

People & Places

Big pumpkins, big business

John Hawkley
specializes in
record-setting
mega-squashes

By JULIA HOLLISTER
For the Capital Press

NAPA, Calif. — In a region known for its vineyards and wineries, John Hawkley grows pumpkins.

Big pumpkins. Pumpkins so big he needs a forklift to move them. Pumpkins that can bring him a paycheck worth thousands of dollars.

Hawkley thinks big — over 2,000 pounds or more — and the rewards lie in the contests he attends, not the pies.

"I grew up in Napa but wasn't interested in growing pumpkins until 10 years ago," he said. "That was about the time I watched a couple of local people load a huge pumpkin on a carrier to take to a weigh-off."

He said he was fascinated.

"That season I grew a 200-pound one and was hooked," he said.

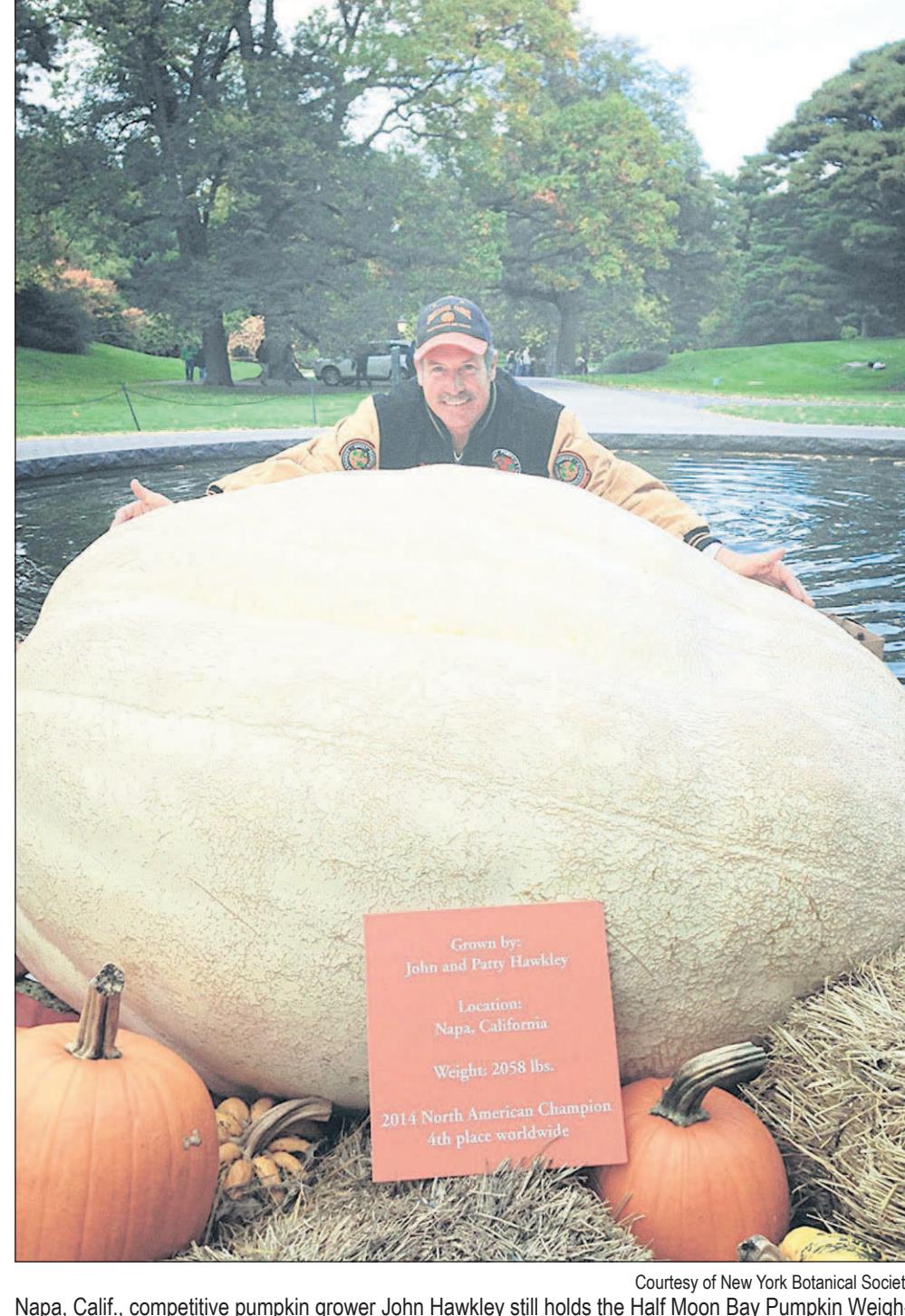
Hawkley said growers in the area help each other produce the big ones, which is extremely difficult. Pests such as beetles and white flies can attack the big squashes. Soil-borne diseases are also a threat.

Several weigh-offs take place each year in California, and the winning pumpkins are getting bigger, along with the crowds — and the paychecks.

This year's winning pumpkin at the Half Moon Bay, Calif., contest tipped the scales at 1,910 pounds and garnered a cash prize of \$11,460 for the winner, Cindy Tobeck of Little Rock, Wash.

The path to a winning pumpkin starts with the right seeds, which Hawkley keeps from year to year and swaps with other competitive growers.

"In April, I start the seeds indoors in quart-sized cups in a preheated, insulated hot house," he said. "In two days



Courtesy of New York Botanical Society
Napa, Calif., competitive pumpkin grower John Hawkley still holds the Half Moon Bay Pumpkin Weigh-Off competition record with this mega-squash that tipped the scales at 2,058 pounds in 2014. The seeds from the huge pumpkins are highly prized for their genetics.

