

Farm grows to include variety of crops

By CRAIG REED

For the Capital Press

ROSEBURG, Ore. — What started out as a raspberry farm on 1 acre back in 1975 has evolved over the past 40 years into a variety of berries and vegetables on about 88 acres.

Harmon and Noreane Walker have been the owners and operators of The Berry Patch since that small start on a plot of land alongside the South Umpqua River near Myrtle Creek, Oregon. The couple has increased their

ownership on that plot of land to 15 acres and it now mainly grows tomatoes. The Walkers also farm four other properties, leasing 7- and 6-acre plots in the Myrtle Creek area and 30 acres in the Canyonville, Oregon, area. They own and farm another 30 acres in Garden Valley a couple miles west of Roseburg. The couple moved to the latter property from Myrtle Creek in 1991.

In addition to increasing their production, the Walkers went through the pro-

cess with Oregon Tilth and became organically certified in 1996. Pride of the Umpqua was added as the farm's organic label that same year. The fields and crops have been inspected every year since and continue to earn the organic seal.

"I wouldn't raise conventional, only organic," Harmon Walker said. "You get enough more for your product to make it worthwhile."

Noreane Walker added she doesn't like the thought of possibly eating pesticides that are used in conventional farming so the couple practices what they grow by eating mainly organic foods.

"I look for where products come from," she said of her grocery shopping. "I will pay extra to get organic apples. I buy organic meat and fish."

"More and more people are into eating organic, or natural," Harmon Walker, who turned 80 in March, said.

The Berry Patch raises a variety of berries, a variety of cherry and bigger tomatoes, and also zucchini, cabbage, Brussels sprouts and table grapes. The Pride of the Umpqua produce is sold to Organically Grown Co., an employee- and grower-owned cooperative that was founded in 1978 in Eugene, Oregon,



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Noreane Walker works on the sorting belt during the 2014 harvest at The Berry Patch near Roseburg, Ore. Harmon and Noreane Walker have been farming since 1975 and their operation has been organically certified since 1996.

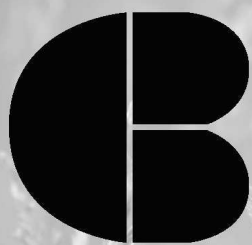
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and to Charlie's Produce, a company based in Seattle. Those operations distribute produce to retail outlets and restaurants.

"They take as much as we can grow," Harmon Walker said of the two companies.

"From what I hear through those companies, our product is very much prized by the consumer," Noreane Walker said.

In 2014, The Berry Patch sold close to 30,000 10- to 20-pound boxes of produce. About 12,000 of the boxes were filled with zucchini, 6,500 boxes were tomatoes

and a variety of other produce filled the remainder of the boxes.

"One thing about this area is that we have better weather than they do up north and that makes our growing season longer," Harmon Walker said.

All of the berry varieties, including raspberry, blackberry and strawberry, are sold to U-pickers only. The Walkers said exact conditions are needed to harvest and ship those organic products so they have been U-pick crops for many years.

"The U-pickers take them all anyway," Harmon Walker said.

The Berry Patch's 2 acres of strawberries are unique in that the plants are grown in pipes that have been cut in half and are elevated off the ground at about 4 feet. It makes the picking much easier compared to stooping over or kneeling to pick from

ground plants.

During harvest from July to October, The Berry Patch employs up to 75 people, many of them picking and sorting.

Before deciding to farm in 1975, Harmon Walker was a building contractor and Noreane Walker was a grade school teacher. When the building industry hit a slump, Harmon Walker opted to become a farmer, something he had considered since his mother had grown a garden and raspberries in her backyard.

"He has a curiosity for how things grow, he enjoys watching things develop on the farm," Noreane Walker said of her husband of 42 years.

"I love farming," Harmon Walker said. "If I have a choice of going fishing or working on the farm, I'm going to step outside the door and farm."

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