Louisburg FFA shines at nationals



Members of the Louisburg High School FFA who competed at nationals are (front row, from left) Kaitlyn Gaza, Ellie Katzer, Abigail Tucker, Megan Roy, Paige Buffington, Bryn O'Meara; (back row) Megan Eberhart, Gracie Key, Morgan Strumillo, Holly Turner and Madelynn Yalowitz.

The Louisburg High School Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter ventured its way to Louisville, Ky., in the final week of October for the 88th National FFA Convention and Expo to compete against some of the nation's top agriculture teams.

As it turned out, Louisburg more than held its own.

Louisburg sent its three state championship teams from last spring to compete at the convention and they came home with a lot of hardware to show for it – including its first individual national champion.

Junior Madelynn Yalowitz made Louisburg history as she won the individual national title in Food Science and Technology. Yalowitz, along with Paige Buffington, Bryn O'Meara and Holly Turner, also finished runner-up in the team standings.

The Nursery and Landscape and Floriculture teams also ended

its competition strong. Megan Roy, Sara Guetterman, Gracie Key and Morgan Strumillo finished third in the Nursery and Landscape Career Development Event (CDE).

Abigail Tucker, Ellie Katzer, Kaitlyn Gaza and Megan Eberhart came in 13th in the Floriculture CDE.



(From left) Bryn O'Meara, Madelynn Yalowitz, Paige Buffington and Holly Turner pose with their National FFA Gold Team Award in Food Science and Technology.

"I am really proud of these students," Louisburg adviser Jim Morgan said. "They worked really hard. We spent many hours during the summer, after school and on weekends studying the material. They all set the goal to reach the gold division and they accomplished that goal."

A goal of an individual national championship wasn't even on Yalowitz's radar. She racked up a score of 174 to win by eight points, as she edged out one of her own teammates for the honor.



(From left) Megan Roy, Gracie Key and Morgan Strumillo pose with their National FFA Gold Team Award in Nursery and Landscape.

Buffington was second in the nation with 166 points and O'Meara came in fifth with 156.5. The three competitors also earned gold emblems, while Turner finished with a bronze emblem.

"I felt pretty confident going in but I wasn't' thinking about getting first at all," Yalowitz said. "I just wanted to get in the gold division. Then when they called my name and told me I won it was just a shock. It was definitely an awesome feeling though.

"As a team, I think we surprised ourselves by how well we did. It was nice to see that all that hard work and studying really paid off."

The Food Science and Technology CDE had the team participate in a timed product development project and each individual participated in practicums involving food sensory, safety, sanitation and a written exam.

"We did tons of tests, about two binders full, that we did the months between state and nationals to prepare," Yalowitz said. "We did a lot of practice team activities where we made a food

product and do every aspect of it. We practiced aromas, we did taste tests and triangle tests. It was a lot of work."

Roy, the president of the Louisburg FFA chapter, led the Nursery and Landscape team with a sixth-place overall finish with 507 points. Roy, Guetterman, Key and Strumillo all earned gold emblems.

In the team standings, Louisburg racked up 1,663.4 points to take third place and also finished in the gold division.

The Nursery and Landscape CDE had teams complete a general knowledge exam testing horticultural principles and each participant had to complete practicums involving six different areas.

"We did really well," Roy said. "We did a lot better than we expected to, that is for sure. It was a lot fun.



(From left) Megan Eberhart, Ellie Katzer, Abigail Tucker and Kaitlyn Gaza pose with their National FFA Gold Team Award in the Floriculture division.

"It was a lot easier transferring for Floriculture to Nursery because a lot of the plants overlap. We identified plants and trees constantly. To prepare, we made several trips to Suburban Lawn and Garden, Grass Pad and we learned how to lay

sod. We also had to identify plants that we go on certain landscapes, so it was pretty tough."

In the Floriculture CDE, Tucker, Katzer, Gaza and Eberhart recorded 4,056 points to come in 13th and finished in the gold division. Individually, Tucker and Katzer each came away with gold embers, while Gaza and Eberhart received silver emblems.

"We took a lot of practice tests," Tucker said. "We had a list of 124 plants that we had to ID and then math problem solving and that wasn't fun. We studied plant disorders and we had to prepare for all sorts of different things in the competition because we didn't know how it was going to go. Over the summer we went to Johnson County Community College and took a short course on floral design and that helped a lot."

Students from all three teams put in a lot of work since their state title last year. Some of the students put in more than 350 hours of work over the summer and into the school year preparing for nationals.

"It was definitely a lot of work, and it involved a lot of studying, even at the convention," Tucker said. "I didn't like it much at the time, but looking back it was so worth it. I am so glad I did it and I had a great time."