

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Tilth Producers speaks with member Diane Dempster, who has been at the forefront of organic agriculture and the Tilth movement for nearly forty years. As a dedicated leader in the organization and the industry, Diane was honored with the Tilth Producers Lifetime Achievement Award in November 2015 in Spokane, WA.



Member Services Coordinator Kate Nagle-Caraluzzo catches up with Tilth Producer member Diane Dempster of Charlie's Produce in Seattle.

TILTH PRODUCERS (Q): What first drew you to the organic and sustainable agriculture movement?

DIANE DEMPSTER: In 1976, I was involved in my first food buying club in Eugene. There was an organization in the area hosting a conference about recreating the food distribution system which I was also involved in, which included lots of folks doing alternative food sales and distribution. I was really interested in saving farmland for agriculture, and also did some volunteer work for 1000 Friends of Oregon and the Oregon Environmental Council.

Around that same time, I started hearing about organic agriculture, and it just sounded like a good idea, I started attending Willamette Valley Tilth meetings. I took a job with Willamette Valley Grower's Cooperative in 1982, staying there for three years. I then went to work for Hope Food Co-op in Forest Grove, and from there, at the Provender Alliance Conference in 1986, I was offered a job with Farmer's Wholesale Cooperative in Olympia.

Q: And how did you find yourself working for Charlie's Produce?

DIANE: Farmer's Wholesale Cooperative became a broker organization, and my career path changed a bit. Charlie from Charlie's Produce called and offered me a buying job in 1989. I hadn't been selling to them because we were competitors, but he was familiar with me. In 1991, the Farmer's Wholesale Cooperative sold their business to Charlie's Produce, and a part of that deal was the Farmer's Own label which became my project.

Q: How did you first get involved with Tilth Producers?

DIANE: When I moved to Olympia to work for Farmer's Wholesale Cooperative it was just before Tilth Producers had lobbied for a state-based certifying agency. Miles McEvoy was hired by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, and I started to get more involved with Tilth Producers. Miles and I began the Tilth Journal—still published today! The organization was small, with just a few of us running the organization in a skeletal mode: Anne Schwartz [of Blue Heron Farm] was secretary, Tony Maskal [of Sunrise Farm] was treasurer and Gene Kahn [of Cascadian Farm] was president of the organization.

We called ourselves the Washington Tilth Association, and we had chapters across the state. We tried that for a while, but then the larger umbrella organization told us we couldn't use that name. From there, we morphed back into Tilth Producers representing growers across the state. As a member of the larger Washington Tilth Association, we really took pride in representing organic and sustainable farmers across the state. I think that's one of the most unique things about Tilth Producers: our education program is really based in farmer knowledge.

Q: What do you think the best thing that Tilth does as an organization?

DIANE: The best thing about Tilth is the influence it has had in how people view farming. The organic and sustainable farmers involved in the organization have taught so many people—academics, conventional farmers, and consumers—about these important farming practices. I think Tilth has been a great constant for its members and community, and I think that's an incredible feat.

Q: What are the biggest changes you have seen since you became involved in organic farming—in our community, and the issues in our community?

DIANE: Organic used to be a four-letter word. Now it's mainstream which has been a good thing for small and large scale farmers. From what I see, organic farms are succeeding—getting bigger and there's been an influx of small organic farms in the market. Beyond that, organic is filtering to farms who we consider to be more conventional. It's gratifying to see the 200- to 400-acre farms take on organic on the full-scale level. You can really see the movement is in an exciting phase with eaters accepting organic as the standard, combined with conventional farmers taking on organic practices.

On the consumer side, it's difficult to watch increased consolidation in large alternative organic companies. I also think that consumers have become distant from growers, and don't seem to understand or care about the issues they face. That's one of the biggest issues that our community and our growers will face in the upcoming years. Overall, I think the interface between consumers and growers needs to change, and I hope in the future Tilth can tackle that.

Q: As someone who works with a variety of farmers, how do you think we need to address these challenges?

