

4-H'ers Blossom With Donna's Coaching

BY BETH HEMMINGER
Staff Correspondent

When it comes to flowers Donna Duncan is in full bloom!

For 12 years, Donna has been the Cumberland County 4-H flower judging coach as well as the 4-H horticulture and vegetable teams coach. Both the horticulture and vegetable teams were organized later in Donna's coaching career.

Donna's career wasn't started in Cumberland County, though. Adams County's 4-H program claimed Donna as a coach for a few short years.

However, Donna and her husband, Duane, moved to Cumberland County upon his acceptance of the position of county agent of the Cumberland County Cooperative Extension Service. But, regardless of the move, Donna wanted to continue her involvement in the flower judging program - and did.

With a well-rounded 4-H program in the county, Donna had little trouble encouraging three plant-loving 4-H'ers to sign their name on the dotted line and become the 1971 Cumberland County 4-H flower judging team.

With only a few years of coaching under her belt, Donna was learning right along with her new-found team.

Donna remarked, "You kind of grow with the competition over the years, so to speak."

Donna recalled that her first team did quite well in the competition.

"They were all new at judging, I was still learning about judging, and they placed fifth in the state competition. I think it was quite an accomplishment for beginners," she said.

Over the years, the competition has changed and so has Donna. The state competition changes frequently in its pattern of questions and judging routine. While Donna hasn't changed frequently, but has grown from a novice coach of 12 years ago to a pro of the flower garden.

Few paid-professional coaches can claim what this one volunteer coach has done in the past 12 years. Donna has coached 12 flower judging teams, with six of those teams winning the first place medal in the state competition. With those six top-place teams, they have retired two trophies into the halls of the Cumberland County Extension Office. Once a county has claimed three years on the plaque it remains in the county. The trophies are engraved and presented to the yearly winners by the Dauphin County Council of Extension Garden Clubs.

What is the formula for such success? According to Donna and this year's winning team - hard work. Just to give an idea of the time and effort spent, the coach read over the past several months itinerary of the group. Their itinerary consisted of evening meetings once, or more likely, twice a week, attending fairs and judging the flower entries and visiting greenhouses and florists.

Donna remarked, "It takes a lot of hard studying to learn to identify flowers, answer management questions and place classes. The four-girl team nodded in agreement."

Donna explained specifically what the team learns during the months of preparation. The weekly practices begin with flower identification, which means the team must learn to identify over 100 annuals. Donna noted that not all the flowers are in bloom during the practice and judging months, and some are not easily grown in the area so each team member uses picture cards. The cards show a close-up of each flower, which enables the girls to identify all the 100 flowers either by petal, pistil or foliage. Along with the cards, Donna takes it one step further. She hunts down the real thing and tries to show the team what each flower looks like in the garden.

At the state competition, each member of the team has to identify only 30 flowers out of the 100.

The second part of the competition consists of questions on the management of the flower garden. The team studies over 100 questions, selected from flower and horticulture project books, but they only have to answer 30 questions at the competition.

And the final section of the contest consists of placing a group of house plants or flowers in a 1-2-3-4 class placing. Donna stated that the class placings are based on the marketability of the plant or flower at that time. Donna teaches the team good and bad marketability characteristics such as maturity of the plant, color, root systems, and overall appearance.

"This is not an easy task," Donna remarked. "The other parts of the competition have a definite answer, but the classes have a lot of variables and can be quite difficult."

The team nodded in agreement to their coaches statement, but they all had a gleam of happiness in their eyes.

The all-knowing coach saw this glint of joy and remarked, "They know their work is done and now they're ready and excited about planning their trip."



The first place flower judging team in the state displays their engraved plaques received after winning the competition at Penn State. From left are Brenda Wert, first place individual, Andrea Gutshall, Deanna Otto, Dede King and coach Donna Duncan.

Yes, for Dede King, Deanna Otto, Brenda Wert and Andrea Gutshall the excitement is not quite over yet. All the long hours of studying, studying, studying have payed off. The first-place winners in the state 4-H flower judging competition are invited to attend the National Junior Horticulture Convention and participate in the activities. This year the team will be traveling to Tulsa, Okla. from October 28 to November 1. This is not an expense-paid trip for the team, consequently, they have to raise money through donations and fund raisers. However, said Donna, from past experiences with the other teams who travelled to Biloxi, Miss.; Salem, N. C., Atlanta, Ga., just to name a few, the convention and trip are well worth the efforts.

Donna stated that the trip is just not only for enjoyment, but quite educational. This year's team members will enjoy seeing a part of the United States they have never seen before, will learn about the vegetation and plant life of the mid-west and meet people who have interests and careers in the horticulture industry.

After 12 years of rigorous coaching activities, trip planning and organization, what next for this super coach?

Donna stated, "More of the same!"

Donna is also the coach for the 4-H horticulture and vegetable judging teams. The horticulture contest is much more involved in that the team has to learn to identify ornamentals, flowers, fruits and nuts, and vegetables along with answering management questions and placing classes in each of the four categories mentioned.

The 4-H vegetable judging contest follows the same pattern as the others, but only deals with vegetables. The team members must be able to identify vegetables



Coaching the champion flower judging team makes a lot of hard work and careful planning for Donna Duncan, who coached the team to success.

from the roots, the plants, the fruit, and the seed.

Donna has also coached several of her horticulture and vegetables teams to winning the first place medal in the state 4-H competition.

However, right now her thoughts are on planning the trip to Tulsa, but once it is over it will soon be time to think of the next year's teams and Donna stated that she is ready.

"I find a great satisfaction in

teaching the 4-H'ers about the beauty that is around them and how they should care for it and use it," Donna said. "Flowers, vegetables, fruits, nuts, ornamentals are always useful to some part of your life, now and later."

And as for the super coach, Donna Duncan, she said she will keep coaching as long as the 4-H'ers want her, and it appears that the kids do want her.



Here the Cumberland County 4-H flower judging team, first-place winners in the state competition, discuss the details of the trip to the Junior Horticulture Convention being held in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Homestead Notes