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Arkansas 4-H member appointed to national 4-H advisory committee

The 4-H National Council has selected longtime Arkansas 4-H member Sara Gardner of Fayetteville to serve on its Young Alumni Advisory Committee, where she will help guide the national organization.

Gardner, a graduate of Fayetteville High School, is a junior at the University of Arkansas, where she is pursuing a double major in agricultural economics and international economics with minors in agricultural leadership, international economic development and Spanish. Upon graduation, she plans to attend law school and become an attorney for veterans or agriculture.

She is one of 11 young 4-H alumni nationwide appointed to the advisory committee, which works to support the National 4-H Council and advise the Board of Trustees.

“This is a big honor for Sara and a great recognition for Arkansas 4-H,” said Martha Ray Sartor, associate vice president – family and consumer sciences and 4-H youth development for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Gardner was a 4-H member for 11 years and worked on numerous citizenship, leadership and public speaking projects. She said she plans to use her position on the Young Alumni Advisory Committee to advocate for civic engagement, increased international opportunities and more youth engagement with veterans.

“4-H has shaped my values, established my dreams, and inspired me to turn vision into reality,” she said. “What began as a flag etiquette speech at the age of 8 has become a foundation of ambition and the source of my desire to make



Sara Gardner of Fayetteville serves on the 4-H National Council's Young Alumni Advisory Committee.

a difference. I am forever indebted to 4-H for making me the young woman I am today, and I am eager to give back to this organization through my role on the National Young Alumni Advisory Committee and throughout my lifetime.

“I hope to use my voice to tell my story, share the stories of Arkansas 4-H, and hear new stories of how 4-H is changing lives in our nation and world.” 

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Watermelon variety trial shows modern hybrids bring the flavor, but the old standbys still putting up strong numbers

Among the many things that can quickly devolve into “fighting words” in Arkansas, perhaps two of the more surprising are “seedless watermelon.” But when Matt Bertucci, assistant professor of horticulture for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, decided to pit a number of older, popular seeded varieties against more recently developed hybrids, he knew he was stepping onto contested ground.

“People have told me the idea of growing seedless watermelon in their county is practically sacrilege,” he said with a laugh.

The trial, which involved six varieties of watermelon grown on two quarter-acre test plots at the Southwest Research and Extension Center in Hope and at the Vegetable Research Station in Alma, respectively, took place over the summer of 2019. Bertucci said the small trial, which produced roughly 1,000-1,500 melons, was intended as a small-scale “proof of concept” that could later be scaled up if the fruit-growing community in Arkansas and elsewhere expressed interest.

The intent was to evaluate both older varieties of watermelon, which have been grown in Arkansas for decades, and newer, hybrid varieties for sweetness, nutrients, yield potential and marketability.

“There has been a lot of progress in the last 15-30 years, in terms of fruit improvements,” Bertucci said. “We have watermelon plants now that are disease resistant, potentially capture more nutrients from the soil, have sweeter taste profiles or sturdier rinds for shipping purposes. There are all

sorts of improvements that plant breeders have been able to make.”

Bertucci’s trial included two seeded watermelon varieties — Jubilee and Charleston Gray — and four seedless varieties: Exclamation, Excursion, Fascination and WDL4410. The melons were germinated in a greenhouse, then transplanted to field conditions once seedlings had sprouted three to five leaves, and were then grown under black plastic with drip irrigation.

A few of the trial’s findings surprised Bertucci, notably how well the fruiting productivity of the older varieties stacked up against the newer hybrids.

“The Jubilee and the Charleston Gray yielded pretty impressively,” he said. “I was expecting them to have a yield penalty because they’re ‘old material’ — they’re not advanced germplasm or advanced breeding lines.”

The trial found that all varieties yielded between 30,000 and 38,000 pounds per acre. Bertucci also considered “marketable yield,” setting the minimum threshold weight at 9 pounds per melon. Jubilee, one of the two older, seeded varieties, led the pack in both categories.