DIANE: Our community needs to be inclusive to growers of all sizes and political bents. I think keeping the farmer-to-farmer teaching is a critical technique for our community. As we look towards the future, it will be even more important that non-growers truly understand issues that growers face. I think bridging the cultural gap between larger organic growers and smaller organic producers will help farmers survive.

Q: What do you see as the highest priority for organic and sustainable farmers right now?

DIANE: Making sure that organic farming stays viable as a career and keeps farmers solvent. Farmer solvency should be a priority because farmers need to support their families and their workers. Welcoming farmers of any type into our fold will help transition more and more growers into the sustainable and organic world.

I once worked with a grower through Charlie's Produce who attended the Tilth Conference and told me that he started farming organic because there was a higher profit margin for his apple production. But then, he fell in love with the art of organics, and the practice really meant something to him. He transitioned more and more of his farm to organic when he realized that it's a better way to grow food. It's really exciting to see that happen as two-fold process: better economics and better farming practices.

Q: How have you balanced working for Charlie's Produce as a buyer with helping craft the next generation of farmers by supporting Tilth Producers?

DIANE: I have done a lot of work with Tilth Producers in conjunction with my work at Charlie's. I'm lucky to work in an industry where I get to talk to farmers, and interact with the same community that is involved with Tilth Producers. I have a memory from high school of a speaker saying, "People do things that make them happy not things that make them feel guilty or bad." Tilth has made me happy—the mission, the people, and helping farmers. Over the years, Tilth has become my second family.

Q: As we look towards the future of Tilth, what is your vision for the growth of this great organization?

DIANE: I hope for a better understanding between farmers and consumers, and I hope people learn more about the difficulties of farming. I'd like to see the new organization craft consumers who understand the political, economic and environmental issues in the food system. I would like to see that farmers who are retiring continue to pass their knowledge and skills to the next generation of farmers.

As the organization grows, I hope to see increased political clout making it a strong voice in the community. I think a shift in the food paradigm will help farmers and consumers, and I think Tilth Producers has done a lot to make that happen. It will only get better as the organization supports the reconnection between farmers and consumers.

Q: Tilth Producers honored you with a lifetime achievement award. What do you see as your lifetime's greatest achievement (so far)?

DIANE: I felt dedicated to Tilth Producers because it's the only organization that is truly farmer-to-farmer—for farmers, by farmers and about farmers. There were other organizations that supported farmers in a different way, but that's not what we wanted to do. So we kept trying new things, and supporting farmers in different ways. Everyone in the community realizes that we're all working towards the same goal—and I think that's a big achievement. It's an organization that knows and interacts with its members. Keeping this organization financially solvent has been as important for me as keeping it positive and upbeat.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with the Tilth community?

DIANE: Stay positive about the future, and be thoughtful and respectful of the community. We need to use a model of thinking about the whole vision, as well as the individual. Do not let divisiveness or an "us versus them" attitude affect the future and growth of the movement. Think about the whole community as we move forward with the vision. It has been an honor to work with so many smart, dedicated and talented people, and Tilth Producers members make me excited for the future.

Q: If you were sitting with a group of members right now, what would you say to them?

DIANE: Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I would tell the members that we should assume that we can change things, and no issue is too big to tackle. Tilth Producers has a long history of that—from getting organic certification at WSDA, having Tilth members on the first National Organic Standards Board to working with WSU on the organic agriculture degree program, and so much more.

Q: What's your favorite Tilth story? I heard you once fell off a riser at a conference...

DIANE: I was facilitating the annual meeting, and fell right off the stage. My whole chair and I just fell backwards. Luckily, Anne [Schwartz] was sitting right next to me and she's an EMT. She looked in my eyes to make sure they weren't dilated, asked me a few questions, and then I finished the meeting!

Q: Is there a particular inspiring moment at a Tilth conference that you think of often?

DIANE: The most recent conference we had in Port Townsend had a square dance with a great band. I think there were probably 300 people in the room all under 30 years old, and it was packed. People were laughing, dancing, and having the time of their life. I remember looking out, and thinking, "Yes!" It was an "I feel better about the world" moment—a bunch of young people dancing, and wanting to be farmers. It's inspiring to see the young people at the conferences, and motivating to know that they want to do this and to be in our community.