

Going organic

Patrick Thiel of Wallowa Valley talks about the challenges of organic farming

By Bill Bradshaw
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — The life of a farmer isn't easy, and when you add organics into the mix, it becomes even more difficult.

"Farming is tough," said Patrick Thiel, who operates Prairie Creek Farms on about 25 acres of leased land near Joseph and another few acres outside of Lostine. "There's times the weather will wipe you out. There are times other things will wipe you out. There are times when it'll turn out OK, but those are getting fewer and further in between."

Unlike many in the Wallowa Valley, who rely chiefly on cattle, hay or small grains, Thiel has a wide variety of crops, including several varieties of potatoes, beets and carrots — all grown to organic specifications.

Not all chemicals are banned in organic farming, he said. Often, common, everyday, and nontoxic (to humans) substances can be used instead. For example, ordinary vinegar that can be used as an herbicide. For fertilizer, he uses kelp and molasses diluted in water.

"The overall goal is to avoid sterilizing the soil or introducing substances that destroy the function of the soil," Thiel said.

"Farming is a great privilege."

— Patrick Thiel

It's true that running an organic operation allows for more pests and weeds, Thiel said. However, if a weedkiller such as Roundup is used, "It makes it more profitable in the short term," he said. "But in 10 to 50 years, you'll have more difficulty controlling pests and weeds" because they become resistant to the chemical.

Organic farming is "more labor intensive, but it's more productive in the long run," he said.

"One thing that happens when you introduce high levels of nitrogen is it reduces a lot of the green foliage, but the product is more watery," Thiel said. "Because of the high nitrates, you don't get as good a flavor."

While organically grown produce remains more expensive than its commercial counterparts, the gap is narrowing.

"The organic industry has been growing by an average of 20% a year for many years," Thiel said. "The first farms were small — a scale that can't compare to a 5,000-acre (commercial) farm. In recent years, more of the larger farms have been converting to organic."

While his cost for production is



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Organic farmer Patrick Thiel, center, discusses the ripeness and quality of his potato crop with his employees Jerry Sparks, left, and Jody Rowe after a freeze killed the vine tops Oct. 2 at Thiel's potato farm near Joseph. Thiel said of the workers, "These two men represent what a potato farmer needs when his potatoes need harvested and the weather turns cold and nobody shows up, these two showed up."

higher, the market value of his produce is "roughly double," he said, but that "depends on the market." Thiel, and his customers, all consider that his Prairie farms produce has much better flavor than even many organic competitors.

Thiel's market is primarily high-end restaurants in the Portland area. What he doesn't sell in Portland will be available at local farmers markets.

He said he's heard stories from his Portland customers of occasions when he'd run out of product and restaurants would have to look elsewhere.

"Diners would come back into the kitchen and say, 'What happened to your potatoes? What happened to your carrots?'" Thiel said.

Potato harvest just got underway in a serious fashion Oct. 2, when the weather dropped to 24 degrees and got a good start on killing the tops of the plants. The tubers still have to remain in the ground a couple of weeks to allow the skins to set, but Thiel is finding some he

can harvest.

"I've got a dozen varieties of potatoes, and some of them are good to go and some need to mature up," he said. "That's all part of the reason for having a variety. It hedges your bets against all your weather patterns, your timing, your disease and pest issues and your climate getting too wet or too dry."

The mainstays of his crop are German butterballs — much like russets — and huckleberry golds that have a purple skin but are yellow inside. Other varieties include large yellow Kennebecs, Yukon nuggets, purple majesties and Valery long yellows that have a red skin.

The potatoes grow near Joseph. Just west of Lostine he has a field protected by a deer fence where he grows about a tenth of an acre of quinoa, just under 5 acres of carrots and about 2.5 acres of various colored beets, all organic.

In Oregon, organic crops are certified by Oregon Tilth, a Corvallis-based nonprofit dedicated to

supporting and advocating organic food and farming.

Thiel has a personal connection with the group. Back when his father, Eugene Thiel, first grew organic in the early 1970s, organic certification was just beginning. The elder Thiel worked with state officials to establish organic standards.

Eugene Thiel continued to pursue organic farming until his death in 2013.

The Thiels grew seed potatoes in the Wallowa Valley for more than 30 years and found it was not that hard to transition to organics.

After following in his father's footsteps, he doesn't yet know if his farm will continue on to another generation. Of his four daughters, ranging in age from 14 to 24, "That remains to be seen over the next few years. My youngest daughter, perhaps."

"Farming is a great privilege; I was trained in that," Thiel said. "It's a miracle every year we put a crop in."