

# Asparagus

# Advocate

Celebrating  
the National Asparagus  
Festival, area growers  
and all things asparagus

2021



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## Welcome to the 2021 Asparagus Advocate

Though the National Asparagus Festival is operating at a reduced capacity this year, Oceana County's favorite vegetable is still growing strong! Congratulations to 2021 Asparagus Queen Tara Oomen, and 2021 1st Runner-up Grace Huffman!



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# 2021 National Asparagus Festival Queen's Pageant



2021 Asparagus Queen Tara Oomen



2021 1st Runner-up Grace Huffman



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## Earl and Linda Peterson West Michigan Research Station



• Contributed photo

### RSVP information

The grand opening of the Earl and Linda Peterson West Michigan Research Station, 5185 N. Oceana Dr., in Hart, is set for Aug. 5 from 5-7 p.m. with tours of the facility.

Speeches will be conducted from 6-6:15 p.m.

Snacks and beverages to be served.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, capacity is limited, so please RSVP by June 19 to Patricia Parsons.

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# New research facility opens to support area growers

By McKenna Golat

Herald-Journal Intern

The new Earl and Linda Peterson West Michigan Research Station in Weare Township is slated to have its grand opening Aug. 5.

The research center, located at 5185 N. Oceana Dr., in Hart, began as a project by the West Central Michigan Horticultural Research, Inc. to support the agriculture of Oceana, Newaygo and Mason counties. Additionally, the research center is a part of Michigan State University (MSU) Ag-BioResearch. It is near the north side of Oceana County's Michigan Asparagus Research Farm.

"The property currently has blocks of fruit that contain peaches, tart cherries, and pears," Grant Boring, marketing and communications manager at Peterson Farms, said. "There are future plans to expand the fruit on the property."

Research will be dedicated to tree fruit, such as apples, peaches and cherries, and asparagus.

Through fundraising efforts by its board members, West

Central Michigan Horticultural Research, Inc. raised a total of \$1.5 million in donations for the research center. The project also received donations from community organizations, corporations and grants. The Founders Club was established when the project began and was finalized once the building was finished. People and businesses who now donate \$1,000 or more will be inducted into the Defender's Club.

"While the initial goal was met to build the facility, the Defender's Club was established as there is still a need for ongoing donations to maintain the legacy of the West Michigan Research Station," Boring said.

The research center will not only be used for agriculture research. The building can be reserved for events such as meetings, banquets, weddings and graduations. The facility's conference room has a sitting capacity of 230 people. Outside there is a gazebo and the Zack Snider Tractor Museum, which features tractors from various decades, and is named after the late farmer, who passed away tragically last year. The room also has photos taken from the 1800's through the 1900's, with one area celebrating local Hart resi-

dent, historian and former cherry queen, Marge Peterson. The entire facility is named after the owners of Peterson Farms.

"(It) is a representation of generations of agriculture in the West Michigan area," Boring said.

He added that the facility is not only a tremendous asset for the agricultural community of this part of Michigan to better understand the soil and microclimate diversities, but it's also a resource to help educate and develop future generations of farmers in the Oceana, Newaygo and Mason County communities.

"There are plans to partner with neighboring schools to educate students on agriculture and farming," Boring said.

The Earl and Linda Peterson West Michigan Research Station was originally supposed to have its grand opening June 24. However, the event was pushed back because the tart cherry season was beginning. The facility will have its grand opening on Aug. 5, after the season ends.

"We look forward to sharing the station with everyone," Boring said.

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# Ryan Walsworth Spear-It 5K returns



**By Andy Roberts**  
*Herald-Journal Writer*

The National Asparagus Festival learned last year, when COVID-19 precautions forced its annual Spear-It 5K to be all virtual, that people with connections to the county

were glad to participate all over America. Texas and Georgia were just a couple of the states represented in last year's virtual event.

That experience informed the decision to include a virtual option in this year's 5K, although in-person runners will be welcomed back to the usual starting line at the Silver

Lake Chicken Shack Saturday, June 12.

Race coordinator Michele Amstutz added that when the event was in the planning stages, it was still uncertain what state outdoor events would be in amid the pandemic, which was another reason the virtual option was included.

"People could choose to run the typical course in Silver Lake (last year) or wherever they were able to," Amstutz said. "It gave (people) a way to participate."

That's not all that's new: The event has been renamed The Ryan Walsworth Virtual Spear-It 5K, honoring the late former aspara-

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# in-person, virtual option still available

gus farmer and supporter of the festival. Walsworth was part of Golden Stock Farms, which routinely donates asparagus to the festival.

