

People & Places

Researcher welcomes farmer involvement

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

The University of Idaho has hired a new potato variety development specialist who wants farmer input to guide his research.

Rhett Spear has just joined the team of potato scientists at the university's Aberdeen Research and Extension Center.

He grew up on his parents' farm in southern Idaho. His paternal grandfather was a mechanical engineer and worked as a professor for a time at the University of Idaho in Moscow in the early 1960s.

His father earned a degree in veterinary medicine and did a veterinary residency in Australia before deciding farming was his true calling.

Spear was 5 when he and his parents moved to Raft River to farm, and he worked on the farm "from the time I could walk just about," he said.

After graduating from high school, he spent a year at the University of Utah before going on a two-year church mission to Mexico.

When he returned, he went back to the university to hit the books. After earning a bachelor's degree in chemistry, he went to Washington State University, where he secured a Ph.D. doing potato research in the horticulture department.

He had thought about farming, but his parents' land wasn't enough to sup-



Rhett Spear, new potato variety development specialist with the University of Idaho, in his home office.

port another family beyond themselves and his sister and brother-in-law.

"If you don't have access already, it's financially difficult" to go into farming, he said.

After earning his doctorate, he went to work for McCain Foods in Burley as the company's regional agronomist.

"I mostly worked with growers to improve growing practices," he said.

He studied ways to increase farm revenue through farming practices, variety choices and consumer preference.

"I learned a lot of things," he said.

He had a pretty good handle on the research side of things, but he was able to see the processing facet of the industry and help with challenges there.

That experience will benefit his research at Aberdeen, he said.

"I'll be able to address some of the problems a little better, something more applicable to the struggles of the industry," he said.

A lot of those challenges have to do with disease and bruising, things that affect the usability of potatoes when they get into a fresh-pack shed or a processing plant, he said.

The Aberdeen research center is the base for regional potato variety development, combining the efforts of researchers from the University of Idaho, Washington State University, Oregon State University and USDA's Agricultural Research Service.

"They do really good research. It's one of the premier variety development programs in the country," he said.

The entire team is dedicated to improving the industry, he said.

Spear's job will focus on working with other researchers, farmers and



RHETT SPEAR

Position: Potato variety development specialist, University of Idaho

Location: Aberdeen Research and Extension Center

Age: 35

Education: Bachelor's degree in chemistry, Utah State University, 2010; Ph.D., horticulture department working in potato science, Washington State University, 2015

Family: Wife, Aria; daughters Jenae, 10, Brooke, 7, Kylie, 6; son Carter, 2

others to assess the potential of experimental crosses from USDA ARS potato breeding efforts. He will help assess how well they grow in the field and perform for processors, fresh packers and consumers.

"I do want to make sure farmers have a say in what we're doing, involve them to guide the research. They're the boots on the ground and see the issues firsthand," he said.

Giant pumpkins remain in spotlight after weigh-ins

By DIANNA TROYER
For the Capital Press

Long after harvest, no crop entertains in more ways than Atlantic Giant pumpkins.

Objects of curiosity at fairs and weigh-offs, they later become boats at regattas, canvasses for carvers and sculptors, and entrees for elephants. Cheering physics students even chuck them with catapults or drop them, posting videos on social media.

"Giant pumpkins make people smile for so many reasons," said Cliff Warren, 54, a member of the Utah Giant Pumpkin Growers. An electrical engineer and avid gardener, he raises his prize-winning pumpkins in his garden near Pocatello, Idaho.

"They generate a sense of awe and are interesting to look at. Managers at car dealerships, banks and hospitals buy them as a talking point. You hear so many crazy theories about how they're grown."

No, they aren't fertilized with milk. He uses specific amounts of fish emulsion, seaweed and soil acidifiers.

No, pies aren't made from them because giant pumpkins lack flavor.

Yes, he moves them carefully with a sling and chain hoist.

At the Utah weigh-off in late September, his 611-pound pumpkin won seventh place. The winner tipped the scales at 1,608 pounds.



Tualatin Parks and Recreation
The 16th annual West Coast Giant Pumpkin Regatta was held Oct. 19 in Tualatin, Ore. Competitors don Halloween costumes and row their great pumpkins around Tualatin Lake at the Commons.

"I'm always happy to be in the top 10 there, especially this year with freezing temperatures in June," he said. "I only had one that survived the weather. Some of my friends in Utah lost all theirs."

After his sister gave him a book about Atlantic giants in 2000, Warren began raising prize-winners for the Utah weigh-off and the Eastern Idaho State Fair.

"They're such a challenge to grow. You try to keep them between 50 and 85 degrees. Depending on the weather, you have to adjust how much you fertilize and water them."

Like thousands of other members of giant pumpkin grower groups nationwide and worldwide, Warren is optimistic, meticulous and flexible — traits needed

to raise pumpkins that grow as much as 20 pounds a day in summer.

"October is our prime time," Warren said. "During the next three weekends most of the world's pumpkins will be weighed."

Nearly all the results will flow through two websites: www.bigpumpkins.com and the Utah growers' Facebook page.

"Our Utah growers' page has more than 1,100 followers, with many from around the world," he said. "After weigh-offs, the entertainment begins with regattas, drops, surfing competitions, you name it. ..."

Two of the West's most popular events are the 16th annual West Coast Giant Pumpkin Regatta in Tualatin, Ore., and the 9th annual



Oregon Zoo
Elephants dine on giant pumpkins during the Squishing of the Squash Oct. 18 at the Oregon Zoo in Portland.

Ginormous Pumpkin Regatta on Oquirrh Lake south of Salt Lake City. Both events attract thousands of spectators.

