

Mayhaw madness

Area residents prepare for celebration of popular fruit

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Maxine, Red Majesty, Cajun, Royal Star, Marlene, Heavy and Georgia Giant.

No. These aren't the names of movie stars or rock bands. They are varieties of mayhaw; a small, juicy, red fruit, otherwise known as a hawthorn.

Used to make delicious jellies, syrups, cakes, cookies, wines and even slushes, locals celebrate the mayhaw's growing popularity each year during El Dorado's Mayhaw Festival at the historic John Newton House on Jefferson Street.

As the May 7th event approaches, Chairperson Sherri Odom finds herself busy making mayhaw jelly to sell to the hundreds of visitors the festival draws to El Dorado. Last year, bad weather dampened the event, but this year, the promise of good weather has organizers bracing for a hardy crowd coming in search of its mayhaw offerings.

Recognizing the opportunity created by the growing mayhaw market, El Doradoan Paul McLaughlin has launched the largest mayhaw orchard in the state on his Nick Springs Road farm.

Mayhaw trees are native to river bottoms, mostly in the southern climate zone along Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and now Florida. South Arkansas is in the northern most border of the mayhaw growing zone, making McLaughlin's orchard - with a potential capacity of more than 1,400 trees - the largest operation north of Louisiana, which currently boasts one of the largest orchards in the nation with 2,500 trees, according to McLaughlin. His is also the first commercial orchard in the state, according to McLaughlin.

Tuesday, Odom took time out of her jelly making and festival planning to tour McLaughlin's orchard and to discuss details of the Mayhaw Festival.

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Mayhaws

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Still in its infant stages, the orchard is not producing enough fruit to fill the demand, so McLaughlin gathers his mayhaws in the wild.

One mayhaw tree produces enough of the tiny fruits to make a year's supply of jelly for one family. It takes 50 gallons of berries to create 20 gallons of juice, which is needed for mayhaw jelly. Asked what inspired him to start a mayhaw orchard, McLaughlin said he visited a friend's pecan orchard while dove hunting near Texarkana.

"I watched him harvest pecans, making \$150,000 a year," he said. "That may be small change to some, but it was enough to get my interest."

McLaughlin said he researched his options for five years, seeking input from a professor at the University of Georgia.

"I found out there's a lot of knowledge that goes into this business," he said. "It's been five years and I'm still learning. There's a lot of labor involved."

Some mayhaw operations earn an estimated \$5,000 per acre. McLaughlin learned to graft his own trees using native root stock. He has approximately 1,500 trees in his nursery. Some will be ready to sell at the Mayhaw Festival. One day, McLaughlin aspires to develop his own variety of mayhaw. He even knows what he will name it. He gets a lot of help from others in the Louisiana Mayhaw Association.

The difficult part of starting an orchard is the unpredictable, uncontrollable forces of nature. One ice storm could wipe out his dreams. Some of his early starts were wiped out by deer. McLaughlin now protects the



News-Times/Toni Walthall

Preparing for festival

Paul McLaughlin shows Mayhaw Festival Chairperson Sherri Odom a sampling of mayhaw jelly, one of the products which will be for sale at the Saturday event at the historical John Newton House in El Dorado. McLaughlin has established the

first commercial mayhaw orchard, and the largest mayhaw orchard in the state, which he says will one day help fill the growing demand for the small, juicy, red fruit that grows wild in river bottoms in the southern climate zones.

vulnerable plants in his nursery with an electric fence, but even an electric fence won't keep fire blight or cedar rust from transferring to the

leaves in his young orchard.

His dream is worth the risk, he said.

"The most satisfying thing will be to look out there in the

spring and see those trees full of white blossoms and then red berries," he said, showing signs of a man with mayhaw juice in his blood.