In terms of marketable fruit, however — the number of individual melons over 9 pounds., rather than simply the overall weight of the crop — all six varieties were very similar, with hybrids Excursion and WDL4441 at the top.

The cultivars also were all similar in sweetness, with each measuring between 14 and 15 on the Brix scale (expressed



A recent watermelon variety trial involved six varieties of watermelon grown on two quarter-acre test plots at the Southwest Research and Extension Center in Hope, Arkansas and at the Vegetable Research Station in Alma, Arkansas.

as “degrees Brix”), although the hybrid Fascination did take the lead.

Bertucci said that one flaw in the study, which he might address in a larger trial, was that it didn’t address physical appearance in the marketability of the melons.

“One shortcoming in our study is that we didn’t discard melons with blemishes or marks on the fruit rinds,” he said. “Charleston Gray and Jubilee had a propensity for rot on the rinds. You wouldn’t be able to sell it. The fruit grew and reached a good size, but there’s no way you could sell it at a farmers market.”

Bertucci said that growing modern hybrids does tend to incur higher input costs — both because the seed itself is more expensive (although most producers growing “seeded” varieties tend to purchase new seed each season anyway), and because the hybrid varieties usually require greenhouse conditions for seedlings to germinate, as opposed to the older varieties, which will germinate well in open field conditions. 

To our Extension retirees

Well, life continues to roll on under Stage II guidelines from the Arkansas Department of Health during what seems like the second year of operating remotely and with limited meetings due to health concerns over the coronavirus. Our employees continue to find new innovative ways to fulfill our mission through their various efforts online and with small group meetings. Recently, we began taking and approving a few more requests for in-person meetings, including a few groups over 10 people. The Arkansas 4-H Center has had a few groups return, and we are all learning to operate under the guidelines to help prevent the spread of this deadly virus. I attended my first in-person event as extension director at a very limited attendance version of the Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council convention in Hot Springs. The AEHC did a great job keeping everyone safe at this meeting.



One thing for sure is that this year will be a year of many firsts when it comes to online programming. I am sure I was probably the first extension director ever hired using only online interviews. This will also be the first year we have done all our major summer row crop field days online. This began Aug. 20 with the virtual rice field day and runs through October. Our researchers and program associates and technicians have done a great job getting our research done, given the circumstances this year, and it is the desire of the division to get the word out, by whatever means needed. This year's field days will be crop-focused and include rice, corn, soybean and cotton. You can find registration sites online. I think we have a good lineup, and my hope is that our attendance or views may actually be higher than if the events were in person. Of course, a major downside is no BBQ or catfish.

Everyone continues to do a good job educating me in all aspects of our Cooperative Extension Service. I cannot say enough about how much I appreciate everyone's patience and wisdom. At extension, our strength is our people, and we have a very strong extension service right now. Soon we will begin the process of reporting. If you get a chance to talk to our folks in the field, let them know how important it is to record our contacts, impacts and stories. Now more than ever we must report our efforts during these challenging times.

I look forward to the time when we can resume some form of normal business again. But in the meantime, I feel confident that we are moving forward and discovering new ways to meet the needs of the people and the State of Arkansas. Please consider joining me online for our upcoming events including field days and many other programmatic content posts.

As always, I will add that I look forward to hearing from you. You have helped shape the dynamic extension service we have today, and your work is much appreciated. I hope you will always feel welcome to reach out to me with your ideas and feedback. You can reach me at bscott@uaex.edu. 

Arkansas residents asked to report mystery seed, product packages



Contents of one of three unsolicited packages received by Kelly Freeman in Washington County, Arkansas, back in May and June.

Did you receive a packet of seeds or some trinket that you didn't order? The Arkansas Department of Agriculture is asking Arkansans to let the department know if they received unsolicited packages in the mail.

