

Sat, Nov. 8, 2008

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## Special Sections



Former Britt graduate Mike Wellik is making waves in the strawberry industry, growing more than 40 varieties. (Photo courtesy of Mike Wellik)

## Fruits of labor put former Britt man on map

By Mary Loden, Of the News-Tribune

Mike Wellik makes good on strawberries, hard work

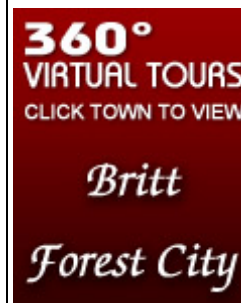
Michael Wellik, a 1970 graduate of Britt High School, has been pretty busy since leaving his hometown and these days he is up to his neck in strawberries at his Middletown, Delaware home.

As owner of Fraises des Bois (French for strawberry of the woods), an on-line seed, plant, fruit and research business, he sells well over 40 varieties, or cultivars, of alpine strawberries and three cultivars of musk strawberries to markets all over the world.

With a bachelor's degree in biology and a master's degree in entomology Wellik entered a PhD in Entomology program in 1977. For two years he conducted research on vegetable and cotton insects until the program ended unexpectedly in 1979. "My only options were to start over or get a job," Wellik joked.

With his background he accepted a job with Pennwalt Agchem, a Philadelphia corporation, which eventually took him to the east coast. He worked for them for 18 years, first as a field development manager for 26 north eastern and mid western states, then as the national field development manager responsible for all pesticide research and development in the United States.

After moving to Philadelphia in 1985, "I



met my wife, Maureen, and there was no turning back," he said.

Wellik left Pennwalt in 1987. His job options, however, were limited. "Part of the problem on the east coast was there were not many positions with entomology and no demand for my training," Wellik explained. So he created his own job.

He and his wife went into the greenhouse business in southern New Jersey.

"There was a high value for crops that would produce food. For strawberries in a greenhouse there was not much being done," he said. "I started growing garden variety strawberries in 1988. I was looking for a crop that could grow in the off-season, which is during the winter. While researching growing strawberries I stumbled on tidbits of information about alpine strawberries. I ordered some seeds and have been involved ever since."

Alpine strawberries, also known as woodland strawberries or wild strawberries, may look like the small strawberries found in backyard gardens but the taste is incomparable.

The strawberry most people are familiar with came from cross-breeding a strawberry native to Chile and one native to Virginia, Wellik explained in an earlier interview with Midstate Living magazine. The plants were bred so the berries could be picked greener, ship better and produce the greatest yield. The result is, "they've bred the flavor out of them," Wellik said.

Alpine strawberries have been cultivated in Europe for centuries and people familiar with these berries eagerly seek them out in the United States.

Fraises des Bois, his online company, became so successful that Wellik said he left his job in 2007, which left him more time to surf the internet for new alpine and musk strawberry varieties and supplies.

Wellik said there are three aspects to what he does. First, he is a collector of *Fragaria vesca* (the genus for strawberries is *Fragaria*. The species for alpinus is *vesca*) varieties. Second, he is a researcher and third, he is a seller of seeds and plants to markets all around the world.

"I am endlessly curious about this strawberry, about what makes these varieties different and why are these berries not more widely cultivated here in the U.S.," Wellik said on his website.

The questions led to the seed business, which in turn led to the plant business. "I offer the most comprehensive list of strawberry seeds available anywhere in the world," he said, "and I grow about half a dozen non-running varieties commercially and sell them by variety name. The big payoff is growing the plants and producing the fruit. The fruit is the ultimate reward."

He doesn't grow his strawberries in a greenhouse anymore. "I do my germination in the garage - 8,000 last winter," Wellik said and to keep up with his plant orders, "I can produce several million (plants) on an acre."

"I grow yellows primarily on my one acre property because the birds don't bother them. They are sweeter than red," Wellik said. He went on to explain that that most of the alpine strawberries don't produce runners, they send out underground stolons, which increase the size of a mound. He either



saves the seeds or divides the plant, which he said is the best way to propagate it. The best thing, besides the taste, of alpines, is they bloom continually, not just once a season.

Along with collecting, growing, selling and researching alpine and musk strawberries Wellik said he is working towards his organic certification.

A lot of things go into potting soil and no two soils are the same. "Organic soil is the key issue," he said, but finding it isn't easy. Being a researcher he said he started testing to come up with his own mix and he has applied for a grant from the Organic Farming Association.

"I started with worm castings. I grow red wigglers and harvest their castings. I make a tea from these castings and use it as a fertilizer," Wellik said.

When asked why the organic certification was important to him since he has already cornered the U.S. market with his rare, and in high demand, strawberries, he said, "Why not go the last step and be fully organic. With the green revolution I want to do everything naturally. And, it's a challenge, which is up my alley - research is what I love to do."

Wanting to share his knowledge and the flavor of these little berries Wellik sent his dad, Frank Wellik of Britt, six yellow fruiting plants of alpines. "But he didn't have much luck this year because of the weather. They didn't make it. I think they drowned in the spring floods," he said. "And, yes, he is using worm castings. He uses castings on his vegetable garden and I got him started making a tea from the castings. My mother thinks the tea is making a huge difference with her house plants."

With so many years of alpine experience under his belt Wellik has been sought out recently by a firm that wants to build greenhouses to produce food for ethnic, including European, markets. "I will launch a horticultural consulting biz soon named "Agrogreen" which specializes in setting up and operating commercial greenhouse production of wild strawberries and I will start publishing results of that research within a year," he said.

Story created Oct 29, 2008 - 11:53:11 CDT.

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