

MILITARY VETERANS HELP GROW THE TILTH MOVEMENT

Mark Musick, Tilth Co-Founder

One of Tilth's founders, Woody Deryckx, was a Vietnam era veteran and from the beginning, the annual Tilth Conference has fallen on or near Veterans Day. With increased recognition of the potential for agriculture to open new career opportunities for men and women discharged from the military, veterans have become more actively engaged in the conference over the past few years.

John Knox, Seattle Outpost Coordinator for Growing Veterans, attended his first Tilth Conference this year and he loved it. "I feel right at home," he said about being with organic farmers there from around the region. And that feeling of connection with people and the land is what both Tilth Alliance and Growing Veterans are all about.

Growing Veterans was co-founded by Christopher Brown and Christina Wolf in 2012 and since then it has expanded from an initial 3.5 acre site near Lynden in Whatcom County to farms in both Skagit and King County. From the beginning the focus was on growing food and community as an antidote to isolation, depression and despair among returning veterans.

"Dirt therapy," they call it, and it really works. The military instills a deep sense of comradeship that evaporates when men and women get out of the service, leaving many veterans feeling alone and isolated. Often the only people they can relate to are other vets.

John Knox served for six years in the Marines as a transport operator in Okinawa, The Philippines and Iraq. Growing up in rural Wisconsin, he had no interest in agriculture. But after leaving the military he was drawn to growing food and learning about the environment. John earned a BA in Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, where he said their bible was Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac.

John said his experiences in the garden helped him transition back to civilian life. "It gave me a crystal clear vision," he said. "Bringing life out of the ground resonated with how I want to live."

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After moving to the Seattle area John became involved with Growing Veterans initially in their gardens at 21 Acres in Woodinville, and then he helped establish their outpost as part of Tilth Alliance's farm business incubator at Red Barn Ranch near Auburn.

When Senator Patty Murray participated in the grand opening of Growing Veterans' Auburn farm on August 19, 2016, she said the experience was extremely personal for her. As the daughter of a World War II veteran and former chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, Senator Murray said (as reported in the Auburn Reporter), "I strongly believe that we owe it to our service members to give them the care and support they deserve when they come home. Being here today reminds me of exactly what we are fighting for."

More than 500 veterans have become involved with the three Growing Veterans farms. About 40 veterans participated in Tilth Alliance's Auburn farm this past season, and their crops were distributed through the Tilth Alliance Produce food hub. In addition to Growing Veterans, the food hub distributes for Tilth's farm business incubator, as well as for a network of organic family farms.

Increased participation by military veterans is one of the most heartening aspects of the annual Tilth Conference, and by continuing to be open and inviting, that trend is certain to continue.



The 2016 Tilth Conference in Wenatchee provided a networking opportunity for (left to right) Justin Blotsky of Growing Veterans Skagit Valley, Kyong Soh, Seattle Tilth Farm Manager, John Knox of Growing Veterans Auburn, and Tilth co-founder Mark Musick.