Anyone receiving packages of seeds that they did not order should contact Arkansas Plant Industries Division at 501-225-1598, or by email: Paul.shell@agriculture.arkansas.gov or Mark.stoll@agriculture.arkansas.gov.

"The Arkansas Department of Agriculture has been made aware that private citizens in several states have received unsolicited packages containing seeds that appear to have originated from China," said Scott Bray, plant industries director for the Arkansas Agriculture Department. "The types of seeds in the packages are unknown at this time and may be invasive plant species. We urge people not to plant them, but report them to us."

Cooperative Extension Service agents around the state said residents in their counties have received the seeds and asked agents what they were. Agents have been asked to place any seeds in a zip top plastic bag to send to the Arkansas Agriculture Department.

Sept. Birthdays

Alberta James - Sept. 1

Diana Baker - Sept. 4

J. H. Denton - Sept. 4

Vickie Huddleston - Sept. 4

Johnnie Younger - Sept. 5

Bob Blake - Sept. 6

Mike Moss - Sept. 7

Carol Sanders - Sept. 8

Barbara Singleton - Sept. 8

Venetta Rice - Sept. 9

Jerry Wooley - Sept. 9

Catherine Grills - Sept. 12

Lee Hunter - Sept. 12

Raymond Benz - Sept. 16

Joe Stuart - Sept. 16

Charles Albritton - Sept. 17

Janet Slate - Sept. 17

Irene Carlock - Sept. 18

Steven Simpson - Sept. 18

Bill Jones - Sept. 21

Gloria Mayhugh - Sept. 21

Belinda Weaver - Sept. 21

June Williams - Sept. 21

Sherry Ream - Sept. 22

LeVeda Tate - Sept. 22

Donna Rothberg - Sept. 23

Willie Booker Jr. - Sept. 25

Stephen Vann - Sept. 27

William Dodgen - Sept. 28

Don Plunkett - Sept. 28

Henry Rice - Sept. 28

Bettie Wilson - Sept. 28

Mystery seed, cont.

Some of the packages were marked as containing jewelry. Others had no content description on the outside. Return addresses indicated origins in China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

"These seeds are of unknown species and of unknown origin. We have no idea why or what's being sent to us," said Vic Ford, extension's associate vice president-agriculture and natural resources. "The possibility of introducing an exotic invasive species or disease of common crops is a possibility and we have to take precautions." 

Scholarship donations

The following gifts were recently received to support professional development opportunities for faculty and staff of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Extension Service Retiree Scholarship Fund

Helen Glass

In memory of Paul Barlow

In honor of Jamie Collier

Renee Myers

Honorary or memorial donations should be forwarded to the Development Office, ATTN: Brian Helms, Cooperative Extension Service, 2301 South University Ave., Little Rock, AR 72204. If joint recognition is desired, please indicate. To ensure proper notification is sent, please also include in whose honor or memory the gift is made and the mailing address of the person to receive the notification. 

Colleen Owen passes

Colleen Owen, age 91, of Russellville passed away Aug. 4, 2020. Colleen was very witty, enjoyed playing bridge, sewing and was an avid reader and a good cook. She began her 41-year career with Extension in Mississippi County. She then served in Yell, Pulaski and Saline counties. A private graveside service was held for the family. Funeral services are under the direction of Shinn Funeral Service of Russellville. 

Milton Bard Scott passes

Milton Bard Scott, 95, of Benton, passed away July 22. Milton had a long and impactful career serving organizations and people of Arkansas. He started out as an agriculture extension agent in Huntsville and then went to work for the Arkansas Plant Board. From there, he joined the Arkansas Farm Bureau. He held many positions over the 35 years. As executive vice president of state and national affairs, he worked with governors, legislators and farmers to successfully shepherd numerous articles of legislation benefiting the farmers and the people of Arkansas. One of his many accomplishments was the passage of a bill funding the Arkansas 4-H Center at Ferndale. After retiring in 2004, he continued to serve on community boards. A Graveside service was held July 29 at Scott Cemetery. 