



JOHN VAN NOSTRAND/Colby Free Press

Rathé Kogl, 5, climbed the playground equipment Tuesday during student orientation at Colby's Heartland Christian School. Classes for the school began Thursday. Heartland's preschool begins Monday.

Wisconsin farmers testing tobacco plants

STOUGHTON, Wis. (AP) — David Olson peers at a 16-acre plot of tobacco on his southern Wisconsin farm and sees a healthy crop ready for harvest in a few weeks. He also sees an opportunity.

Olson, who has farmed tobacco since 1973, grows a type of Wisconsin tobacco used for chewing, but he and other local farmers have started tinkering with growing burley, the primary type of tobacco in cigarettes.

"It could be an opportunity for some people to make money," Olson said. "But they're so used to raising Wisconsin tobacco, it's a change for them."

Farmers nationwide significantly cut back growing burley when Congress passed the \$10.1 billion tobacco buyout in 2004. That replaced the industry's Depression-era production and price controls with a free-market system, allowing farmers like Olson to grow new tobacco.

The nation's biggest cigarette manufacturer, Philip Morris USA, is interested. The company won't disclose exactly how many acres of burley are being tested in Wisconsin or how much it is investing in the effort, but at least four counties are involved.

"We think the climate and soil conditions may be beneficial for growing burley," Philip Morris spokesman Bill Phelps said.

Phelps said the company is looking to "ensure we have a stable supply of burley tobacco. Now that tobacco growing has moved to this free market system, the market is

evolving. We want to evolve with it."

With less than 2,000 acres of two types of Wisconsin tobacco grown across the state, any burley would be a niche market in Wisconsin. Kentucky leads the nation in burley production, with about 106,000 acres harvested in 2004, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

There are factors in local farmers' favor in Wisconsin, even though tobacco accounts for 0.1 percent of

the more than \$5.6 billion agriculture industry in Wisconsin, according to the agricultural statistics service.

Initial testing from tobacco companies has found that types of tobacco grown in Wisconsin have low amounts of nitrosamine, a precursor to cancer-causing carcinogens, said David Fischer, University of Wisconsin Extension's Dane County crops and soils agent.

That could translate to the burley crop, and the climate of longer,

cooler sunny days in the summer also bodes well for the plant. Fischer said, "The real opportunity here is to diversify the tobacco production in Wisconsin."

Olson, 53, tested burley last year, and said the rich brown leaves are exactly what tobacco companies like Philip Morris want.

"They like to go with people who know how to raise tobacco," Olson said. "Philip Morris is putting a lot of money into this and they are hoping it goes well."



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Bring on tomatoes

BOSTON (AP) — Three years ago, Peter MacArthur set out to grow the best tomato in the state.

His father-in-law, the mentor who taught him everything he knows about farming, had died, and he'd heard a minister talk about the need to have a goal in life: MacArthur decided to focus on tomatoes.

A year later, his commitment started to pay off. He won first place in the field tomato category of the Massachusetts Tomato Contest and Festival. On Monday, the Holliston farmer stood nervously just outside the cordoned judging area in Boston's City Hall Plaza and hoped for another win.

"I heard the judges saying it was the best-tasting tomato," MacArthur said.

With clipboards in one hand and toothpick in the other, 20 judges from the food industry walked up and down three rows of tables sampling the best tomatoes the state had to offer.

Judges looked for best flavor, a balance of acidity and sweetness, firmness or "slicing quality," ideal color, and symmetrical shape.

The tomato contest included four categories: cherry tomatoes, field or "slicing tomatoes," heaviest tomato and heirloom tomatoes — or non-

hybrid, much older varieties.

Gail Perrin wrinkled her face as she tasted a cherry tomato she determined was overly acidic.

"They all looked beautiful, but very few tasted like tomatoes," said Perrin, a retired food editor, who wore plastic tomato earrings.

This year's contest drew just over 100 entries from all around the state, according to coordinator Nat Arena, a member of the New England Vegetable and Berry Growers Association. Arena said the number was slightly fewer than previous years, due to this year's record rains, which damaged many tomato crops.

Marie Hills, owner of Kimball Fruit Farm in Pepperell, said she and her husband Carl beat the rain by buying a machine to raise their tomato beds. The heavy rain ran down aisles between the raised beds instead of drenching and splitting the fruit.


"My family is passionate about tomatoes," said Hills, whose farm produced the 3.3-pound reddish-pink Aussie that was awarded the heaviest in the competition.

The 22nd annual contest kicked off Massachusetts Farmers' Market Week, a celebration of the more than 100 farmers' markets throughout the state.

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