WL 507

West Virginia University
EXTENSION SERVICE

West Virginia Fairs and Festivals

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From the basic need to demonstrate and spread agricultural knowledge, West Virginia fairs and festivals have evolved into a celebration of fun, food, and holiday treats.

Traditional beginnings and farming roots

Like many of the foundations of modern society, fairs and festivals stem from our farming roots. Since the early 19th century, Americans have been gathering for organized fairs to learn about farm equipment and show off their produce and livestock. The handiwork of the farm women was displayed through sewing, home arts, and baked or canned goods. The events gathered neighbors, friends, and relatives far and wide to share information and instill local traditions.

Records show the State Fair of West Virginia developed from earlier events throughout Greenbrier County. The first Greenbrier Valley Fair was founded March 19, 1921, by the Shorthorn Association. The fair was held in what is now known as Fairlea, West Virginia.

The Mountain State Forest Festival, which started in 1930, is recognized as the oldest festival in West Virginia. The concept of the Forest Festival started after locals expressed interest in organizing a homecoming event. One of the most unique traditions is the coronation of Queen Silvia. The queen and all 40 princesses in her court must be West Virginians who live outside of Randolph County.

Celebrate the fruits of labor

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- One of the oldest festivals in the state is the Strawberry Festival held the third week of May in Buckhannon, West Virginia. The festival

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began in 1936, as a way to promote the growth and sale of strawberries in the area.

- In 1938, Preston County's annual Buckwheat Festival began. It occurs the last weekend of September in Kingwood. Buckwheat was chosen as the focus of an end-of-harvest homecoming, because the grain was hoped to spur agricultural economic growth during the Depression. Even though the Buckwheat Festival now includes carnival rides, as opposed to sack races and husband-calling contests, the festival has always included king and queen contests, crop exhibits, and serving buckwheat cakes and sausage.
- Not all the festivals of fruits and vegetables commemorate the harvest in its edible form. In 1992, Ric Griffith turned his home in Kenova into an attraction. Each year volunteers carve and display jack-o-lanterns around his house. In 2005, Griffith had more than 3,000 of them – lining his porch, covering his roof, and many other parts of his Victorian home. This magical display is lit up 24 hours a day around Halloween.

Heritage and ethnicity bring people together

West Virginia has several festivals that recognize its own distinct heritage with the various ethnic groups that have claimed the state as their home. The Hatfield and McCoy Festival is a one-day event that commemorates the famous feud. The festival is held every June and features a marathon, free entertainment, ATV rides, and site tours. The goal of the West Virginia Black Heritage Festival is to celebrate the African-American experience and the milestones made since the Emancipation Proclamation. This family-friendly festival started in 1990 and is held every Labor Day weekend in Clarksburg.

The state is also home to various ethnic festivals that celebrate food, culture, and music from Europe and the Middle East. Italian festivals lead the way with four that are held in Wheeling, Clarksburg, Fairmont, and Bluefield. The state also boasts two festivals that celebrate Scottish and Irish culture. The Scottish and Celtic Heritage Festival is a one-day event held in Parkersburg every April, whereas the Scottish Festival and Celtic Gathering is a three-day event held every May in Bridgeport. Both festivals feature Scottish and Irish dancing, music, bagpipes, and other Celtic activities.

Two lesser known festivals include the St. Greek Festival in Huntington and the Mahrajan – a Lebanese festival held in Wheeling. The St. Greek Festival is a three-day event that offers visitors a chance to experience Greek music, dance, and traditional food and drinks. The Mahrajan is a one-day fundraising event for the state's only Maronite Catholic Church. The festival started in 1933 and features traditional Lebanese food, along with Middle-Eastern music and dance performances.

Finally, Multifest celebrates the state's diversity through art, music, education, cultural programs, and cuisine. This event, held in early August at the State Capitol, features Latin and jazz music, R&B, gospel, Italian heritage presentations, and Eastern Indian dancers.

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