

MEET YOUR FELLOW TILTH PRODUCER

Brownfield Orchards was the first farm certified organic when the Washington State Department of Agriculture initiated the Organic Food Program in 1988. As one of its founding members, TPQ shares a recent visit with John and Mike Brownfield who talk about their farming practices, their successes and struggles, and their organic certification.

Heidi Peroni, WSDA Organic Programs Outreach and Education Specialist, catches up with Tilth Producer members Mike and John Brownfield of Brownfield Orchards in Chelan County.

TILTH PRODUCERS QUARTERLY (Q): When and how did you start farming?

MIKE BROWNFIELD: I'm third generation directly of growers, but even my great-great grandfather did a little apple growing in this area. He was a pioneer in the Chelan area in the early 1900s, and would pick and ship apples. My grandfather started growing apples in the 30s in the Chelan area; my father and uncle took over for him in the late 60s. I moved into the position around 1990.

Q: What types of crops do you grow?

MIKE: Apples, pears, cherries, and assorted stone fruit: peaches, nectarines, and apricots for our own direct sales. Currently we are farming around 53 acres.

Q: What appealed to you about farming when you started?

MIKE: I grew up growing fruit, helping my dad in the orchard. I love the lifestyle, like to be outside for a portion of my work, and the challenge of working with nature, and trying to grow a nice crop of fruit.



Photo credit: Mike Brownfield

A field bike comes in handy when you're checking on things every day across 50 acres. Brownfield Orchards, Chelan County, WA.

Q: Who have been your inspirations?

MIKE: Well, my father for sure was my inspiration to continue organic farming. Grant Gibbs is certainly a heck of an example—a diverse organic farmer and he really gets into the nitty gritty of farming, and is able to be really hands-on in his operation.

Q: When and how did you first decide to certify organic?

MIKE: This place has been certified organic since Tilth first certified. We were first in line for the state of Washington's certification process when the state first took over certification.

JOHN: Tilth Producers Co-op was formed around 1980. Just prior to that, in the late 70s, when I was working with chemicals, we were doing a lot of concentrated spraying in the orchards and it seemed like the sprays just got stronger and stronger. I began to feel it in my health, headaches and so forth when I'd come in from work. I decided there must be a better way to grow fruit than more or less poisoning ourselves. I became interested in the late 70s in organic farming. There wasn't much literature available. Rodale Press, Acres USA, and a few of those publications were our only sources for information. Thank goodness for Tilth in those early days—they helped organize it into a viable unit.

Q: What was the certification process like then?

JOHN: It was nothing like today. We started with five out of 30 acres. We would work with that five acres on an organic basis, and would only certify that small acreage to see if we could be successful. Sometimes we shifted that five acres to another five-acre block. This was before they had the three year rule in place.

We would visit each other's farms; there was no official certification person. There was a lot of controversy about which products could qualify. We went through a number of years trying to sort out certain materials that did qualify for certification. We would have meetings every few months in various areas of the state to discuss the different organic farming methods and the different crops that were being grown. It was more or less a whole organization of people who traveled to each other and learned what each other was doing. There was very little written material at the time on farming organically, and what materials qualified.

Q: Can you tell me about when certification transitioned to WSDA?

JOHN: When the state took over? It's been a long time ago, so I don't remember too much (laughs). I do remember whoever got their money in first got the #1 certification. Mike mentioned it



Photo credit: Joan Brownfield

Mike and John Brownfield of Brownfield Orchards northeast of Chelan, Their 46 acres of certified organic apples, pears and stone fruits overlook the Columbia River Valley.

may have been because of our name starting with a B, but no, it was because I got my check in there first.

MIKE: Mariah Cornwoman was, I think, our first inspector. I believe she's still active in organics. [Editor's Note: You can find Mariah farming in the Okanogan, www.heartofthehighlands.net]

Q: How does the application process differ today?

MIKE: The application can be pretty exhaustive. You're describing the way you do every aspect of your farm. We have a bunch of different blocks and varieties, we're growing almost all the tree fruit we can grow around here, and every crop has to be accounted for. We have chosen to plant a lot of small blocks in the past, which makes our records more elaborate. We do have conventional neighbors, too, so we have to keep an eye on our borders.

Q: Why do you certify organic?

MIKE: It's satisfying for me to produce tasty, healthy fruit for people to enjoy. I appreciate utilizing organic methods and being good to our land. I love the lifestyle of being a jack-of-many-trades, and being able to spend time outdoors scouting for pests, checking the crops, and visiting with our workers. I like being able to do this without me, my family, or our workers being exposed to conventional chemicals.

Q: What has been your greatest challenge? How did you approach it?

MIKE: Growing apple trees in old apple soil. There's a condition known as apple replant disease. In your soil, after apple trees or really any fruit tree has been in the ground, there's a complex of pathogens that attack the roots of the young trees, so the orchard gets off to a really poor start. It is never able to fully recover from that. That by far has cost us the most money, lost opportunities and the most headaches.

But there are some things on the horizon. One of the big positives is that there is better root stock available which are resistant to that problem. If you can get good genetics to start with, that

will help tremendously—they won't suffer from this same thing. There's starting to be a little more research on inoculations and things you can do in the soil to try to set those pathogens back as well. There are several different approaches where you might be able to have a successful fully organic replanting in the future. Most people fumigate to solve that problem.

Q: What have been your greatest successes?

MIKE: Where we differ from most fruit growers, even organic ones, is we do direct marketing to food co-ops—in Everett northwards, and in Olympia. I give my father credit for getting that ball rolling. That's been a good success for us. It's nice to have some direct feedback on your fruit. We actively truck fruit about eight months out of the year. It's really stabilized our income stream.

Q: Do you have any unique farming practices that have increased your production efficiency?

MIKE: Inorganic, there are a number of things: one of the revolutions in organic farming was coddling moth mating disruption with pheromones. The current product we use contains a synthetic pheromone compound that mimics the female coddling moth scent. We put out between 250 to 400 ties per acre and it floods the area with that scent, so the male coddling moths aren't able to find the females and mate. That made a tremendous difference to our control of that pest. We cut our sprays down by about 75%. The next one is an implement known as the Wonder Weeder. It's a cultivating weed control machine. We use it on the front of our tractor, with a mower on back. There's not much extra tractor driving, and we're getting two jobs done for one, with very little damage to the trees.

Q: Do you have a to-do list for the future (farm-related or otherwise)?

MIKE: Always! (laughs) This last year has been more focused on planning. I have a daughter going into horticulture, and I'm starting to think about how to work her into the operation. And upgrading planting systems and our varieties to optimize our sales on farm. There's just a little less room for error these days. We've had great prices for the last several years in the wholesale market but there's bound to be an influx of more organic tree fruit in this state.

Q: What advice you would give to a beginning farmer?

MIKE: I would encourage them to get out and talk to other farmers about crop areas they're interested in and really try to learn from people in the dirt, so to speak. What it's like for them, and where they see opportunities.

Q: Where do you see organic tree fruit cropping in the next 20 years?

MIKE: I see it increasing in acreage. I doubt it will take over in a huge way, but in all I think it's going to be more prevalent.

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