Hidden gem

Planting seeds of learning at CWRU farm

By RYAN DENTSCHEFF

HUNTING VALLEY — After spreading out freshly pasteurized straw on the sterilized table and sprinkling on oyster mushroom spawn and nutritional supplements, Josephine Brencic of Chester began packing it all into a cylindrical plastic bag. She then tied off the end and poked a few holes into the bag. That left her just two weeks away from harvesting her first batch of homegrown, organic mushrooms.

Ms. Brencic was among the participants in a three-hour class on oyster mushroom production offered last weekend at the Squire Valleevue and Valley Ridge Farms owned by Case Western Reserve University.

The 400-acres on Fairmount Boulevard with meadows, ponds, forests, farmland, orchards, picnic areas, athletic areas, a silo theater, watershed and more is a living classroom for Case researchers and students as well as area residents.

Well water monitoring pact in limbo

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

With nearly all of Geauga dependent on ground wells for drinking water, leaders of area communities are closely watching to see if county commissioners renew a longtime well monitoring contract that expired last fall.

Protecting the ground water drinking supply has long been a priority of local leaders. The U.S. Geological Survey has monitored wells in Geauga since 1996 to keep watch on quantity and quality of the water table. The survey group has monitored 31 wells through a contract with county commissioners and gave them a renewal proposal in August, said Martha Jagucki, hydrologist with the Geological Survey, Michigan-Ohio Water Science Center.

No decision had been made by the county commissioners as of early this week. The proposal calls for the county to pay $23,500 a year, she said. U.S. Geological Survey pays $11,500 for the annual monitoring and receives some federal money.

The monitoring determines whether there are fluctuations in water levels caused by activities other than regular seasonal precipitation events. Ms. Jagucki said South Russell Village has been part of a separate program since 2001 and pays to have six wells in the village monitored every four months. One of those wells records hourly water levels.

There was one well in South Russell that showed a decline due to increased nearby use, but that well has stabilized, Ms. Jagucki said.

Police weigh use of body cameras

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

Resident Chuck Campbell posed a question to Russell Township trustees last week: Is it time to consider equipping the township’s police officers with body cameras?

With the changing times, Mr. Campbell said body cameras could be one more way to protect police officers and the public.

It is a question trustees have considered, Trustee Justin Madden said.

Body cameras may provide better evidence and increased accountability, but also present privacy issues and costs not only for the cameras.
For 80 years, she said, but the newest part is “combining food production with research and teaching.”

No chemicals are used on any of the produce and since 2010, when the farm stopped harvesting eggs from chickens, no live animals — except for bees — are kept at the farm. Eighty percent of the produce there is harvested outdoors, with the remainder grown in the greenhouse and two high tunnels. Unlike greenhouses, the enclosed tunnels, also called hoop houses, are heated entirely by the sun.

Some of the produce grown at the farm includes oyster mushrooms, beans, herbs such as basil and thyme, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco and much more. They even have a couple of tropical plants including a lime tree and a coffee plant.

Last year was the farm’s most successful year for food production when it harvested and sold more than 28,000 pounds of organically grown produce.

More than 50 percent of the farm’s produce sales go to Bon Appetite, which caters Case dining services. About 10 percent is sold to local chef Jonathon Sawyer, owner of Cleveland restaurants the Greenhouse Tavern, Trentina, and Noodlecat. Another 10 percent is sold to the Cleveland Zoo and is used to feed the gorillas and giraffes.

The final 30 percent is sold through its Community Supported Agriculture program where “shareholders” pay for a month’s supply of produce at the beginning of the season well before the harvest occurs. The cost for one month is $100 with each shareholder receiving $25 worth of produce weekly.

The type of fruits and vegetables received depends on the season and weather patterns, CSA Coordinator Renae Brown explained. Ms. Brown received her undergraduate degree from Case in biology and anthropology in 2014 and is currently working on her master’s degree in nutrition.

She said her experiences volunteering at the farm in her early college days and now working there full time as the CSA coordinator have opened her eyes to the world of local farming.

“I think being here has really put me in that place to understand that this isn’t just a hobby for people,” she said. “This was something, fortunately for me, I was able to do at my leisure and really work towards in my own time, but the farmers are out there right now worried and panicked about this winter, when they can’t grow anything and they can’t make money.”

She would like to see more students experiencing the many projects that go on at the farm.

“It does seem like we’re phenomenal and we partner with all of these different groups, and we do, but we could really expand that,” Ms. Brown said. “If I had a dream, it would be to truly reach out to people and really get students involved because there’s so much opportunity here. And I think the biggest thing that goes missing is that students just don’t know about the place.

“The farm can do a lot more in terms of reaching out,” she said. “If it could be a home base for more people, I think it could be a really great opportunity for new ideas.”