“Ryan’s dad Dick, who’s also passed, was part of the festival in the early years,” Amstutz said. “By naming it in his name, it gives us an opportunity to keep his memory alive. Not only did he support the NAF, I couldn’t name all the organizations, but he was (part of) so many in the state of Michigan that supported the asparagus industry and farmers in general. It’s really special for us to be able to do that.”

With the full NAF experience unfortunately unavailable again this year - most of the scheduled activities were canceled earlier this spring - Amstutz said having the run is important to allow the community the chance to feel connected to the festival. Runners are each given a bundle of asparagus for their participation - this year provided by Todd Greiner Farms - and the Asparagus

Queen, who was crowned June 5, as well as the runner-up in the pageant, will be on hand for the run too, Amstutz said.

“I love hearing the comments from runners who come back year after year,” Amstutz said. “I grew up in this area and have family that are asparagus farmers. To see our community and even a lot of tourists that are summer folks, for them to get excited about it, it brings joy to my heart, as cheesy as that sounds. The smiles it brings are amazing.”

“We’re almost looking at it as a way to meet our queen. We want to work to keep them involved in the community, keep them local. We don’t know if the larger festivals (later) this year will still happen, so we’re using the run as a way to, even though we can’t have the full festival, kick-start some excitement.”

The run is on course to draw as many participants as in a regular year, with a little over 100 runners signed up

as of Wednesday, June 2. Amstutz said that number is normally doubled by the time race time arrives - same-day registration is available starting at 7:30 a.m. - though she doesn’t know how many of the pre-registered to date are participating virtually or in person.

While activities continue to inch back toward normalcy nationwide amid falling coronavirus case numbers, there will be at least two precautions, as the usual post-race snacks will be given to runners pre-packaged this year and the awards ceremony will not be held as normal.

Even though the full fun of the festival will not be available, Amstutz hopes the 5K can drum up excitement for the county’s most famous crop.

“It’s part of the community, and people want to go out and celebrate asparagus,” Amstutz said. “Of course I’m passionate about it, but it’s a way to keep the excitement alive.”



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# Pineapple Strata and Ham and Asparagus Strata

**By Mary Beth Crain**

*Contributing Writer*

*(Previously printed in the OHJ)*

My friend Lisa Fleury, who's a great cook, makes a dish that's a surefire hit wherever it turns up: pineapple strata. She calls it a pineapple soufflé, and it could also be called a pineapple bread pudding, but whatever you call it, it's absolutely delicious and tends to disappear as soon as it appears.

When I asked her if I could have the recipe, she said that she got it online and that it's so easy you won't believe it. She told me to google "pineapple strata," so I did. In the process, I discovered what, exactly, a strata is, along with about a million other strata recipes.

I guess I'd never become acquainted with stratas because so many other genres fit their description. Technically, a strata is a layered casserole dish, usually using eggs, bread and often cheese. So that could mean lots of things. A frittata could be a strata. A quiche could be a strata. A bread pudding could be a strata. The reason a dish is called a strata, though, is that the bread is alternated with the filling, producing layers, or strata. Even this distinction is vague, though—the strata recipes I'm giving you today aren't layered, but are still classified as strata. Go figure.

You'd naturally assume that strata, being an Italian word, originated in Italy, but it's actually an American creation. The earliest recipe we know of was in a 1902 publication, *The Handbook of Household Science*, and used egg whites instead of whole eggs. Some 80 years later, strata hit the charts when the 1984 cookbook *The Silver Palate* made it a culinary trend.

Strata are ingenious creations because 1) they're a God-given way to use up leftovers and 2) their possibilities are endless. You can make sweet and savory strata, in any variation. There are no rules. A strata is pretty much whatever you want it to be, from whatever you've got on hand, just as long as that includes eggs and bread.

I have two strata recipes, of both the sweet

and savory varieties, that I'm including here: pineapple strata and ham and asparagus strata. Together they practically make a whole meal—the ham and asparagus strata is a perfect main dish and the pineapple strata is the perfect dessert. They also make superb brunch dishes. Best of all, they're eeeeasy!

## Pineapple Strata

### Ingredients

- 1 ½ c. butter, softened
- 2 c. granulated sugar
- 1 c. brown sugar
- 12 large eggs
- 15 sandwich bread slices, cut into cubes
- 3 20 oz. cans crushed pineapple

### Preparation

- Cream together butter and sugar.
- Add eggs, beating after each one.
- Drain pineapple and add to egg mixture. Blend well.
- Gently fold the bread crumbs into the mixture.
- Pour into a greased 9 x 13 baking dish.
- Bake at 350 degrees 50-60 minutes until golden brown on top and edges.

