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Barnstable County Extension Service extends county's reach

Tour highlights variety of programs

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MULTI-USE – The docks at Prince Cove accommodate both the growing bivalves and recreational boaters. County grants help fund regional municipal shellfish propagation.

Hop aboard. You're about to go on a tour like no other, a tour that will involve baby shellfish, hazardous waste, pre-teen gardeners, a controlled burn, and a lunch served with a beautiful view of the farm that grew the vegetables and fruits you're eating that very moment.

Not to mention a bus ride through the woods. And a bus driver who loves Brazilian dancing so much he travels to Framingham, Worcester, and even Brazil to do it. (And he's not even Brazilian.)

You're taking the third annual summer tour that the Cape Cod Cooperative Extension provides to acquaint county officials and other invited participants with some of its programs. The Extension, according to its brochure, "is Barnstable County's Education Department. Programs are conducted in cooperation with the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Sea Grant Program."

This year's tour took place Aug. 12 under a gloomy sky that could not darken the season's lush lawns and trees, brilliant flowers, and calm, silvery waters.

The guests were 10 or so members of the League of Women Voters, from a number of Cape towns. Videographer Steve Baty is on board too, recording the day so that you will be able to watch the trip on Channel 17 Saturday (Aug. 15) at 8 a.m. or anytime at barnstablevideo.com

There were seven stops on this tour, which left from behind Superior Court in Barnstable village. Prince Cove Landing in Marstons Mills was our first.

Bill Burt of Extension Marine Resources explained that shellfishing is "far more important than people think" because it provides employment in a difficult economy; high-quality protein for little more money than the cost of a permit; and shellfish help to keep the water clean because they feed by filtering.

Kris Clark of the town Shellfish Department displayed bags of seed quahaugs that she pulled up from their nursery that is built right into the cove's docks so that recreational boaters can use the waters too. County Extension grants have helped develop the project.

A paper in the tour information packet offered a "purposely conservative" estimate that the quahaug seeds purchases from 1999 to 2009 for a total of \$684,850, assuming a 50 percent survival rate, would have a "landed value" of more than four and a half million dollars, or a 700 percent return on the investment.

Next stop, a handicapped-accessible trail in the woods of the Santuit River Conservation Area. A

County Extension grant here allowed a level, wheelchair-friendly path to be cleared to a beautiful scenic overlook where there is a sturdy bench made of vandalism-resistant material, according to the Extension's director, Bill Clark, who served as the tour host and guide.

Over the river to Mashpee where Rick York, that town's shellfish warden, and Diane Murphy, the Extension's fisheries and aquaculture specialist, showed how seed oysters grow on crushed shells that they get free from shucking houses.

"The oysters provide their services free of charge," said Murphy. "They eat for free, they filter the water for free, and they even provide habitat for other species."

York agreed. "The other day I checked an oyster bed and found an eel hiding in it." He added that the river area is "perfect" for cultivating oysters, with warm, clean water; algae to feed them; and a lack of predators.

As Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe natural resources director Quan Tobey looked on, York noted that the tribe has also received a grant to enhance its shellfishery, and that Mashpee shellfish permits went from 800 to 1,000.

At the Mashpee Department of Public Works, DPW director Catherine Laurent and Mike Maguire, Extension educator, reminded their visitors of the Extension's hazardous waste and sharps collection program to help remove mercury, used medical needles, and flares (which contain thyroid-inhibiting perchlorates) from the environment.

Last year, the County collected (and offered free, safer replacements for) 1,349 mercury thermostats, said Maguire. Laurent added that in the first six months of this year, the County took in 126 containers of sharps and distributed new containers.

The tour returned to Marstons Mills to visit the Children's Garden of the Extension's Master Gardener Association (and the subject of the Mills feature in last week's Patriot). "The idea is to connect children to where their food comes from," said Roberta Clark, Extension horticulturist.

The next stop provided a "who knew?" moment for many. Who knew that Barnstable and Plymouth counties are second only to southern California in danger of wildfires?

After explaining the dangerous combination of certain plants, prevailing winds, and soil chemistry in this region, Clark concluded, "So it's not a matter of if, but of when" the Cape will experience a wildfire. The County provides money for equipment, training, and road building (to provide fire barriers and access for firefighters). Now the group had reached the West Barnstable Conservation Area.

At this point, Darcy Karle, Barnstable conservation agent, and Charlie Genatossio, town tree warden, swung open a gate to allow the tour bus to drive along some of the roads that County grants are helping the town to carve out for the safe passage of fire trucks. The staff and visitors alike cheered on driver Steve Challis as he maneuvered the path, including a sharp turn. Karle announced that she can't wait to brag about the successful design of this road, just one of many planned for the 1,114-acre reserve.

It looked funny to see street signs deep in the woods with familiar names like Old Mill Road and Popple Bottom Road. But Genatossio explained a serious reason for them: a visitor had a heart attack in the conservation area and his son had no way of identifying to the rescue squad where they were. A county grant is helping to provide the signs.

The bus reached the area where there had been a recent controlled burn, obvious by the scorch

Next stop, tree handicapped the accessibility to the (wood) of fact, San the River Conservation Area. A

areas of the woods, said Karle, are cleared mechanically because they are so close to houses; Mashpee has just gotten similar equipment as the county gradually funds towns with firefighting machinery.

The bus exits the property and Challis joked that no one will ever believe him that he drove through a forest. "Don't worry. I've got video," Baty joked in return.

Last stop: lunch on a farm. The county farm.

Once a service project for inmates in the county jail, the gently rolling fields have been leased to organic farmer Tim Friary, who told his visitors that the farm is producing about 30 varieties of fruits and vegetables ("13 kinds of potatoes!") and is home to 400 laying hens. The county also grows trees for Cape Cod's towns here.

Friary has built a new farm stand and was selling eggs, flowers, and vegetables. He plans to have the stand open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays, and occasionally on Sundays.

He brought his guests into a potato field to show them the unusual Ozette, a bumpy little spud that he said is much in demand in restaurants. "Roast it in a little olive oil and garlic," he advised, "and it's worth a lot of money when you put it on a plate."

"I don't know," one visitor mused. "I'd worry if something that looked like that arrived with my dinner."

But now it was time for lunch, prepared and served by nutritionists from the Extension.

With a pink-and-green motif and fresh flowers decorating the tables, the meal was a buffet of fresh-picked raw vegetables, chips, wraps for every taste, and a dessert of farm-grown fruit offered with yogurt and sunflower seeds. At one table, the bus driver regaled his companions with stories of his two-month visit to Brazil, where he said he met "the happiest people."

A rooster crowed, flowers brightened the fields, the harvest ripened, a breeze cooled the party, workers went about their duties, a train rolled by, cars pulled up to the farm stand.

It was another day in the life of Barnstable County.

The Cape Cod Cooperative Extension's phone number is 508-375-6690 and its Web site is www.capecodextension.org

marks on tree trunks and the thin ground cover (a major factor in the spread of forest fires). Other