Visit to a sweet potato farm grows

An appreciation of the color purple

By Steva Allgood

Purple: A color that is not only beautiful but intriguing, that comes in many different shades. Lucky are we that North Carolina has its own purple sweet potato growing in a beautiful area of Stokes County.

On Aug. 21, the North Central Extension Advisory Council met with Forsyth, Guilford, Rockingham and Stokes county Extension personnel and a Stokes County Commissioner, Stanley Smith, at Stokes County Cooperative Extension's offices. Michael Hylton, interim director, was our host.

After the meeting, we were invited to see a unique and much-talked-about purple sweet potato farm in Stokes County.

This product has its very own Web site, www.stokespurple.com, and the farmers are working to get their product patented. The pride in this product is evident throughout the county.

Mike Sizemore, who is instrumental in promoting the potato, very graciously took us on a fun tour of a farm and showed us how the potatoes grow in a strip layout format.

If you just look at the acres of the potato vines, they seem very similar to other potato vines with maybe a bit smaller leaf. However, this is where the similarity ends.

When Sizemore pulled several out of the ground and cut the potatoes in half, an outstanding bright purple color stared us in the face. Interestingly, only those grown in this particular area hold their color when cooked. Plus, this sweet potato has properties that are very good for your health.

We then visited the washing and grading facility, where we saw how the potatoes were put on a conveyor belt to be washed, then placed in containers to be taken to the processing plant.

We then were treated to some beautiful and absolutely delicious purple sweet potato pie and purple sweet potato butter. It was outstanding!

Sizemore noted that to protect their product and their trademark, no whole potatoes are allowed to leave the fields or be sold unless by authorized personnel; only the puree made from them. Currently, the product is being sold locally and in fine grocery stores such as Whole Foods.

This crop is a great help in the economic development of beautiful Stokes County, with its rolling hills and wonderful hardwood trees.

Thanks to Sizemore and his constituents for allowing us an “up-close and personal” screening of this very unique commodity.
Today we stand as a nation not only with a new president and a new government, but also as a country beset by a series of economic setbacks. Officially, we are in a recession. Not only did the National Bureau of Economic Research declare in December that we are in the midst of a recession, but also clarified that the country has been in such an economic slump since December of 2007.

Some of this country’s most brilliant minds have been hard at work attempting to lead us out of the slump. It’s reassuring to me that some of those brilliant minds are churning right here in North Carolina, through our esteemed Cooperative Extension system.

Extension’s role in providing solutions to people’s problems didn’t just arise with this latest set of hard times. Extension has been here through some of the most difficult challenges faced by North Carolina and the rest of the nation, and we have survived and continued to thrive. Providing solutions is who we are and what we do.

Not only has the recession intensified our mission of resolving issues, but understanding how Extension and our university systems fit into our communities is the nexus of the UNC Tomorrow effort. Through UNC Tomorrow, we, at the member institutions, are finding ways to better prepare for the future and address the needs of North Carolinians. Again, Cooperative Extension has literally been out in the fields for decades getting a first-hand assessment of what people need, and is responding to those needs.

In the recently released Solutions for North Carolina are stories that illustrate how the Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T responds to people’s problems. We don’t just fix them; we empower people to find the right solution for them. Even in economic turmoil, we still have first-time homeowners who have been able to pay their mortgages and keep their homes; we have young farmers who have come back to the land and found ways to make money as farmers; and we have young people growing up with limited resources who still believe a college education is attainable if they commit themselves. All these people have succeeded by working with Cooperative Extension agents and program assistants, and using Cooperative Extension programs.

Yes, our country is in a recession. Yet, once again we are showing individuals, families and communities that Cooperative Extension is a valuable resource during tough times.
State Advisory Council visits Boone

By Lynn Yokley

Sue Counts, just-retired Watauga County Cooperative Extension director, and her staff provided the State Advisory Council (SAC) with a warm welcome Oct. 28-30. They even whipped up a little snowstorm for our benefit.

We enjoyed reports from our own members about 4-H Citizenship Focus and Back Home visits with Reps. Patrick McHenry, Bob Etheridge, Mike McIntyre and Robin Hayes. Rebecca Jones, SAC youth member and ASU senior, shared her award-winning radio spot about the history of 4-H.

Drs. Jon Ort (NCSU) and Ray McKinnie (NC A&T) provided us with administrative updates. Of course we all regretted hearing about the 4 percent reduction in budget, but we understand that there will be a lot of belt-tightening in the current economic climate.

N.C. Cooperative Extension's Western District provided us with excellent speakers on the topics of medicinal herbs, the Christmas tree industry and value-added products and integrated programming.

We visited some wonderful sites in the Boone area, such as The Farm at Mollie's Branch, which uses hydroelectric power to run the farm. We also toured Moretz's Orchard and enjoyed the hike to the orchard and the apples we collected when we reached the orchard site. Our last stop was the Town of Boone Cistern. Rainwater is collected and held in the cistern to use for a variety of jobs including washing vehicles.

