Plenty of pumpkins to go around this Halloween

Story by Theopolis Waters
Photos by Mary Ann Walter

2016 promises to be a pumpkin-palooza

Halloween enthusiasts need not take fright over the state of this year’s U.S. pumpkin crop. Supplies of the orange-yellow fruit are much more plentiful than last year, easing concerns of a possible shortage for carving jack-o’-lanterns and buying filling for pumpkin pies.

U.S. store supplies of canned pumpkin have almost overcome the effects of last year’s shortage, which was caused by damage to crops from heavy rains in parts of the Midwest.

“We’re rebuilding our inventory right now and as soon as we have enough pumpkin canned we’ll begin releasing the 2016 Libby’s pumpkin to our retail partners,” said Roz O’Hearn, spokeswoman for Libby’s, supplier of more than
80% of U.S. canned pumpkin. “So by end
of the month, the 2015 shortage will be
behind us.”

For Illinois farmer Mark Berg, who grows
roughly 120 acres of pumpkins for Libby’s,
2016 promises to be a pumpkin-paloo-
za. Berg has just wrapped up his harvest
ahead of schedule, averaging 30 tons of
pumpkins per acre, well above his histor-
ical average of 25 tons and worth about
$500 per acre.

Last year, he harvested just two to three
tons per acre and revenue fell short of
$100 per acre. “You have to take the good
with the bad. This year we’re fortunate,”
said Berg, attributing his good fortune to
sufficient rains and above-average heat this
summer. Last year’s U.S. pumpkin harvest
totaled 754 million pounds valued at $90
million, the smallest crop since the U.S.
Department of Agriculture began tracking
the sector in 2000.

Illinois, which typically produces about
90% of the United States’ canned or pro-
cessed pumpkins, last year harvested only
318 million pounds of pumpkin worth $12
million, according to USDA.

University of Illinois plant pathologist
Mohammad Babadoost said this year,
Illinois’ average pumpkin yields could be
above 22 tons per acre.

Nonetheless, with the harvest possibly
stretching into November and vulnerable
to weather, Babadoost remains cautious
after heavy rains in 2015 spawned various
diseases that robbed Illinois producers of
nearly half their expected yield.

Added Libby’s spokeswoman O’Hearn,
“So far, we appear to be in much better
shape than we were in 2015.” Harvesting
for Libby’s, a unit of Swiss-based Nestle
SA, started last month.