

GET TO KNOW "FARMER OF THE YEAR" JERRY PIPITONE

Jerry Pipitone has been at the forefront of organic farming for more than 40 years. As a dedicated organic farmer, Jerry was honored with the Tilth Alliance Farmer of the Year award in at the Tilth Conference in Wenatchee in November. Tilth Alliance's Farmlink & Statewide Operations Manager Kate Nagle-Caraluzzo recently spoke with Jerry.

Q: How did you get started in farming? What was your main motive?

I've told this story a lot in the last few years. I knew I wanted to garden then I read Silent Spring by Rachel Carson. That was my "ah-ha!" moment, and it woke a lot of people up to what was going on. I started thinking about pesticides and how it was affecting my small part of the world. I wanted change.

They say "don't turn your hobby into a job because you won't have a hobby or job." I did just that. I moved to Wenatchee in 1974 and by 1979 I was officially farming. Though, let's not romanticize this completely. I have almost always had a full time job, even while I was farming. In 1978, I grew a couple hundred pounds of garlic for sale. I mark 1979 as the year I became a real farmer.

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Q: You've been involved with the Neighborhood Farmers Markets for a long time. What's your favorite memory?

I don't think there's just one favorite memory. It's been a lifetime involvement with these people – consumers, farmers and associations. I've been selling at those Seattle markets for about 16 years. I even remember the first Tilth Harvest Fair. Fran Taber and I started a Tilth chapter in Wenatchee that lasted two or three years, too.

If I had to say, I would tell you that my favorite market is the U-District market. I served on their board and pal around with those farmers. I think it's the connections I've made as a farmer that I love most about this work. I still go to the U-District market on Saturday and West Seattle on Sunday for five weeks between June and July to sell apricots and peaches.



Q: What advice would you give a beginning farmer?

I won't throw you a softball here. The truth is that farming is about ultimately sales. You need to plan your marketing in advance. You need to have some good idea about where your product is going to be sold. And it's not the most glamorous part, but it's critical to making your business succeed. Have a

good idea of your marketplace – and plan it out because you need to have outlets. I'm no exception to this rule, but most farmers have other jobs while they're doing this work. Success is based on how much of your food you can sell.

Q: As you sit on the cusp on retirement, what do you see for the future of organic and sustainable agriculture?

There is growth in the organic industry, and there's now no question about demand in this market. The biggest challenge is for small organic farmers to succeed versus really large organic farms. Small farms must find their niche to prosper in the market. We also maintain the quality and standard of the organic brand. Small farmers must continue to fight for stringent standards because that's where we differentiate ourselves in this market.

Q: In that same vein, as long time members of the Tilth community, what do you see as Tilth's role in educating the next generation of farmers?

I've been involved with Tilth for a long time, and the merger of these great organizations marks a turn in this organization. This new organization represents a breadth of constituents, and it's going to be a lot of programming to address everyone. Facilitation of education and networking is what farmers need, and I think that it's important that Tilth keeps filling that role.

Q: What's your favorite Tilth story?

I often think back to that first Tilth Harvest Fair back in 1998. It was pouring rain. You just have to picture it. And we didn't have canopies back then, we had tarps. People

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were in ponchos, and folks were just clamoring for it all. It was a moment that I realize people in this city were driving change.

I think I've been to about 15 Tilth conferences over the years. I spent a lot of great times at those conferences talking, learning and networking with this community. It's the connections that make this community so vibrant. I want to do this until they find my nose in the dirt under an apricot tree.

READ THE FULL INTERVIEW WITH JERRY PIPITONE AT TILTHPRODUCERS.ORG.