

Tieton farmers learn by doing

By **ERICK PETERSON**
For the Capital Press

Scott and Esther McIlrath's farming career began a bit like the 1960s sitcom "Green Acres," but the outcome has been much different.

Unlike the farming novices played by Eddie Albert and Eva Gabor, the McIlraths have learned their lessons and have built a successful operation.

While growing up, Scott admired his grandfather, who was a farmer. As he got older, he wanted to be a farmer, too.

"It was something that I always wanted, but I didn't think that I could afford it," he said.

Instead of pursuing agriculture, he sold insurance, but his dream of farming did not die. His passion for it only grew.

Selling insurance required travel, which took him past farmland and caused him to think more about becoming a farmer.

After accumulating money through his insurance career, he started asking about

farms and their cost and discovered that farming was not as expensive as he had thought. There were several 40-acre farms and vineyards that seemed within his budget.

He was excited about this information, and he discussed farming with his wife, Esther.

It would be quite a risk, she realized, but it would be an excellent way for them to raise their children.

OK, she said, they would give it a try, even though they knew nothing about farming.

They jumped in with both feet, buying a 30-acre farm in the Yakima, Wash., area.

Sagebrush flourished and the sunflowers were tall, but the plot was all that they could afford.

Scott said the land was filled with opportunity.

"I liked the idea that I could learn how to farm," he said. The location, which was ditch-irrigated, gave him a chance to learn.

They bought a tractor, and then picked up equipment, piece by piece. They built their home the same

McIlrath Farms

Owners: Scott, Esther and Brian McIlrath

Location: Tieton, Wash.

Acres: 200

Crops: Apples, cherries, pears, tomatoes, squash, green beans, sweet corn, blueberries

Year started: 1976

way, adding on as they could afford it. They expanded their farm, picking up local farms as they became available.

Meanwhile, they gained experience, learning ways to make the farm more efficient.

One of their most important lessons, they said, involved labor. Intelligent and able employees are a treasure, as they help a farm run smoothly.

A trustworthy, seasoned workforce more or less takes over the most important duties, he said.

To retain these employees, he keeps some on the payroll throughout the year. And he has increased the number and types of crops that he grows, just to keep them active.



Erik Peterson/For the Capital Press

Scott and Esther McIlrath have learned farming by experience on their 200-acre operation in Tieton, Wash.

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