FARM WALK HIGHLIGHTS

Gleanings From the Farm Walks Program (Spring 2015)

"UTILIZING COMPOST AND VERMICULTURE TO BUILD SOIL FERTILITY—HANDS-ON!" SPENCER FARM / March 30, 2015

For the first Farm Walk of the 2015 season, Tilth Producers and the WSU Small Farms Team visited Spencer Farm in Malaga, WA (southeast of Wenatchee). The Farm Walk focused on this certified organic farm's use of compost as their main source of fertility. In addition to the practical knowledge shared by Bruce and Grace Spencer, owners of Spencer Farm, in attendance was David Granatstein from WSU Tree Fruit Research and Extension Center who has decades of experience researching organic agriculture and fertility in orchard soils.

Bruce Spencer began by explaining how he's built the soil fertility of his six acres over the past 38 years. Bruce has always practiced organic methods of production and was one of the first farms to become certified in 1987. After 20 years of purchasing inputs for his soil, Bruce calculated that he had spent nearly $250,000. So he invested in making his own compost on the farm. The two basic ingredients of his compost are wood chips from the county and steer manure from a neighboring farm. Bruce also adds in crop residues and utilizes biodynamic inoculants. He had participants hold a handful of soil to smell and feel as he spoke about the importance of microbial populations in healthy soil.

Bruce noted that managing the fertility of annuals versus perennials could not be more different. Much can be learned about soil management in one season with annuals such as vegetable crops, whereas with fruit trees it can take years to understand what is occurring within the soil. Bruce concluded that it is best to consult fellow fruit growers and current research for guidance with orchard soil management practices as there isn't a lot of opportunity to get it right.

Bruce Spencer explains his methods for observing the tilth of his soil, Spencer Farms, Malaga. *Photo credit: Angela Anegon*

EXTENDED WEB VERSIONS

To download Farm Walk booklets and access complete summaries, please visit tilthproducers.org

A few years ago, Bruce utilized a NRCS-EQIP grant to build a high tunnel for growing fruit trees. This fruit ripens a month to two months earlier than trees out in the field, allowing him some fruit to market earlier. To pollinate these trees, Bruce purchases a bumble bee hive which is set in the middle of the high tunnel. Honey bees don't work as well under plastic.

Bruce and Grace use vermiculture to clean their potting soil mix, which allows them to reuse it within the season and from year to year. The red wigglers eat the root balls and other organic matter left behind, and add their nutrient rich castings. The Spencers also vermicompost food scraps from their home and commercial kitchens (where Bruce makes fruit wines). Overall, Spencer Farm was a great example of how an organic farm can maintain soil fertility, for both annuals and perennials, utilizing compost.

This Farm Walk is supported in part by WSDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program and by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant # 2012-49400-19575.

"MULTI-SPECIES ROTATIONAL GRAZING AT A FAMILY FARMSTEAD" GREEN BOW FARM / April 27, 2015

Christina Miller and Matthew Cox, farmer/owners of Green Bow Farm in Ellensburg, welcomed sixteen fellow farmers and agricultural professionals to learn about multi-species rotational grazing and farm marketing. Located northwest of Ellensburg, Christina and Matthew moved to their property in 2011. They grow chickens (layers and broilers), Icelandic sheep (fiber and lamb), beef cattle (Scottish highlanders and sometimes Jersey steers), turkeys (for Thanksgiving sales), and ducks. All of these livestock are pasture-based and are often kept in the same pasture—Green Bow has a total of three that the animals rotate through. The sheep browse for broadleaves and other forbs in pasture, making them a good companion to the cows which prefer the grasses.

The cows Green Bow raises are Scottish Highlanders. Matthew shared that while they may be smaller, with lower hanging weights, the meat has a great taste. All of Green Bow's animals are 100% grass-fed and finished. Matthew uses apple cider vinegar in their stock water to help control parasites in all the livestock (at a rate of one tablespoon per gallon).

When they first purchased the farm, the pastures were in relatively bad shape. Matthew began irrigating the fields which

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led to drastic improvements (the farm site only receives nine inches of annual rainfall). Green Bow also produces their own compost, used to make compost tea which is then injected into the irrigation system. A few different NRCS-EQIP grants and small grants through the conservation district helped build fences and purchase irrigation systems.

As far as marketing, Green Bow sells at the Ellensburg Farmers Market and the West Seattle Farmers Market. Recently, they began a meat CSA and an online store for their fiber products. Both Christina and Matthew find it important to educate customers, both on their products and the importance of supporting small farms, which they do through social media. Green Bow believes in producing as many products as they can from one venture—an idea that has served them well so far.

In the future, Green Bow would like to grow herbs to make value-added spice rubs and other products to complement their meats. Since Matthew and Christina don't have employees or interns, their expansions are mindful of what can be handled while still maintaining their family life. All-in-all, this family farmstead is an excellent example of a passion for food and for animals translated into a sustainable livelihood.

