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Field day will explore how to raise giant produce – July 15, Mt. Pleasant

MT. PLEASANT, Iowa — Raising produce of any kind takes time, dedication and hard work. But when the produce in question is mammoth-sized, the work required is even more intensive. Marty and Mary Schnicker can attest to the work – but they are also happy to help others learn what it takes to be successful in this niche.

Marty and Mary, along with their six children, operate Schnicker Specialties near Mt. Pleasant, and have been raising giant produce since 2003. What started as a hobby for the family has turned into a prize-winning feature of their business: The Schnickers now grow some of the largest produce in the state.

Marty holds the current state record for heaviest watermelon at 209 pounds, and he has won three times at the Iowa State Fair for heaviest giant pumpkin. In 2016, the Schnickers took first place at the fair in the largest cabbage, longest gourd, largest squash and largest onion categories. Marty also holds many other records for jumbo produce, including kohlrabi, tomatoes and cantaloupes.

The Schnickers will share their experience raising giant produce – as well as regular-sized heirloom produce to sell at farmers markets – at a Practical Farmers of Iowa field day they are hosting on **Saturday, July 15, from 2 to 4 p.m., near Mt. Pleasant** (1673 Iowa Ave., about 8 miles north of town). The event – “Vegetables: Growing Giants for the Fair . . . and ‘Regular’ Ones, Too” – is free to attend and will include a light snack following the field day. The field day is sponsored by Iowa Farmers Union.

Marty and Mary will discuss the intensive management required for growing giant vegetables, which can gain up to 50 pounds a day, and lead a tour through their “giant” high tunnel. They will also lead a tour of their outdoor fruit and vegetable beds, offer production and management tips, and answer questions. Topics covered will include nutrient testing and management; cover crops and soil preparation; and regular-sized vegetable production for farmers markets.

“Visitors will learn how to optimize space to grow award-winning giant produce,” says Marty, who is the former president of the Henry County Master Gardeners. “We will discuss pruning, how to enhance soil, avoid disease using cover crops and the advantages of using a high tunnel for early-season growth.”

The Schnicker family has been featured in the book “Blue Ribbon Vegetable Gardening: The Secrets to Growing the Biggest and Best Prizewinning Produce,” and in “Iowa Gardener” magazine.

Directions from U.S. 218: Travel 7 miles north of Mount Pleasant, then head west on 170th Street. In 1 mile, turn right (north) onto Iowa Avenue (the first gravel road headed north). The house is on the left (west) side in 0.3 mile (it’s the only house on the road).

Practical Farmers’ 2017 field days are supported by several sustaining and major sponsors, including: Ag Ventures Alliance; Albert Lea Seed; Center for Rural Affairs; Fertrell; Gandy Cover Crop Seeders; Grain Millers, Inc.; Iowa Beef Center; Iowa Environmental Council; Iowa State University Department of Agronomy; Iowa Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE); ISU Extension and Outreach; La Crosse Forage and Turf Seed; Lemken; Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture; MOSA Organic Certification; Natural Resources Defense Council; Organic Valley / Organic Prairie; Riverside Feeds, LLC; The Scoular Company; Trees Forever; Unilever; University of Iowa College of

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