

SYMBOLICALLY SPEAKING

From crawfish to cooking pots, states have a taste for adopting some odd mascots.

BY JANNA GOODWIN

Got milk? At least 17 states do—as their official state beverage or drink.

Every state in the nation has official designations, with Massachusetts a clear victor with 44. By contrast, Iowa has only eight. The most common symbol is a state flower. All 50 states recognize some type of blossom. Some of the more unusual symbols are a state star (Delaware), state photograph (Minnesota) and state coin (Wyoming).

Many state symbols are adopted thanks to civic participation: A third-grade social studies class that lobbies for a state dinosaur, or a concerned citizen who is interested in protecting an aspect of a state's unique heritage.

They contact a legislator, who proposes a bill or resolution. In Colorado, for example, Skyline Vista Elementary School fifth-graders lobbied Representative Jennifer Veiga for a state reptile and were rewarded in mid-March when Governor Bill Ritter signed House Bill 1017, which deemed the Western Painted Turtle the official state reptile.

In 2002, 9-year-old Will Smith wanted to make walking Maryland's official state exercise. He enlisted Delegate William A. Bronrott to champion the concept, and, nearly six years later and with extensive lobbying from the young man, Senate Bill 437 formally crowned walking as the state's cardiovascular activity.

Some lawmakers think such legislation is a waste of time and taxpayer money. Others, however, see it as a great way to encourage citizen involvement.

"There's definitely a perception that it's not as important as everything else we do down

here, on education and health care and so many other things," says Maryland Delegate Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio, who introduced a bill this year to designate soybeans the state crop at the urging of fifth-grade school children.

"While I would not typically introduce a bill such as that," says Haddaway-Riccio, "I think it is important to engage young people in the political process. The students did an excellent job of presenting me with letters and reports on why we should have this state designation. They even came to Annapolis and testified before the House Health and Government Operations Committee—an experience many adults never have. They were also very excited to see their picture in the *Baltimore Sun* the next day."

Whether such bills are just quirky deviations from the serious business of lawmaking or demonstrations of civic participation, here are 10 of the more unusual things that have received official state blessings.

LOUISIANA



State crustacean: Crawfish

In 1983, Senator Elwyn J. Nicholson took the lead in designating the crawfish the state crustacean. According to *Crawfish.org*, Louisiana leads the nation in crawfish farming and produces more than 90 percent of the domestic crop. The same bill also elevated the alligator to state reptile.

MARYLAND



State sport: Jousting

Jousting became Maryland's official sport in 1962. Jousting tournaments have been common in the state since colonial times, and competitions are regularly held from May to October. Maryland was the first state to adopt an official sport.

MASSACHUSETTS



State bean: Baked Navy Bean

In 1993, a Dover third-grade class proposed, and Senator Cheryl A. Jacques sponsored, a bill making the baked navy bean the official state bean. The navy bean is the original bean in the venerable Boston Baked Bean recipe.

Janna Goodwin covers state government issues for NCSL. Research for this story was provided by legislative librarians in Louisiana, Massachusetts and Nebraska.

MISSISSIPPI



State toy: Teddy Bear

The Legislature crowned the Teddy bear the official state toy of Mississippi in 2003. Teddy bears became popular after President Theodore Roosevelt, on a bear hunt in Onward, Miss., refused to shoot an injured bear, saying it would be unsportsmanlike. A toy shop owner from New York wrote the president asking if he could name the stuffed toy bears in his shop "Teddy's Bears." The president agreed, and hence the name.

NEBRASKA



State soft drink: Kool-Aid

In Nebraska, legislative approval is not required to designate official state symbols; governors can make such declarations. In 1998, Governor Ben Nelson declared Kool-Aid to be the official state soft drink. The fruity flavored drink mix was developed in Hastings, Neb., in 1927 by Edwin E. Perkins, founder and president of the Perkins Products Company.

NEVADA



State artifact: Tule Duck Decoy

A Tule Duck decoy was created almost 2,000 years ago and was discovered by archeologists in 1924 during an excavation at Lovelock Cave, Nev. The decoys are made from bundles of bullrush (tule) stems bound together and shaped to resemble a duck. It was chosen as the state artifact in 1995.

OKLAHOMA



State cartoon character: Gusty

Gusty became Oklahoma's state cartoon character in 2005. It was an animated gust of wind created for a Muskogee television station in 1954. Gusty served as a reporter who forecast the weather and appeared on the news until 1989. Oklahoma is the only state that honors an animated creature.

TEXAS



State cooking pot: (Cast-Iron) Dutch Oven

Texas designated the cast-iron Dutch oven as its state cooking vessel in 2005. A basic necessity for early pioneers, these cast iron pots were among the most cherished of items for early Texans. In Utah, the state cooking pot is also a Dutch oven, but the cast-iron variety is not specified.

STATES HAVE LOTS OF COMPANY

Here are some other facts about state symbols:



Oklahoma and Texas designate the Mexican free-tailed bat as the state flying mammal.



Four states have some variety of onion as their official vegetable, three list potato varieties, and two designate tomatoes.



Eight states have an official dog, whereas only three have an official cat.



Twenty-four list square-dancing as their official dance.



Three states have a state snack (Texas, tortilla chips and salsa; South Carolina, boiled peanuts; Illinois, popcorn).



All states except Kansas, New Jersey, North Dakota, Pennsylvania and Virginia have some sort of state rock, mineral or gemstone.



New Jersey and New York are the only states without an official song. New Mexico even has an official Spanish-language song.

UTAH



State astronomical symbol and centennial star: Beehive Cluster and Dubhe

In 1996, Utah recognized two celestial bodies. The Beehive Cluster—a faint array of stars located in the constellation of Cancer the Crab—was denoted as its state astronomical symbol. The Dubhe—shining at the front of the bowl of the Big Dipper—was deemed the state centennial star because light emitted takes 100 years to reach Earth, and 1996 (the year the star was christened) was Utah’s centennial. Utah is not the only state to recognize a lone luminary. In 2000, the Delaware Diamond—located in the constellation Ursa Major (the Great Bear)—became the official state star of Delaware.

VERMONT



State flavor: Maple

In 1994, maple became Vermont’s state flavor. Vermont produces roughly twice as much syrup as any other state—somewhere between 350,000 and 500,000 gallons each year.

 **CHECK OUT:** Missouri’s state grape, Minnesota’s state photographs and many more state symbols at www.ncsl.org/magazine.