

# Growers Offer Perspectives On Mid-Atlantic Fruit And Vegetable Convention

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**HERSHEY (Dauphin Co.)** — It's cold. Spring is weeks away, but for hundreds of growers, this is the season to plan and lay the ground work for a productive growing season.

One of the most important tasks is attending the three-day Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention conducted last week in Hershey. Packed with information on every grower-related subject, convention participants pick and choose workshops.

"The most important thing is that this conference has the best speakers around," said Ed Ahrens, Manchester. "They hold my attention and can really explain things."

"Sometimes we learn even more over lunch than in the

classroom," said Alyssa Holsinger. She, her husband Jeff, and his brother Earl work for Raab Fruit Farms, Dallastown.

"If any one goes away from here and claims they didn't learn anything new that means they have no interest in farming," Jeff said.

Dan Brubaker attended the conference to learn more tips about growing raspberries on his Denver farmette.

Cut flowers is a thriving business. But growers sometimes find out the hard way that everything isn't all beauty in the posey patch. Flowers that bloom beautifully one day may wilt the next. Profuse beautiful blooms may be stymied by weak stems. The "hot" selling flower in the market place last year may result in totally flat sales this year.

To help growers grapple suc-

cessfully with problems, workshops examine both field and market potentials. New cultivars are introduced annually. The convention is the place to hear about these and to learn the pluses and minuses of growing the new stock.

During the workshops, presenters often ask opinions from the audiences. Trial gardeners who have gained experience with new cultivars sometimes give glowing recommendations of some varieties and completely nix the reputations other new cultivars.

The important thing is that growers specify exactly why or why not they do not like a particular cultivar. This input enables other growers to make an educated decision on whether or not they want to try the cultivar.

What works for the home gardener may not be viable for a production grower. For example, the dianthus new strain gives higher yields and produce earlier. Dr. Robert Berghage, Penn State presenter, said that he was pleased with the cultivar in the school's trial gardens. However, another grower said that although the dianthus is an attractive flower, they would never plant it for cut flower production. It requires too many stems, which are thin to start with, to make an attractive bouquet.

New cosmos cultivars were also introduced. But that variety also requires too much cutting for the production grower who wants to gather bouquets quickly.

*Enchinacea purpurea* plant produces abundant flowers the second season, but growers need to be aware that the blooms will be scarce the first year.

Bob Ambrose from Ridgeview Acres Farm, Stahlstown, shared how he grows Lisianthus in the field, which is quite different than the greenhouse.

Ambrose explained how to determine the best place to obtain seed at reasonable cost and that some varieties are available only as plugs through select companies.

Ambrose said that growing phases and transplanting may be handled perfectly but post harvest is the most critical operation of all. "If you screw this up, you have wasted all preceding efforts and may lose your customers for not only Lisianthus but everything else you are selling," he warned.

Try to avoid cutting at noon. But no matter when you cut, take buckets of lukewarm preservative into the field and place the blooms in solution immediately after they are cut — not after cutting 5 or 10 blooms.

As soon as the bucket is reasonably filled, place it in the shade for four hours or more, depending on ambient conditions, before going in the cooler.

He recuts only if making bouquets; otherwise the blooms are sold as they come from the field after bunching and sleeving.

Ambrose said growers must invest in a cooler for conditioning and more flexibility in harvesting and selling.

"Generally when we have Lisianthus, the whole world is awash in the stuff and summer wholesale price is 30-50 cents per stem.

"Our best outlet is a farmer's market. Your customers may not be familiar with Lisianthus initially, but when they get a two week vase life, they will become enthusiasts. Having established a market, we are able to get \$1 per stem," Ambrose said.



Although thrilled with the workshops, Alyssa Holsinger said she often learns even more conversing with other growers during lunchtime.



Tom King introduces cherry juice concentrate during "show and tell" at the trade show. Researchers at Michigan State University have discovered that tart cherries contain natural anti-inflammatory compounds 10 times more active than aspirin and it contains potent anticancer agents. Many people suffering from arthritis and gout are drinking tart cherry juice for relief from pain. King Orchards, a family-owned and operated fruit farm in Central Lake, Michigan, sells the cherry concentrate.



Earl Holsinger, left, and his brother Jeff discuss some of the tips for raising better raspberries that they plan to use at Raab Fruit Farms where they both work.



According to Ed Ahrens, Manchester, the annual convention offers the best speakers around to enable growers like him to understand and apply the knowledge.



Dan Brubaker, Denver, said learning goes on and on in sessions and out of them during the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Convention.

Another favorite spot for growers was the trade show, where they saw new equipment and products to make their job easier and the crop better. In addition, many items were on display for growers to purchase for resale to increase roadside marketing potential.

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