

In November 2015 at the annual conference in Spokane, WA, Tilth Producers members and organic farmers Terry and Dick Carkner were honored respectively as Farmer of the Year and Advocate of the Year.

These awards acknowledge the Carkners years of dedication to preserving farmland both through policy work and organic farming practices.



Tilth Producers Education Coordinator Angela Anegon chats with Terry and Dick Carkner at their new farmstead in Ellensburg, WA, in the lovely Kittitas Valley. The Carkners recently relocated from their long-standing Puyallup location to a new farm east of the mountains.

TILTH PRODUCERS (Q): How did you get your start farming?

TERRY CARKNER: Well, after Dick finished his Ph.D. in North Dakota, we wanted to move to a farm in the Northwest, and he wanted a raspberry farm. We found one near Tacoma.

DICK CARKNER: At first, we followed the WSU production guides—spraying chemicals that required me to put on a Tyvek suit and have everyone go inside. One day I remember seeing a pheasant run through the rows of raspberries ahead of me. When I came back around the other way, I saw the pheasant, writhing on the ground, dying. At that moment I knew this wasn't right, and we had to figure out another way. So we turned to organic methods.

TERRY: It wasn't easy at first. We sought out advice from Cascadian Home Farm who were looking for more organic berries, and Tony Maskal was a mentor to us. He helped us understand the soil microbiology and what we need to do to grow healthy plants organically. The encouragement he provided was also very helpful.

Q: What motivated you to farm and to advocate?

TERRY: We wanted a place to raise our kids and a farm is a great place for that.

DICK: Our kids grew up learning practical skills as well as farm skills. Our youngest could sell anything! Of course they were involved with school and sports, but the farm was a great place to raise children. It should be a big appeal to anyone with a family looking to start a farm.

As far as the advocacy, I started when a group of neighbors organized over a tribal land settlement, which turned into almost a 10 year process. This got me involved on a regular basis with the county, state, and even federal government. I learned the about the process and that was important. I was also involved with the Raspberry Commission.

Q: What advice would you give a beginning farmer? To a beginning advocate?

TERRY: It's okay to have an off-farm job. In fact, I highly recommend it because the source of income is necessary in the beginning. It's also important to meet the needs of the customer. We changed a lot over the past 30 years and adapted ourselves to what our customers wanted instead of sitting back and complaining about them. It's also important to find a good apprenticeship for hands-on learning—it's the best way to learn how to farm.

DICK: A farmer has to be involved [in advocacy] otherwise, someone else will make decisions for them. It begins with opening up opportunities for yourself. Join a board of directors, learn how to work with other players and build up a network of people. This way when there is a critical decision on the table you are informed and know the right people to help get the work done and the result you want. You aren't going to win all the time but you have to be persistent. Every experience is a learning opportunity that sets you up to position yourself to win in the next issue that comes up. It's also important to use your time efficiently when advocating.

TERRY: The challenge is always how to get involved when you're busy with the farm. I'd always look at Dick and say "You're going to another meeting!? I guess I'll stay home and farm." But take the time to learn everything you can about policy issues.

Q: What's the next step for you and your involvement in farm advocacy and organic farming?

DICK: I still have connections back in Pierce County and have helped advise and prime the next generation of farmer advocates there within our Friends of Family Farmers and county ag advisory board. They are some very young and enthusiastic farmers who are doing great work. The big picture dream is to float a bond issue that preserves farmland into perpetuity.

TERRY: Having recently moved to Ellensburg, we are exploring ways to get involved with growers here. We've already started meeting monthly with farmers in the area. We want to help encourage people in Ellensburg to eat local and support organic. There is also a movement towards farm-to-school here which we want to support. And I can't give up farming entirely. I told myself I wanted to farm until I was 79—well that didn't quite

happen—but this new house and farm is providing us with plenty of projects. I'm also learning how to grow in this climate and with this wind! We have plans for building a wind break and as you saw, we are putting up solar [panels] on the roof. I know it may sound silly, but I am taking master gardener classes—one can never stop learning. I want to continue to farm, but who knows if I'll call it "Terry's Berries" or something else. And we still have animals.

DICK: Yes, we still have the animals—processed 20 turkeys and eight lambs this fall. In fact, Matthew [Cox] from Green Bow Farm is going to stop by today to help me determine how much more cleaning I have to do on some hides. It's been nice to make that connection with him and his wife—we were just out at their place helping him put up a high tunnel. So we are getting to know farmers here and getting involved with improving markets locally.

Q: You recently transitioned your farm in Puyallup, Terry's Berries, to new farmers. What have you learned from that process?

DICK: We are still learning and it's still a process. I think the big thing is for other growers—whether they are facing retirement or just beginning—to start planning for the future of their land. We need to keep agricultural lands in production and it starts with farmers starting a conversation with themselves and planning for what will happen when they can no longer farm.

TERRY: I still have a whole house back in Puyallup full of stuff to deal with! [laughs] We know Katie and Mark [Green] well and

they worked with us before the transition process started. But like Dick says, it's still something we are figuring out and we look forward to seeing them grow Wild Hare Organic Farm.

Q: As long time members of Tilth, what do you see as Tilth's role in educating the next generation of farmers?

TERRY: Keeping up the great work. Farm Walks have always been useful and interesting. Talking to other farmers within the Tilth community has always been enough.

DICK: Tilth's role shouldn't be to train farmers directly. Continuing to have the annual conference and inviting researchers and larger growers—experienced growers—to share information has always been key.

Q: What remains on your bucket list, farming or otherwise?

TERRY: Travel! We want to visit some of our past interns in Peru and Asia, backpack in England, and we have plans to go backpack around the Southwest with family. I also really want to learn how to be a farmer in Ellensburg.

DICK: Save more farmland. The work is never done.

Angela Anegon is Education Coordinator for Tilth Producers of Washington. angela@tilthproducers.org, 206-632-7506. Angela enjoyed her visit with the Carknerns – they make a mean elk stew! Tilth Producers wishes them the best as they learn to deal with the winds of the Kittitas Valley and continue to contribute to Washington's agricultural communities. Congratulations again to these most deserving Tilth awardees!