## Ham and Asparagus Strata

### Ingredients

- 4 c. packaged stuffing mix
- 2 c. (8 oz.) shredded Swiss cheese
- 1 ½ c. (¾ lb. fresh or 10 oz. frozen) cooked asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 ½ c. cubed cooked ham (Honey ham is really good)
- 1 can Cream of Asparagus Soup
- 2 c. milk
- 5 eggs, beaten
- ½ tsp. seasoned salt
- ¼ tsp. coarsely ground pepper
- 1 Tbsp. spicy brown or Dijon-style mustard

### Preparation

- Mix stuffing, cheese, asparagus and ham. Spoon into greased 3-quart baking dish.
- Bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes or until a knife inserted into the center of the dish comes out clean. Let stand 5-10 minutes before serving.
- Mix soup, milk, eggs, mustard and seasonings. Pour over stuffing mixture.



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# Asparagus Festival Board welcomes new members

By **McKenna Golat**  
Herald-Journal Intern

The National Asparagus Festival Board currently consists of eight members, and while many have served for a number of years, two of them are more recent additions.

Gina Mead and Lisa Newton are the newest members of the NAF Board. According to the festival website, Mead is the coordinator for the Kidz Zone and Family Fun Friday, both of which were cancelled this year due to COVID-19 restrictions. She volunteered at the National Asparagus Festival for many years before joining the board. Newton is the coordinator for the Taste of Asparagus Competition, Arts & Crafts Fair and Food Vendors, all of which were also canceled this year due to COVID-19 restrictions. She has also made soaps and other products

which are only available during the festival.

Oceana's Herald-Journal reached out to both Newton and Mead, but at press time only Mead was available for an interview.

"Being given the opportunity to come and be a part of the board and working with a great team like that, it just didn't seem like I could pass up the opportunity," Mead said.

Mead loved Oceana County's asparagus celebrations since she was a child. Aside from being a volunteer, Mead has also participated in the parades and the 4-H activities within the festival. She enjoys being a part of the festival board so far. Additionally, she is glad to learn from other members of the NAF Board.

"I look forward to being able to celebrate a little bit and take a step back and get a feeling of normalcy again after the COVID pandemic," Mead said.

Mead said the festival board is hoping to

keep the importance of the asparagus season alive despite the COVID-19 pandemic. She wants the local farmers to know how appreciated they are within Oceana County by keeping the events open. Mead knows how the community looks forward to the festival every year, so keeping it going is one of her goals.

"I think COVID pushed us to think outside the box," she said. "I think we'll be coming back full strength, hopefully next year, and be able to do everything we do."

Even though the festival will be limited, Mead looks forward to the festivities. She was excited for the Asparagus Queen pageant, and now, to see the new reign of the 2021 Asparagus Queen, Tara Oomen. The festival board is especially emphasizing its support of farmers.

"It's usually the first event that kicks off our summer for Oceana County and I'm



**Mead**

looking forward to seeing it come back and continuing to be a part of it," Mead said.

As for next year's National Asparagus Festival, Mead hopes it will be unhindered and continue to support local farmers.

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• Sharon Hallack / Oceana's Herald-Journal

**John Stephens**

**By Sharon Hallack**  
Contributing Writer

WALKERVILLE - Often retirement means a time of relaxation, travel and new opportunities. For John Stephens of Walkerville, he retired to explore some new opportunities and does travel, but he's definitely not doing a whole lot of relaxing, especially during asparagus season in Oceana County.

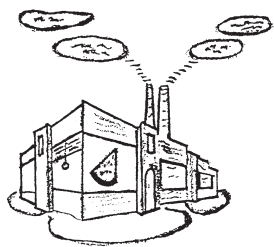
Stephens, a retired General Motors pipefitter, owns Stephens Farm east of Walkerville. He bought the land in 1981, loving the beauty of the area, and knowing in a few years he would be retiring. Farming is in his family's history and he had always enjoyed visiting Western Michigan. He and his wife worked at the same golf course where they met Al Payne, of Shelby, who was the groundskeeper at the time.

"I guess you could say he was our connection to Oceana," Stephens said. "We started looking for property and this place, while not the best farmland, is so beautiful and the layout is perfect with the woods, meadows and stream running through it. I have to give a lot of credit to my mentors Dick and Don Walsworth, Don, especially. He was manager at the co-op at the time and once he learned of my connections on the east side of the state, encouraged me to consider putting in some asparagus. Both guys were very helpful in helping me get my operation going. I originally started picking just for the fresh market. I was still working full-time at GM and could manage that on a small basis. I retired in 2005 and little by little I found a niche; I sell mainly to small stores and farmer's markets. I started with a contact I had in Auburn Hills and that eventually led to getting

connected to other markets. I've done some cold calling but most of it has been word of mouth. The farm markets spring season with bedding plant sales, runs at the same time as asparagus, so the traffic is already established. I was also introduced to Flint Fresh, who provides food boxes to the underserved communities in Flint. Flint Fresh got their start after the water crisis. For me, it's been a good feeling to know I am providing healthy food for people."