Two years ago at Oquirrh Lake, Warren hollowed out his 992-pound pumpkin — saving the seeds to grow another ginormous weigh-off entry — donned his Yankees baseball cap and christened his entry the Yankee Clipper.

"It's best to have a pumpkin with a fairly flat bottom because it's easier to row than a round one," he said.

Since 2004, the Pacific Northwest Giant Pumpkin Growers' 50 to 90 members have been providing pumpkins for the regatta on Tualatin Lake at the Commons.

"We usually get 17 to 22 pumpkins each year," said Heidi Marx, special event coordinator for the city's Parks and Recreation Depart-

ment. "We have 60 to 80 paddlers who dress up in costumes and take turns rowing in four to five races."

This year, Warren will skip the Utah regatta. "I'm displaying my pumpkin in the front yard for the neighbors to enjoy."

Warren said whatever his pumpkins weigh each year is fine.

"Every growing season, I like the anticipation and suspense of wondering how they'll finally do on the scale," he said. "There's camaraderie among growers. We all like to see each other succeed and share seeds."

In late November, he will harvest the seeds to grow more prize winners.

"Then we spread the pumpkins on the garden or use them for compost, so they feed next year's giants."

CALENDAR

tact Mylen Bohle at 541-447-6228 or mymlen.bohle@oregonstate.edu

FRIDAY, NOV. 1

Young Farmer Tour and Mixer: 6-10 p.m. Washington Hall, 153 14th Ave., Seattle. Ninth annual Young Farmer Mixer hosted by Washington Young Farmers Coalition. Urban farm tours followed by mixer. Potluck and live music. Farm tours 2 to 5:30 p.m. Mixer 6 to 10 p.m. More details on coalition's Facebook page. Contact: <http://washingtonyoungfarmers.org> or wayoungfarmers@gmail.com

WEDNESDAY-SATURDAY OCT. 30-NOV. 2

92nd National FFA Convention and Expo: Indiana Convention Center, 100 S Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Indiana. This is the organization's annual gathering. Contact: <https://convention.ffa.org/>

FRIDAY, NOV. 1

Oregon Hay King Samples Due. Hay quality samples are due for Oregon Hay King Contest, which will be held on Nov. 16. \$30 per entry. For more details and entry form go to www.oregonhaygrowers.com or con-

vention.ffa.org/

Dream: 6-8:30 p.m. OSU Extension Office, Josephine County, 215 Ringuette St., Grants Pass, Ore. This three-session beginning farmer training series meets in Nov. 4, 11 and 18. Southern Oregon abounds with enthusiastic farmers involved in pursuing the commercial small farm dream.

TUESDAY-WEDNESDAY NOV. 5-6

Intermountain Native Plant Summit IX: Boise State University Student Union Building. The use of native plants on rangelands in the West. Open to the public. Contact: Thomas Jones, thomas.jones@usda.gov

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 6

Women and Leadership 3: 5-8 p.m., Urban Studio, 935 Northwest Davis St., Portland. Jordan Ramis PC announces the Third Annual Women & Leadership event. Designed to motivate, inspire and educate women who are leaders or aspiring leaders. Food, drinks,

and whiskey tastings will be provided with the goal in mind of bringing women and allies in the agricultural industry together to network, discuss issues regarding careers and growth and enjoy the company of like-minded colleagues. A panel discussion features Caylin Barter, an environmental and natural resources attorney with Jordan Ramis; Cory Carman, owner of Carman Ranch in Wallowa County, Ore.; Leigh Geschwill, owner of F&B Farms and Nursery; and Mallory Phelan, executive director of Oregon AgLink. Contact: info@jordanramis.com, (503) 598-7070. <https://bit.ly/WomenAndLeadership3>

WEDNESDAY-SUNDAY NOV. 6-10

American Agri-Women Convention: 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Embassy Suites by Hilton, 9000 SW Washington Square Road, Tigard. Hosted by the Oregon Women for Agriculture, the American Agri-Women Convention will bring members from around the nation. Contact:

owfa@owfaonline.org, (503) 598-7070. <https://bit.ly/WomenAndLeadership3>

Friday-Sunday Nov. 8-10
Tilth Conference 2019: Yakima Convention Center, 10 N. Eighth St., Yakima, Wash. Every year, the Tilth Conference brings together hundreds of farmers, producers, researchers and food system professionals for a weekend of learning, building relationships and sharing best practices. Contact: Kevin McAleese, kevinmcaleese@tilthalliance.org. <http://www.tilthconference.org>

Monday-Wednesday Nov. 11-13
Idaho Cattle Association Annual Convention: Sun Valley Inn at Sun Valley Resort, Sun Valley, Idaho. The annual ICA event is focused on cattlemen's needs, putting them face-to-face with some of the industry's most renowned experts. Contact: 208-343-1615, www.idahocattle.org/

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CORRECTION

Because of a computer problem, a portion of the final two paragraphs of the story about the hemp harvest did not appear in last week's printed editions. They should have read as follows:

By next harvest, Jay Noller, director of Oregon State University's Global Hemp Innovation Center, said farmers should have a better idea of varieties they want to plant, dates for planting and harvesting, and just a much better idea of overall production practices.

"I think it's reasonable to say that we will see much higher yields in the future," he said.

The Capital Press regrets the error.

Correction policy

Accuracy is important to Capital Press staff and to our readers.

If you see a misstatement, omission or factual error in a headline, story or photo caption, please call the Capital Press news department at 503-364-4431, or send email to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

We want to publish corrections to set the record straight.