

Establishment of the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Center (100 acres) - 1979

In 1965, Charles D. Kesner became the District Extension Horticulture Agent for Northwest Michigan. Kesner had earned his Ph. D. degree working with Dr. Ries on herbicide action, and was a well-respected source of information for fruit growers in the Traverse City area. Kesner and other MSU researchers conducted experiments with growth regulators and herbicides, trickle irrigation, training and pruning systems, harvest mechanization, and pest control. The growers were so supportive of this work that they decided that he needed an experiment station, rather than being confined to testing chemicals and methods on growers' farms. This led to the establishment of the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Station on the Leelanau Peninsula.

The first step toward the establishment of this Station was taken when the Grand Traverse Fruit Growers Council, representing fruit growers in Grand Traverse County, passed a resolution favoring the creation of such a station, and this was supported by Dean James Anderson of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and Sylvan Wittwer, Director of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station at MSU. The purpose of this station was to conduct research mainly on cherries, the primary fruit crop in the area, but also on strawberry, brambles and other tree fruits with potential for northwest Michigan. A local non-profit foundation, the Northwest Michigan Horticultural Research Foundation, representing growers in Manistee, Benzie, Leelanau, Grand Traverse and Antrim Counties, was formed in March, 1978, and a Board of Directors with Robert L. Underwood as Chairman was elected. The Foundation subsequently raised \$350,000 in cash and pledges from fruit growers, processors, machinery dealers, irrigation companies, financial institutions, and others with ties to the fruit industry, for the purchase of land, buildings and equipment. An additional \$ 150,000 was donated in cash and in-kind items over the next 2 years.

In November 1978, an 80-acre farm on County Road 633 in SE Leelanau County, 8 miles from Traverse City, was purchased by the Foundation for \$ 165,000. Horticulture Department Chair Kelly and Underwood signed an agreement at that time establishing a working relationship between the Foundation and MSU whereby the farm was leased to MSU for a nominal sum, and MSU became responsible for research and an educational program at the station. Ground was broken for an office and storage facility on May 5, 1979, and an openhouse in September of that year marked the official start of operations. Kesner was named coordinator, as part of his duties as District Extension Agent and Adjunct Professor. On his retirement in 1991, James Nugent became coordinator.

The foundation purchased an additional 20 acres in 1985, and the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station which was added to the lease with MSU. The Michigan Agricultural Research Station is responsible for all operational costs, the Foundation for capital improvements. Most of the current work is with cherries, but additional research is conducted with other tree and small fruits.