As Americans we are so used to purchasing every fruit and vegetable every day of the year. We've demanded it and producers across the nation have made it possible to grow produce, almost year around. But that convenience does come at a cost. "The agriculture business has dummed down our buying habits," said Stephens. "So much of what we buy in the grocery store has been transported across the nation and the world even. Producers sell what is best for their bottom line and we as consumers will buy it because we've grown accustomed to having it when we want it. But in a lot of circumstances, we're foolishly paying money for a substandard product. It's grown out of the country a lot of times and doesn't taste as good. And asparagus is no exception."

But those who live in Oceana County know that there is nothing better than the first spears of the spring especially. Stephens explained, "In the first few pickings, those asparagus crowns are bursting with energy and have the capacity to produce the largest yields. That is why early freezes can really affect your bottom line. The crowns are so loaded with sugars and carbs that the first spears literally are the sweetest and best tasting. The imports coming from Central America, picked and stored sometimes for weeks before arriving here, simply can't com-



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# and perfectly delicious Oceana asparagus

pare to the taste of Michigan-grown asparagus.”

A typical asparagus season in Oceana County can run anywhere from the first week in May to the second or third week of June. During that time a field of asparagus will be handpicked on average every 24-36 hours. The length of a season and the number of times a field is picked, just like many things agriculture-related, is ever dependent on the weather.

“As soon as the asparagus is picked, we cool the spears using well water infused with a food-grade disinfectant. The cooled spears are then stored at 36 degrees in our walk-in refrigerator before we sort and pack for orders. We store and pack according to our orders as close as we can. I try not to have a lot of extra in storage. The remaining asparagus goes to Michigan Freeze Pack for cuts and tips processing. The farm employs H-2A workers (foreign workers employed in the U.S. to perform temporary or seasonal work and services related to agriculture.) for all picking, sorting and packing. For our

fresh sales, one pound bundles are banded, then packed into boxes of 28 bundles,” Stephens said.

The Stephens Farm packing shed is an amazing display of “farmer engineering” at work. From the hydro-cooling set up to the asparagus bundlers, Stephens has put his engineering background to good use, creating and manufacturing most of what he needs to get the job done.

“For sorting, I was able to purchase my sorting line using grant funds from the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act. This federal program was developed as a way to help farmers affected by imports, for asparagus farmers, it’s been the Peruvian imports. My delivery days are every Monday and Friday during the season. I’m on the farm Tuesday through Thursday. Then the weekend is spent getting ready for Monday! I don’t really want to get much bigger, I am really enjoying this phase of life; living in this beautiful area and providing a quality product to my customers,” Stephens said.



• Sharon Hallack / Oceana's Herald-Journal

## Stephens Farm sorting line

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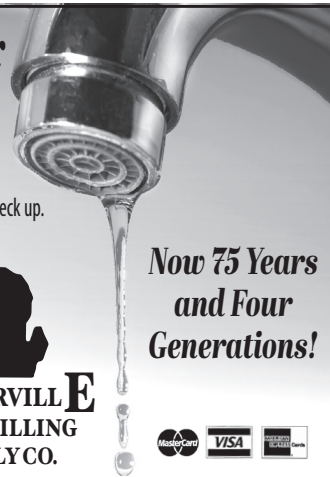
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# Jamie Clover Adams named new Michigan Asparagus Executive Director

**By Sharon Hallack**

*Contributing Writer*

DEWITT - Long-time executive director and advocate for the Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board, John Bakker, of Crystal Valley, retired in May, after nearly 20 years in that position. The board is pleased to announce Jamie Clover Adams as his replacement.

Clover Adams, who was hired in April and officially started as executive director on May 10th, brings with her 25 years in agriculture. She grew up on a farm in mid-Michigan and served as the Director of Agriculture for the Snyder administration and most recently as the Farm Production and Conservation Chief of Staff for the U.S. Department of Agriculture under USDA Secretary Sonny Purdue in Washington, D.C.

Given the high profile nature of her former positions, she says she is excited about her new position, "I like solving problems. I've served farmers my whole career. I like challenges and they've got challenges."

