

VEGETABLE, FRUIT IMPROVMENT CENTER CELEBRATES 20TH BIRTHDAY



by Emily Davis on FEBRUARY 26, 2014

The Texas A&M University Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center is celebrating 20 years of helping provide healthy food options to consumers.

The center began under the direction of former A&M professor Leonard Pike as a facility to research the health benefits of vegetables and how to produce ones that are healthier and more economically and environmentally efficient than regular vegetables. Fruit was added to the scope of research in 1999.

Bhimu Patil, center director, said that when it began, the center was the first of its kind to bring in scientists and medical doctors from different areas of expertise.

“There was no concept in the country at the time to bring in interdisciplinary scientists in the industry,” he said. “It was a unique thing.”

Kathleen Phillips said that in 20 years, the center’s influence has spread across the country.

“There’s a building out on Research Park where they have labs, but they extend all over Texas because that’s where crops need to grow,” she said. “We’ve got researchers all over the state, and the connections with the medical industry go all over the United States.”

On Tuesday, the center hosted a conference focusing on how to make people consume more fruits and vegetables, as well as a banquet celebrating its 20-year anniversary.

Though the center started out researching only vegetables and is most famous for producing the Maroon Carrot and the 1015 Onion, it expanded its research to include fruit. Research now includes peaches, nectarines, berries, peppers, melons, cantaloupe, grapefruit and more.

“When we started, we had one lab, now we have four quadrants of focus,” Patil said. “We have grown probably 20 to 30 times the size.”

The four quadrants the center focuses on are bioactive molecules, phytochemical and nutrient

analysis, plant biotechnology and biological activity. Patil said that the broad spectrum of focus helps students at the center learn more in order to be more prepared for a career.

“Because of the interdisciplinary sciences and the four quadrants, our students are able to find jobs,” he said. “Almost all of the students that have graduated with us are now employed.”

Along with research and educating undergraduate and graduate students, the center also has a program directed at educating elementary and high school children.

“The children’s program focuses on age-related education about nutrition,” said Connie Sebesta, administrative coordinator for the center. “Now we are also adding segments on how fruits and vegetables play a part in sports medicine.”

Patil said that all of these educational and research factors help make the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center one-of-a-kind.

“It’s really unique,” he said. “No other state has this.”

ORIGINAL LINK: http://www.theeagle.com/news/local/article_3ed40486-b4f9-5722-9c0a-76246ce7a256.html