

CONSERVATION IN ACTION: DIVERSE APPROACHES ON THREE LOCAL FARMS

STARTING A SUSTAINABLE DRAFT POWERED FARM AT HAYSHAKER FARM

Lia Spaniola, Farm Program Coordinator

Hayshaker farmowners Chandler Briggs and Leila Schneider sat outside their turn-of-the-century Italian-built bungalow and addressed 15 Farm Walk attendees who came to learn about sustainable vegetable farming with draft horses during the Tilth Farm Walk on September 12, 2016. While Hayshaker Farm is not certified organic, their practices align with principles of nutrient cycling, energy efficiency and chemical-free agriculture. And, because of their use of draft horses for nearly all the load-bearing work, they are largely independent from fossil fuels to produce a great variety of vegetables.

A walk through the vegetable fields demonstrates row spacing that accommodates horse-drawn equipment. The horses, Dusty and Jackson, 10 year old Percheron geldings, happily ate their hay in the barn while Chandler and Joel Sokoloff, another local teamster, spoke on the details of their care and maintenance to encourage productive work. The horse-drawn equipment, arranged neatly next to the barn, featured a non-motorized John Deere and several cultivators. These machines can be bought new from a few companies that still manufacture them, but Chandler prefers to buy them used via Craigslist and other channels. The older equipment tends to be made specific to the needs of a local region and community, which adds interest and often increased durability. Much of Chandler's equipment was made in the 1930s.

While farming with draft horses may be a big adjustment to make for many beginning farmers who are used to tractor-pulled equipment, there are much lower up-front costs to get started than a fully mechanized operation. Another advantage is the relative ease of repairing non-motorized equipment if one has or can learn basic skills in welding.

To Chandler and Leila, being financially viable is as important as being ecologically sustainable. Because of this principle, they quickly saw the need to upgrade from two acres to eight acres in order to generate enough volume to stay competitive in the market. Their chicory, celeriac and fennel tops are sold to restaurants in Walla Walla, which is supported by a vibrant wine tourism industry.

In their second year as a business, 45% of their sales go



Chandler Briggs at Hayshaker Farm demonstrates the use of his nonmotorized equipment.

to restaurants in Walla Walla, 35% to three regional farmers markets, with remaining split among consignment sales at a local retailer, their winter CSA and a local food cooperative. They also host several pop-up markets throughout the year which they promote successfully through social media. Retaining customers year round has been their greatest goal and challenge, but something they continue to improve.

Despite their use of classic production technology, Leila and Chandler have found a complementary tool in modern communication. From texting orders with chefs to sharing and sourcing farm stand ideas via Instagram to promoting the farm on Facebook and via their website, Hayshaker takes advantage of what's attractive to customers today.

WHOLE FARM CONSERVATION PLANNING AT HEAVENLY HILLS HARVEST

Elizabeth Murphy, Soil Science Consultant and Educator, Tacoma

Many producers have a vision to integrate production and conservation. Numerous government resources offer technical and financial support for conservation practices. Nonetheless, the realities of farming can sideline conservation goals.

On September 19, 16 farmers and agency representatives gathered at Heavenly Hills Harvest (HHH) in Yakima County for a Tilth Farm Walk to learn how this 92-acre diversified operation has succeeded in implementing conservation at every scale of production. A career environmental educator, Merritt Wajeesh committed to establishing HHH as a

successful farm and as an education center. In the nine years since, Merritt's success rests on her adaptability. "[We] always have to reinvent this operation to be a successful farm."

This philosophy has lead Heavenly Hills Harvest to consistently blaze a trail in on-farm conservation. HHH was the first in the region to receive cost-share from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) high tunnel program. In 2013 they received additional EQIP funding for pollinator hedgerows. In 2015, they signed a five year contract with the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Stewardship Program, implementing farm-wide practices to benefit wildlife.

In partnership with Mid Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group, HHH also implemented an ambitious 12-acre restoration project on the Yakima River. Utilizing volunteer labor, Department of Ecology funding, and a Humanlink grant, the project planted over 8000 native trees and shrubs, while using alfalfa and willow to stabilize an eroding streambank.

A lively discussion about challenges and opportunities integrating restoration on the farm ensued. For Merritt, cost-share programs don't compensate for the land taken out of production. Instead, the project is about "doing the right thing."

But not all aspects of restoration conflict with production. Last year alone, Heavenly Hills lost three-quarters of an acre to erosion. Streambank stabilization can save valuable, fertile ground. Restoration also benefits organic certification applications, promotes Salmon-Safe efforts and builds customer relationships. Brisky Beekeepers, a Heavenly Hills collaborator, also benefits from ample native forage. Heavenly Hills' holistic efforts model conservation in action, pointing towards the farm's ultimate goal to be "a resource center for people who want to learn."



During the Farm Walk at Heavenly Hills Harvest, farmers learned about their stewardship practices.

SOLAR ENERGY ON THE FARM AT RENTS DUE RANCH

Elizabeth Murphy, Soil Science Consultant and Educator, Tacoma

Does solar energy make sense on a farm? What are the tax incentives that make it pay? How do farmers access service providers and solar design? These are the questions that a group of 35 farmers and agricultural professionals brought to the last of the 2015-2016 Renewable Energy Farm Walks at Rents Due Ranch in Stanwood.

In fact, it was a similar workshop in February 2015 that led Mike Shriver, owner-operator of Rents Due Ranch, to install solar on his farm. After learning about the USDA REAP grants, which can cover 25% of system installation costs, Mike acted. He hired Fire Mountain Solar as a service provider to design and install a ~25kW system. The new system offsets 75% of the farm's electric bill, powering the greenhouse fans, refrigeration and an office. In the next few years, Rents Due expects to recoup most of the remaining costs of system installation through combination of federal, state and utility incentives. These include federal tax credits, a Snohomish County PUD Solar Express rebate, the state Production Incentive, net metering with Snohomish PUD, and REAP.

Prior to heading out to Rents Due, Jill Eikenhorst of Northwest SEED opened the classroom session by addressing the big picture and climate change. Renewable energy on the farm provides a climate change adaptation strategy for many reasons. In addition to reducing emissions, renewables reduce farm expenses and provide an additional income stream, as power is sold back to the public utility districts.

Brandon Hoffman of the USDA Rural Energy office in Mt. Vernon encouraged producers to apply for REAP grants, which funded 38 applications in 2016 at an average award of \$20,000. With additional incentives, the Washington State Production Incentive, the sales tax exemption, and the federal tax credit, payback time on system installation ranges from two to four years. However, all speakers emphasized that the time to act is now, as many of these programs expire or scale down in 2018 and 2020. For more information and resources about renewables on the farm, visit Northwest SEED at nwseed.org or 1.866.759.SEED.

Thanks to Northwest SEED for partnering on this wonderful Renewable Energy Farm Walk series and to the Washington Department of Commerce for the support.