Clover Adams' job responsibilities will have two main focus points - promotion and research. "Michigan Asparagus is funded by a check-off program funded by

asparagus growers. The organization just received a \$180,750 Specialty Crop Block Grant, some of which will be used for the biggest promotion in their history. We will work with retailers to set up displays promoting Michigan asparagus.

"As far as research we will continue working with Michigan State University researchers to help growers with some of the disease problems they face. Part of the block grant will fund in-field sensors with a sensor technology package that is affordable, provides easy access to data in real time and provides timely disease model output through the MSU Enviroweather website.

"A third additional focus the board has asked for my help with is labor. This is a huge issue for growers. Most are using H-2A workers and the costs have continued to rise each year. That combined with the import of asparagus at the same time as their crop is coming on, presents many challenges to today's grower. Hopefully I can use the connections I made while at the USDA. My goal will be to find ways we can work together to minimize some of the economic impacts these challenges present."

The Michigan Asparagus office is located

in DeWitt, Mich. just north of Lansing, but Clover Adams' job will take her all over Michigan as she meets with and gets to know the growers this year. "Eventually I'd like to get to know the retailers, packers and processors." When asked what her favorite asparagus recipe was she said, "I really like to grill mine in a simple concoction of olive oil and garlic seasoning. I especially like Michigan asparagus because it's fatter and doesn't fall through the grates on the grill!"

More information on the good work being done at Michigan Asparagus or for some newly developed asparagus recipes, please visit the Michigan Asparagus website at [www.michiganasparagus.org](http://www.michiganasparagus.org)



**Clover Adams**

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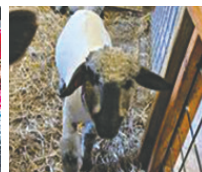
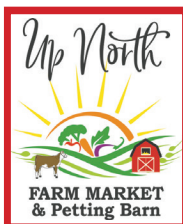
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# Asparagus Pork Stir Fry with Orange-Sesame Sauce

By **Mary Beth Crain**

Contributing Writer

(Previously printed in the OHJ)

Well, asparagus is officially up and running, and if you're an asparagus fan, you'll be eating the stuff like it's going out of style, which it basically is, as the season is so short.

The great thing about asparagus is its versatility. While it definitely has its own distinctive flavor, that flavor is sociable enough to blend with almost any kind of sauce, protein and other vegetables.

And it's great all by itself. Grilled, steamed, roasted,

braised, with some salt, pepper, garlic, a little butter, or lemon, or lemon and butter, it takes minutes to prepare and is a veritable delicacy.

Here's one that's Chinese restaurant quality yummy.

## Asparagus Pork Stir Fry with Orange-Sesame Sauce

Serves 4

### Ingredients

- ½ lb. fresh asparagus
- 6 oz. fresh sliced mushrooms
- ¾ c. sliced water chestnuts
- 1 small colored bell pep-

per, halved and sliced thin

- 1 small onion, finely chopped

- 1 Tbsp. chopped garlic, raw or from jar

- ¼ c. chopped Thai lemongrass (available at Hansen's)

- ½ lb. pork tenderloin, sliced thin

- Seasoned salt and coarsely ground pepper

- Oil for frying

- Orange-sesame sauce (recipe below)

- Fresh cilantro for garnish

### Preparation

- Chop asparagus into ½ inch pieces (remove thick

ends).

- Heat 1 T. of oil in wok or large skillet. Add asparagus and saute 3-4 minutes.

- Add the rest of the vegetables and garlic and saute another two minutes. Remove into a bowl.

- Season the sliced pork with seasoned salt and pepper. Fry for 2 minutes (add a little extra oil if necessary).

- Return vegetables to skillet with pork. Toss with the orange sesame sauce and cook 2-3 more minutes.

Serve over rice, or toss little heat)

with lo mein egg noodles for asparagus pork lo mein. Garnish with chopped fresh cilantro.

### Orange-Sesame Sauce

- ¾ c. orange juice
- 2 tsp. orange marmalade
- 2 tsp. honey or brown sugar
- 2 tsp. sesame oil
- ½ tsp. garlic powder
- 2 tsp. grated ginger
- 1 T. soy sauce
- 2 tsp. teriyaki sauce
- 2 tsp. cornstarch
- 1 tsp. finely chopped chili peppers or Thai chili sauce (optional if you don't like a

- Mix all ingredients in a bowl with a whisk, or shake in a jar. Add by increments to the stir fry—you don't want it to have too much liquid, so see how it goes. The vegetables and meat should be nicely coated but not swimming in sauce. You can save leftover sauce in the fridge for quite a while.

*PS: This recipe works wonderfully with shrimp, chicken, scallops, crab, beef or tofu substituted for the pork.*



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