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Sowing for local bread
Dungeness farm hosts tour of crops

By Diane Urbani de la Paz
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Photo by Diane Urbani de la Paz

DUNGENESS – "To see things in the seed, that is genius."

So said Lao Tzu, the sixth-century sage who started that craze called Taoism.

On Monday, a flock of farmers and other curious folk followed the Dungeness Valley's own sage, Nash Huber, into a thicket of seeds and possibility.

It was a farm walk through the Nash's Organic Produce fields, cosponsored by Washington State University and Tilth Producers, a statewide organization of some 400 growers. First stop: a multicolored field behind the packing shed on Anderson Road.

The field's wheat waved as Huber strode in. Calling the stalks "long and leggy," he explained that this crop, an experiment exploring which kinds of wheat grow best around Sequim, epitomizes the future of farming here.

Huber, 67, started growing vegetables here about four decades ago; these days he and his 30 employees are reaping the rewards of the organic-food movement that has spread across the nation. Nash's carrots, strawberries and dozens of other products are beloved at farmers' markets and food stores from here to Seattle.

But he and his young bunch of farm workers also sow their energies into seed crops and grain, though those don't turn a profit as fast as, say, the fancy arugula.

Life, when it's good, is all about biodiversity, Huber said, his hands grazing soft white and hard red wheat varieties.

"You can't hammer a piece of land," by growing the same crop in it year after year, "or you're going to get in trouble," he said. To keep the soil healthy, he and his crew rotate crops, exchange vegetables for grains, and use much of their grain as a ground-nourishing cover crop.

Besides wheat, Nash's grows barley, buckwheat, oats and rye. And the rye loves North Olympic Peninsula winters, Huber said.

As for the trial wheat field planted this year, Huber made no pronouncements on Monday on which varieties are looking the best. But he said his farm will continue to be a testing ground for other grain and seed crops.

Scott Chichester, one of the managers at Nash's, grew up in the Dungeness Valley, went away to the Evergreen State College in Olympia and returned nine years ago to work with Huber.

"We're in the middle of one of the best seed-growing regions we could possibly have," Chichester told the farm-walk crowd.

That doesn't mean organic seed farming is easy, especially now when many of the money crops are ripening fast.

"When it comes down to harvest time and everything else is going on ... we're still trying to keep the weeds down and the aphids off" the seed crops.

"Growing seeds doesn't really pay," monetarily, Chichester added. "But it's something we need to know how to do."

Nash's breeds hybrid seeds in the traditional way, he said, but the farm will have nothing to do with genetically modified crops. The latter are a laboratory product, while everything on land owned or leased by Huber is organically grown.

Chichester, 34, added that today's wheat could sow the proverbial seeds for a resurgence in locally grown grains and lead to real bread – the green stuff and the kind that's sliced. Local bakers could buy local wheat, so local eaters could enjoy local loaves.

The eat-locally movement is picking up velocity, he and Huber say, as fuel costs drive up the price of foreign food.

"There's this landmark in Sequim," Chichester added, referring to the elderly structure that towers over Fifth Avenue and Washington Street.

"It's a grain elevator. That tells me we might be in a decent location," he said with a wry grin.

Huber, in the wheat field surrounded by blooming sunflowers, rows of scarlet runner beans and people hanging on his every word, reiterated wisdom learned from the Illinois farming family he grew up in.

"What's made our farm really successful," he said, "is the diversity of crops we grow."

Nash's is well-known across the nation as an organic operation; this spring Huber became the first organic grower to win the American Farmland Trust's Steward of the Land award. The prize, which the trust has bestowed for the past 12 years, highlighted Huber as an inspiration to the coming-up contingent of American farmers.

On Monday, Huber said his job now is to "pass what I've learned on to the next generation." But like everything else in farming, that's not simple. "Letting go," he said, "can be one of the major challenges in life."

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