

Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Center History

The Grand Traverse area of Northwest Michigan's lower peninsula is known as "The Cherry Capital of the World." Northwest Michigan produces 120 - 150 million pounds of tart cherries annually and about 50 million pounds of sweet cherries. This represents over 50% of the state's tart cherry production and 80% of the sweet cherry production. Michigan produces 75% of the tart cherries in the U.S. and is one of the four major producers of sweet cherries.

Recognizing the need for research to help maintain a viable cherry industry, a group of fruit growers from the five Northwest counties of Manistee, Benzie, Leelanau, Grand Traverse and Antrim formed the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Foundation in 1978. The Foundation board is administered by an elected nine member board of directors from the five counties. The purpose of the Foundation was to establish a field research station in this major cherry area since no other MSU research facilities represent the unique Northwest and West Central growing areas.

The Foundation launched a fall 1978 fund raising campaign that resulted in over \$350,000 in cash and pledges from fruit growers, fruit processors, machinery dealers, irrigation companies, financial institutions and others closely connected to the fruit industry. Another \$150,000 was donated in cash and in-kind items within the following two years resulting in a total of \$500,000.

The Foundation purchased an 80-acre farm near Bingham on County Road 633 in Leelanau County in November 1978. By the following summer, an office and storage facility had been built on the site. An Open House in September 1979 marked the official start of operation at the Station. Up to that point, all expenditures were from industry funds.

Michigan State University's Agricultural Experiment Station then leased the facility and property from the Foundation. The Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station is responsible for all operational costs, with real estate based capital improvements the responsibility of the Foundation. The Foundation has since added 20 acres of land, built a pole building for equipment storage, added a conference room and constructed a dormitory. In winter of 2001, the Research Station office building was extensively remodeled to better reflect increased usage over the past 20 years. Funding for these real estate improvements has been made possible in large part by line item funding from the Michigan Department of Agriculture to the Foundation.

It was the desire of the industry to make cherry research the highest priority at the Northwest Station. Therefore, most of the work continues to focus on this crop. However, research is also conducted on several other fruit crops including apples, plums, wine grapes, peaches, apricots, pears, chestnuts and hazelnuts and other potential horticultural crops for Northwest and West Central Michigan.

The Northwest Station is a multidisciplinary horticultural facility. MSU departments currently affiliated with research at the Station include Horticulture, Plant Pathology, Entomology, Agricultural Engineering, Agricultural Economics, Geography and Food Science. Research that at one time focused on strictly production issues is shifting to address more environmentally related agricultural issues. There are currently approximately 70 applied [research projects](#) underway. Another key area is the dissemination of information through MSU Extension. We maintain several different information systems to keep growers abreast of real-time information, plus publish a weekly newsletter delivered via fax and email. We also generate newsletters, numerous programs with the media, organize educational programs, answer grower questions, and much more.

The Foundation board of directors, working with MSU research and Extension personnel, completed [Vision 2000](#), a visionary assessment of future direction, in 1995. We have more recently undergone a new strategic planning process and produced a document entitled, [New Horizons](#).

There are six full time staff at the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Center. They are Dr. Nikki Rothwell, District Horticulturist and Station Coordinator; (Currently Open), District Fruit IFP/IPM Educator; Bill Klein, Farm Manager; Jackie Baase, Secretary and Myron Anderson, Horticultural Aide, and Karen Powers, Technician. Additional workers and technicians assist during the summer months.

The NWMHRC brings together a unique blend of MSU research and Extension programming combined with the active participation of the fruit industry and excellent support from MDA. This station puts the University at the focal point for information for both Northwest Michigan's fruit industry and the tart cherry industry throughout Michigan, North America and the world. There is a great sense of pride and support from the fruit industry in the research and extension activities conducted at the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Station.