

OSU plants a new variety

By Sarah Catalano
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This year's all-female variety of Oklahoma State University crop judges is currently sowing the seeds of another national ranking.

To compete at national levels, members of the crop judging team have to practice at regular times, be able to identify more than 300 seeds and plants and complete weekly assignments, however, they receive no scholarships or class credit.

Both the 1999 and 2000 OSU national competition crop judging teams consisted of four women, said Jonathan Shaver, plant and soil sciences assistant professor and new team coach.

"Of this year's practicing participants, five out of twelve are female," Shaver said.

Crop judging at OSU started in 1923, and for 49 years, Oklahoma State has been dominant in both national competitions, one taking place in Kansas City, Kan., and the other in Chicago.

"We're the most consistent team," Shaver said. "We've gone to more contests than any other team and participated more years. Over half the years, we've been in the top three teams in the nation."

This year, Kerry O'Neill, Sheila Cross, Kylie Vincent and Deena Bushong placed second in the regional competition at Manhattan, Kan., Oct. 28. They competed in nationals Nov. 14 in Kansas City, Kan., and placed fourth.

Although crop judging is strictly an extracurricular activity, all the crop judges agree that being a part of a team is rewarding.

"It's hard getting everybody together to practice and be responsible. But it's worth it," said O'Neill, plant and soil sciences senior with a crop science option.

Shaver said being a team member in many cases requires more academic skills and more effort than some classes. Additionally, team members must learn self-discipline and specific knowledge relative to their field.

Crop team members competing at nationals must first prepare for three different events.

The first part involves identifying seeds and plants from across the United States. The crops and seeds the students must identify include grain crops, forage crops and weeds.

"It's very useful to the students to be exposed to new plants and seeds that are grown in other parts of the country," Shaver said.

The students are required to correctly identify 200 different plants and seeds with their correct spelling in 90 minutes, Shaver said.

"It's a learning Olympics," Shaver said. "Not only do you have to be able to identify something, you have to be able to recall the names. It takes a special skill."

Additionally, the students learn and identify "historically-important varieties" of crop plants such as wheat, barley and oats. For example, they are required to know what plant characteristics separate different varieties of hard red winter wheat from one another, Shaver said.

For the first year on the crop judging team, students primarily learn to identify plants and seeds, because the seed information a student learns is used in the other two parts of the contest, Shaver said.

"Plant identification is good stuff to know because it's things I'll be dealing with when I'm in a 'real world' job situation," said Cross, plant and soil sciences senior with a crop science option.

Competitors get down and dirty in seed analysis, where the crop judge physically examines the seed sample and identifies contaminants such as other crop seeds and weeds. If weed seeds are in the sample, the student determines whether the weeds are common weeds, prohibited weeds or restricted weeds.

Seed analysis gives the students experience with what is done in a commercial setting when the purity of a seed sample is analyzed.

"In the seed certification industry, when you want to



Deena Bushong, plant and soil sciences senior, practices seed analysis for competition Oct. 28. The team placed second in regional competition and fourth in national competition. (Photo by Sarah Catalano)

sell a load of cowpeas or wheat that's certified, that sample is actually analyzed for contaminants," Shaver said.

O'Neill said seed identification is a useful activity.

"It takes a lot of time, but it's good to know the plants and weeds that I see, and whether or not they're restricted or noxious weeds. It really helped me as an intern this summer," O'Neill said.

Students are required to grade grain samples based on test weights, moisture contents and information given to them in the third part of the contest.

The students learn to use Federal Grain Inspection Standards for grain grading to determine the quality of the samples they are given.

"The students must be familiar with the process of grain handling. They have to understand how a sample is handled when it's brought in to an elevator, how a sample is taken, and what processes that specimen goes through," Shaver said.

Judges are allowed to use a summarized workbook for this part of the contest to make sure grain samples are of a particular quality.

"The grain grading part of the contest is really complicated," O'Neill said. "You have to practice all the time to get good. Every crop is different, so there's a lot to know."

While studying for competition takes a lot of time and effort, it's a good outlet for students' creativity and competitive impulses, Shaver said.

"Many students who participate are simply doing so because they enjoy competition," Shaver said. "We have a very strong history of crop judging and winning in crop judging at Oklahoma State. I want that to be a motivator for students, but mostly I want them to do the best they possibly can."

While they are gaining valuable experience with team spirit and performing under pressure, crop judges also have the added benefit of impressing prospective employers when they interview for jobs or internships.

"There are a lot of company officials out there who know what being a member of a crop judging team means. They know what level of discipline it takes to compete at national levels," Shaver said.

It takes discipline to participate in a crops team like Oklahoma State's, but the pride of being on a winning team also is a motivator for the students, Shaver said.

The team members agree.

"It's hard but it's also useful," O'Neill said. "I know that as much time as I spend studying plants and seeds I'll never forget them."CJ