

MEET YOUR FELLOW TILTH PRODUCER

Tilth's Kelsey Maki chats with Spencer and Susan Wilson of Punkin Center Farms

Kelsey Maki, Tilth Producers of WA, Seattle, WA

Nearly twenty years after leaving their hometown of Zillah, Spencer and Susan Wilson returned to their native Yakima Valley in 2008 to embark on a new adventure—owning and operating 65-acre Punkin Center Farms. Named for a small store that once served laborers making their way through the valley picking fruit, Punkin Center Farms boasts 30 acres of fruit orchards, a 4-acre market garden and 30 acres of “hope and potential.” Along with four-year-old son, Laek, dogs, Quincy, Colonel, and Tater, the couple has been hard at work restoring the orchards to good health, cultivating the market garden and refurbishing an old building into a guesthouse for agro-tourism. While Spencer may still call himself a ‘novice,’ Punkin Center Farms will see its second season of sales this year, with a new CSA program beginning in June.

You’ve come home to roost in the Yakima Valley, what motivated the move?

Susan: My dad put a bug in my ear back in 2008 when we were living in Portland. I grew up on a small farm and my dad farmed his whole life and loved it. A job happened to open up in Yakima. I applied, and when I got the job we decided to move back and look for a piece of land.

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Was it difficult to get the land up and running?

Spencer: The 30 acres of fruit orchards were here when we bought the land, but it was pretty run down. We’ve spent a lot of time working to bring things back to good health. The market garden didn’t exist until we removed some grapes. We put in a 30x70 greenhouse and away we went.

What is your biggest challenge owning and operating a new farm business?

Susan: The hardest part is learning how to manage our cash flow and cover expenses while staying in business. It was a rough couple of first years for sure, but with last year’s crop I think we turned the corner. We got really lucky because we were able to get into Northwest Farm Credit Services’ beginning farmer program – it’s the only reason we were able to get a loan to buy the farm. If it weren’t for that program, we definitely we wouldn’t be here. I’ve been really impressed with the program; they’ve helped us understand the budgeting process and we’re really thankful for that.

What do you do for soil maintenance?

Spencer: We’re applying compost and trying not to compact things too much. We’re going to be planting a lot of cover crops this spring and using some green manure, too.

What are you growing?

Susan: We have pears, cherries, prunes, and apples in the orchard. In the market garden we are trying to do a little bit of everything. The small patch of asparagus we have should be good this year. I like growing the greens because they are fast and good to eat and they are always around. It’s just amazing to me that we can grow all this great produce!

You have the cutest little farm cabin that you rent out. Have you had many visitors?

Susan: It’s been good all around. We opened late last spring and we’ve already had quite a few people stay. It helps with our cash flow and it’s nice to have people come and show interest in what we are doing.

Spencer: When I left the Yakima Valley in the eighties there were maybe a dozen wineries in the valley. Now there are a couple hundred, if not more. We really benefit from folks who come out here to tour the wineries.

What’s new for 2012?

Susan: We are launching our CSA business. The CSA concept is fairly new on this side of the mountains and we’re crossing our fingers that it takes off. The awareness of local food is growing and we’re trying to highlight the nutritional value of our produce. It’s been a challenge to find a way to fit in with our larger farm neighbors and show people that we can be viable as a small farm. Slowly but surely family members and folks who shop at the farmers markets are convinced.

FARM WALKS 2012

Tilth Producers and WSU Small Farms Program's early season Farm Walks schedule

MONDAY, MAY 21

GIBBS ORGANIC PRODUCE, LEAVENWORTH

ORGANIC MECHANICS

12:00 - 12:30PM REGISTRATION; FARM WALK 12:30 - 4:00PM



Come to Gibbs Organic Produce farm in the beautiful Freund Canyon outside of Leavenworth prepared to turn some wrenches! Pioneer farmer and mechanic Grant Gibbs and "Ask Albert" Roberts of

Pine Stump Farm will work on two Massey-Ferguson tractors, one diesel and one gas powered. Grant and Albert will review what's included in a full service spring tune-up, including charging system, antifreeze, air cleaner and oil change. A disassembled motor will be on hand to show participants the inner working parts of a motor. This is a down and dirty, outdoor workshop, so please dress accordingly and prepare to get your hands greasy!

For those who want to stay after the farm walk, there will be a one-hour torch, stick, and wire feed welding class for a \$15 suggested donation. A few helmets for the electric welding will be on hand, but please bring heavy sunglasses to protect your eyes when using cutting torches.

MONDAY, JUNE 4

HAMA HAMA OYSTER COMPANY, LILLIWAUP

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11:00AM REGISTRATION; FARM WALK 11:30AM - 4:00PM



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Spencer and Susan Wilson with son Laek in the greenhouse at Punkin Center Farms in Zillah, WA. Photo by Punkin Center Farms

What are your goals for the farm?

Susan: We're trying to take a piece of land that has been farmed conventionally for as long as anybody can remember and bring everything back to health. We're giving everything the chance to breath. Within five years we aim for all of our production to be organic. And hopefully the CSA will grow.

What is one your greatest successes as a farmer?

Susan: The little things that are successful really surprise and delight us. Like, "Wow we grew really big carrots!" People come back to us week after week saying how great things are and that tells us we are on the right track.

Any advice for new farmers?

Susan: Be persistent. If one door closes, you need to go and look for one that is open. Whether it is finding land or getting a loan, try not to let the negativity get to you. If you believe in what you are doing it's going to be successful.

Why are you a member of Tilth Producers?

Spencer: I found Tilth on the web. We became members to hook up with other farmers who had similar goals as us. We love the farm walks—we went to two or three last year!

Learn more about Punkin Center farms online or contact Susan and Spencer at info@punkincenterfarms.com