

AG STUDENTS

Grow Sweet Sorghum

6



Mantachie High School students Kevin Smith, left, Shea Scott and Tim Ellis harvest sweet sorghum grown by their FFA chapter.

Glynda Phillips

By Glynda Phillips

Mississippi Farm Bureau

Students involved in the Future Farmers of America program at Mantachie High School received hands-on experience this year in growing and harvesting sweet sorghum seed through an agreement with Mississippi Foundation Seed Stocks (MFSS), a support unit of Mississippi State University's Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station. MFSS was established in 1959 under the direction of MAFES and is located on the MSU campus.

The students were involved in the field production and harvest of the "Dale" variety of sorghum, which was grown under contract for MFSS. They also grew four additional acres solely to cook as syrup and sell to the general public.

Students cut the first mature sorghum seed heads in late September and carried them to MFSS, where the seed was dried, thrashed, conditioned, tested and packaged for sale as foundation seed. The seed is sold to interested producers across the large sorghum-producing area of the eastern United States.

"We don't grow every variety of the four varieties of sweet sorghum every year because the seed generally retains high quality when placed in our cold storage," said Randy Vaughan, MFSS manager. "It just so happened that we needed additional seed

of the Dale variety this year. The other three varieties that MFSS maintains as seed are M81-E, Theis and Topper 76-6."

Beyond their seed production, the students harvested mature sorghum stalks in mid-October and cooked and sold sorghum syrup to the general public. Proceeds from the two sorghum projects, along with proceeds from the students' meat cutting and greenhouse plant projects, help to fund various events the students participate in throughout the year.

"Agriculture is important in this area of the state," said Mantachie High School Principal Scott Blackley. "Our ag program not only allows students to get outdoors and get their hands dirty

learning the basics of how to grow, harvest and further process a crop, it is also good for community and school relations.

"Our ag program shows the people around here that we care about the future of agriculture and are supportive of the industry," he said. "Plus, this type of project is something our students will never forget."

Terry Norwood, Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation

Region 2 manager and corn, wheat and feed grains coordinator, grew sweet sorghum seed for Mississippi Foundation Seed Stocks for four years. Last year, he decided he wanted the school kids at Mantachie High School to take over the reins, and they eagerly accepted.

"Terry did an excellent job for us, but one obstacle to growing sorghum is that it is labor intensive," said Vaughan. "It was getting harder for him to find the time and people to help him grow and harvest the seed. This is a perfect crop for Mantachie High School because they have both the time and labor force. These students also did an excellent job."

Seniors Justin Robbins, Shawn Hurd and Zack Elliff say they enjoy participating in the Mantachie High School FFA program. They think the sorghum project is a great addition, and they appreciate the fact that it provides them with

plenty of hands-on experience. All three are considering ag-related majors in college.

"Mantachie High School has one of the few remaining ag programs in the state," said Principal Blackley. "It's certainly not the only one, but we feel that it is one of the most active. We are very proud of it."

FFA ag program instructors are Joe Rogers and C.W. Franks. Approximately 80 students participated in the program this year.

For more information about Mississippi Foundation Seed Stocks, contact Vaughan at 662-325-2390 or email him at rvaughan@pss.msstate.edu.



Glynda Phillips