I have a plant and in six to eight days I begin to see baby pumpkins that I transfer to mini-greenhouses and then outside."

He said he needs 750 square feet per plant for the big ones.

This year's winner, Tobeck, told an NBC reporter that she regularly sent pumpkin samples to a laboratory for tests so she could adjust her fertilizer blend.

Hawkley began competing for prize money in 2012 and won a Morgan Hill, Calif., weigh-off with a 1,647-pounder.

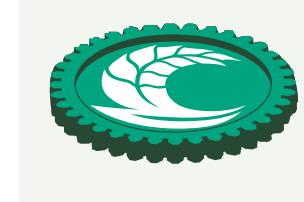
In 2014, he was the first person in the U.S. to grow a 1-ton pumpkin, which weighed 2,058 pounds.

After that win, the New York Botanical Society flew Hawkley, his wife and the pumpkin — in a specialty-built crate — to New York.

The pumpkin went on display and Hawkley appeared on TV shows. The society harvested the seeds and mailed them back to Hawkley.

Hawkley still holds the state and Half Moon Bay Pumpkin Weigh-Off records.

"Contrary to popular opinion, growers do not make a batch of pumpkin pies after competitions," he said. "Most of the big ones are not really edible. People are fascinat-



Western Innovator

John Hawkley

Hometown: Napa, Calif.

Occupation: Competitive pumpkin grower

Family: Wife, Patty, three grown children and one grandchild

Quote: "Growing pumpkins takes an extreme amount of labor and love from April through July 1. After that you hope to see the fruits of your labors."

ed by the big pumpkins and want to display them. There are large casinos in Las Vegas that buy the huge ones at 40 cents to \$1 a pound just for displays."

When he does sell one of the scale-busting pumpkins, he wants the seeds returned. They are valuable for their genetics, he said.

Jesse Ramer, interim executive director of the Napa County Farm Bureau, pointed out Hawkley's contribution to agriculture.

"We have the greatest farmers in the world here in the winegrape business," he said. "I think it is important to spotlight other folks that are doing other interesting projects. We are pleased to have John as a Farm Bureau member."

Hawkley trades seeds with growers all over the world. After the season is over, he gets envelopes with return addresses from people wanting seeds. Clubs use them for fundraisers or for members to grow their own.

"We in the Napa Valley have a history of world record holders," he said. "But the biggest challenge is keeping the pumpkins growing as long as possible while keeping them whole."

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set the record straight.

Florida officials hope quarantine, irradiated flies stop screwworm

By JENNIFER KAY
Associated Press

KEY LARGO, Fla. — A narrow ribbon of road linking the Florida Keys with the mainland is the front line in a renewed fight against maggots that can eat livestock alive.

Near a Key Largo visitors' center painted with larger-than-life tropical fish and sea turtles, northbound drivers with animals must stop for agriculture officials checking for signs of New World screwworm.

The parasite once cost the U.S. livestock industry millions of dollars every year. There hadn't been a U.S. infestation in over 30 years, until the USDA confirmed Sept. 30 that screwworms were killing rare, dog-sized deer found only in the island chain.

The source of the infestation isn't known, but the Keys' isolation may help stop

screwworm from spreading, Florida Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam said.

"We are obviously in a more remote part of the state with one way in and one way out," Putnam said.

Fifty years ago, Florida's fight against screwworm pioneered a kind of birth control for insect pests — a technique that's potentially useful against Zika and other mosquito-borne viruses.

What are screwworms?

New World screwworms, or *Cochliomyia hominivorax*, are about the same size as common houseflies as adults, but have orange eyes. They only lay eggs near open wounds in warm-blooded animals. Unlike most maggots, these larvae feed on living flesh. They don't fly very far, but infected animals can spread infestations if they

move to new areas.

Livestock are most at risk, but human infections can occur in rare instances. Screwworm flies are found throughout South America and a handful of Caribbean countries.

Miniature deer

Key deer are a unique subspecies of white-tailed deer about 3 feet tall at the shoulder — the size of a large dog. Found only in the Florida Keys, their population rebounded from just a few dozen in the 1950s to a herd of roughly 1,000 now.

About 30 Key deer have been found dead or have been euthanized in the last two weeks because of screwworm, said National Key Deer Refuge Manager Dan Clark. Refuge records indicate at least another 30 deer deaths over the summer were linked to screwworm.

Sterilizing screwworms

Agriculture officials have announced the release of millions of male screwworm flies, sterilized with radiation, to mate with wild female flies in the refuge. Any eggs produced won't hatch, killing the fly population over time, said Cris Young, a veterinarian with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. The screwworm's life cycle is about 24 days.

The releases may continue twice weekly for six months, Putnam said.

Chemical treatments are available for infested cattle and pets, but the sterilized insects are so effective that pesticides aren't necessary, Young said.

Sterile insects, Zika

The "sterile insect technique" developed in the 1950s is still widely used. Irradiated

Mediterranean fruit flies have been released regularly since 1998 in South Florida and the Tampa area. Texas and California also release irradiated fruit flies.

The promise of pest control without pesticides is a selling point for those trying similar techniques to control the mosquitoes that spread Zika.

A representative from the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency pitched the technique's potential this spring to Florida Keys mosquito control officials looking for new weapons against the hard-to-kill species carrying Zika, dengue fever and other viruses.

A proposal to test mosquitoes genetically modified so their larvae won't survive is up for a referendum in the Keys next month. A separate test being considered in Florida involves mosquitoes sterilized with bacteria.