We had a productive meeting, learned about new programs and got to see Extension at work. We especially want to thank Sue Counts for providing us with such a warm welcome on her last days of employment with Cooperative Extension.

Past officer produces tribute documentary to 4-H

North Carolina Cooperative Extension's 4-H clubs have always been a part of Rebecca Jones' life.

"My parents met in 4-H in Davidson County," says the Appalachian State University senior, "and 4-H changed my life in that I have better social skills, leadership skills, more confidence, lifelong friends . . . the list goes on. I believe 4-H prepares kids to be better individuals, and I want more people get involved."

So Jones, a former 4-H state vice president (2006-07) who spent 14 years as a 4-H'er, decided to spread the good word about 4-H in a medium that could reach others: radio.

"I wanted to produce something that would inform people about the opportunities 4-H has to offer, to tell the story of North Carolina 4-H 50 years ago and how it has evolved," says the ASU electronic media broadcasting major. "I was interested in the experiences of 4-H'ers in the 1950s and 4-H'ers today."

The Denton native produced the 10-minute audio documentary "Head, Heart, Hands, and Health: 100 Years of NC 4-H" for her audio production class. Her prize-winning effort won second place in the educational program category at the 2008 Broadcast Educators Association National Festival of Media Arts in Las Vegas, Nev.

You can hear it here:
http://www.mediashowcase.appstate.edu/audio/index.php
While Lynn Yokley's family farmed, she doesn't remember them using the North Carolina Cooperative Extension office; nor did she participate in 4-H as a child. Her Cooperative Extension experience started, she says, when her children began participating in 4-H. Since then, her family learned many valuable skills and met lots of interesting, wonderful people, she says.

Lynn grew up on an old-fashioned tobacco farm that her maternal grandparents purchased in the 1920s. The land is still in their family: her parents, brother and his family and Lynn's family all live on the farm.

Her family raised tobacco before the days of automation. They planted, topped, primed and tied by hand and then hung the leaves in a tobacco barn to cure.

They grew their own vegetables, chickens and hogs (she loved hog-killing time), milked their own cows and made their own butter. They used draft horses and mules to plow the garden and always had a horse or pony to ride.

After they raised the last tobacco crop, when Lynn was in the eighth grade, they grew vegetables to market at local farmers' markets, using the money to help finance Lynn's college education. After farming and working two summers in a furniture factory, Lynn had decided that those pursuits weren't her cup of tea, so she got serious about getting an education.

Lynn has worked for Davie County Schools in various capacities since 1980 and currently is the system's lead school social worker. She holds a B.A. in sociology from Appalachian State University and a B.S.W. from UNC-Greensboro. She also attended Catawba College to obtain hours for her grades six-through-nine social studies teaching certificate.

She and her husband, Dale, an Ingersoll Rand Co. machinist, have two children: Elizabeth, 25, and Zach, 21. Elizabeth, an ASU graduate, works in Dallas, Texas. Zach is an ASU senior majoring in physics.

When Zach was a kindergartner he brought home a flyer about the new Animal Science 4-H Club, Lynn recalls. Judy Wilson, club leader, made her family welcome and interested Elizabeth in the sheep and lamb project, Lynn says.

Before Lynn knew what hit her, they were the proud owners of two lambs, animals they didn't raise on their "old-fashioned" farm, and their journey into the world of North Carolina Cooperative Extension had begun.

"This was a whole new world for the Yokleys but one that gave the kids and me lots of opportunities, skills and great friendships," Lynn says. "At one time we had as many as 50 sheep on the farm."

Both Zach and Elizabeth participated in lamb/sheep projects as well as in cooking, dairy foods and leadership areas. They did camp, presentations, ARIs and, of course, livestock shows.

"It was a pleasure to serve as a 4-H leader for the Animal Science Club for 15 years," says Lynn, who continues to help with the Davie County 4-H Teen Association.

She also serves on the Davie County Agricultural Board, the county's Extension Advisory Leadership Council and is in her second term on the State Advisory Leadership Council. She was recently elected SAC vice-chair.

Recently, the Davie County Cooperative Extension office recognized Lynn as its Volunteer of the Year. A fellow ALC member said the moment she received the award was the first time he had seen Lynn speechless.

Lynn says, "Not bad for someone who really didn't have any Extension experience and who said she would not grow up to be a farmer!"

"We are looking forward to Lynn serving as our vice-chair," says Joy Staton, Cooperative Extension's advisory system leader.

"Lynn, along with all of the State Advisory Council members, are hard-working volunteers," Staton says. "They see opportunities to give back to their communities through their leadership on the council and are glad to do so. It is through these volunteers that we continue to reach out to so many through Cooperative Extension's grass-roots leadership."

Visit the Advisory Leadership System Web site at http://als.ces.ncsu.edu/