This Farm Walk is supported by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, USDA, Grant # 2012-49400-19575. For more resources and programs for beginning farmers and ranchers please visit www.Start2Farm.gov

"ORGANIC FARMING & POLLINATORS: ASSESSING POLLINATORS ON YOUR ORGANIC FARM" WOBBLY CART FARM / May 18, 2015

More than forty farmers and community members gathered near Rochester at Wobbly Cart Farm to learn from the WSU Native Pollinator Project about assessing pollinators in an organic farming system. Wobbly Cart Farm is a certified organic vegetable farm, owned and operated by Asha McElfresh and Joseph Gabiou. The farm is in its eleventh year of production, and is in the midst of its second year working with the project. Elias (Eli) Bloom and Rachel Olsson (WSU graduate students), along with Bob Redmond of The Common Acre, presented a wonderful Farm Walk on identifying, assessing, and managing native pollinators.

Attendees split into groups and rotated through three field stations. At the first station, Rachel explained the different morphological features of the bees, wasps, flies, butterflies, moths, bugs, and beetles that may provide pollinator services in the field. She shared specimens to look at under microscopes and hand-lenses—truly fascinating!

The second station was led by Bob, who explained the different techniques for catching and trapping pollinators in order to observe them and determine their approximate numbers. Bob also spoke about the work that non-profit The Common Acre is doing to preserve and create pollinator habitat as well as educate the public on the significance of pollinators.

The third station was with Eli, who led an active observation of pollinators. It was the perfect day to observe pollinators. Eli explained that sunny, warm (above 70 degrees) and low wind (<5 mph) are ideal conditions for pollinator activity. Eli recommended observing the same spot (with active blooming flowers) every week, recording the number and types of pollinators.

Spreading the word about pollinator services within our agricultural and other ecosystems is as needed as monitoring and assessing the health of these amazing organisms. Advocate for organic farming, the planting of pollinator habitats, and the continued research and education around assessing and managing native pollinator health.

To view the full field guide created by Eli Bloom, access the Farm Walk booklet at tilthproducers.org/programs/farm-walk/farm-walk-booklets/.

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"COVER CROPPING ON A DIVERSIFIED VEGETABLE FARM, PLUS SOIL BLOCKING HANDS-ON" LET US FARM / June 1, 2015

It was a rainy day near Oakville as twenty-six farmers and farm interns gathered at Let Us Farm to learn about cover cropping in an organic vegetable cropping system and engage in a hands-on soil blocking opportunity. Farmer-owners Steve Hallstrom and Cecelia Boulais have been farming for over 20 years and were eager to

share how they manage their 88-acre farm. Soil scientist Doug Collins of the WSU Small Farms Program also presented about the use of cover crops for fertility with his graduate student, David Sullivan, and intern, Holly.

For the past nine years, Let Us Farm has relied solely on cover crops to build the tilth of their soil. Steve explained that they use both winter and summer cover crops to provide all of their nitrogen and other plant nutrient needs. They do use organic fertilizers in their soil mixes for starting plants in the greenhouse. Amendments include green sand, blood meal, rock phosphate, and lime. Let Us Farm also greatly relies on a clever crop rotation to avoid diseases and nutritional problems.

Steve and Cecelia have a robust internship program, and this season they are hosting three: Alex Drake, Rachel LaManna, Aaron Sexton. Their interns play a part in all aspects of production, as Steve is keen

Steve Hallstrom talks crop rotation, Let Us Farm, Oakville.

Photo credit: Angela Anegon

on training the next generation of farmers. Aaron led a demonstration on soil blocking and helped participants practice making soil blocks—harder than it looks. Consistency is key when it comes to successful soil blocking because if they are too hard, the plants have a difficult time rooting; too soft, and they fall apart. Let Us Farm exclusively uses soil blocks to start seedlings, which are grown on heated benches in the greenhouse.

The group stopped at several different cover-cropped parcels, where Doug, David, and Holly demonstrated how to estimate plant-available nitrogen. This is done by cutting a representative sample of about one square meter within the cover crop stand, and separating out the different species present. Nitrogen calculators can then be used to estimate the pounds-per-acre of nitrogen provided by the cover crop. The other option is to send the vegetation collected into a lab to determine the nutrients provided. Cover crop mixes that Let Us Farm uses often involve both a grain (such as rye or wheat) and a legume (such as Austrian winter pea). The grain suppresses weeds and disease, and also provides a structure for the legume to grow.

During the walk, Steve and Cecelia shared their seed saving efforts and spoke about their biggest pest issue, the Western spotted cucumber beetle. Participants were also able to test drive some of Steve's unique tractors. Even through the rain, it was easy to see Steve and Cecelia's passion for caring for their land, for growing delicious food, and for training the next generation of farmers.

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