to be arranged in a suitable containers supplied by the exhibitor.

First place award went to Sal Varri for his market basket of various shoots and roots; second place went to Laurie McClosky 's salad green plate, and third place was earned by John Lane for his market basket of assorted vegetables.

The second exhibit category was for individual vegetables, which were evaluated on their maturity and usefulness. Each entry was a plate of several vegetables of the same variety.

First place for her head of Cabbage went to Janice Trent ; second place was earned by Sal Varri 's unusual red-meat radish bunch; third place was earned by Laurie McClosky 's onion bunch.

The final category was the first year of what will be an on-going list of our county's largest vegetables. These records will stand until beaten by someone else in a future edition of this contest. Entries in this Vegetable competition had to be cleaned of all dirt and excess materials at check-in. They were weighed and then multiplied by an “equalizing factor” that allowed small items to be compared with bigger vegetables. (We used the multipliers developed by Jim Stephens in 1989; the last listing of State records was published in the June 2005 Vegetarian.)

Our biggest vegetable this year was “giant” Green Bell pepper grown by John Lane. This 9 oz. fruit (multiplied by 6.3) produced a “score of 56.7. Second place was Sal Varri ‘s carrot, tipping the scales at 12 ozs. (times 2.0) for a score of 24. Our third place winner was Janice Trent ‘s 2 pound, 14 oz. cabbage (times 0.3) with a point value of 13.8. These are NOT state records – but just wait till next year!

Identification and Judging Contest

Okeechobee Yearling Middle School FFA adviser Buddy Mills asked me a year ago to help his members prepare for the state Vegetable Judging Contest. I dusted off my last file copy of Know Your Vegetables and copied it for his team's use.

Back in graduate school, I worked in the UF Department of Ag & Extension Education with Bill Becker and Susan Gray to develop Know Your Vegetables, a training manual and slide set for the Florida FFA Vegetable Identification contest. While it is still a useful document for contest training, it is not available anymore from UF.

Yearling's team did well at last year's contest, but wanted more opportunities to practice. This set the wheels in motion to have a local vegetable ID contest at our fair. Buddy arranged for their local FFA Alumni Association to sponsor trophies for our local county fair contest. I helped with the rules and registration, and put together a
Our contest was based on FFA rules. The FFA contest is different from the Florida 4-H Horticulture and National Junior Horticulture Contests, where contestants only identify (and evaluate) fruits and ornamentals.

These events also have a judging section, where the contestant evaluates the quality of several groups of products (e.g. 10 beans, 3 tomatoes, etc.), each on a separate plate. In that respect, it's not unlike Livestock Judging, where the contestant is rated on how well they can pick out the best and worst animal of a group of four.

The FFA Vegetable event also has the contestant identify vegetable seed and insects, diseases, and weeds that affect vegetable production. It definitely makes it more comprehensive and more challenging.

This first year contest at the Okeechobee Fair had 21 youth from 5 schools as participants. (I heard that January's contest held at the South Florida Fair in West Palm Beach had 22 youth from 6 teams.)

Miami/Dade Extension Agent Theresa Olczyk was enlisted to set up the placing classes. She used potatoes and cabbage from Okeechobee's own Eagle Island growers, radishes from Varri-Green Farms, and beans from Publix. I focused on the sections dealing with kinds and varieties of vegetables, insects, weeds and diseases. Rick Raid of EREC helped out with some of the diseases, while our office secretary Audrey Driggers donated her old insect collection for those items.

**Points to Ponder**

If you want to see the contest placings and photos, please go to our website. I would also challenge our readers with the following question with regard to Vegetable ID & Judging contests:
· Is there a vegetable ID contest in your area? (It's a great way to help teach vegetable gardening to both youth and adults.)

· Is the list of specimens on the contest in need of updating? (My feeling is that some of the contest items being identified are out of date with current marketing trends, and that some of the pests are not as relevant to today's vegetable growers and gardeners.)

· Is there a grad student interested in taking Know Your Vegetables (the old slide set and training manual) into the 21st Century by scanning and editing?

· Are there better photos for student study out there? (Please check the linked study guide on the web page)

Please feel free to RSVP any ideas or reactions to me at indiano@ufl.edu or calling me at the Okeechobee Extension office 863-763-6469.