

Fewels keep changing to meet new challenges

By ERICK PETERSON
For the Capital Press

Change is the only constant at Fewel Farms of Prosser, Wash., according to its owners, Scott and Josh Fewel.

Scott moved to Prosser with his father and started the farm in 1977, beginning with beans and small grain crops. In time, they moved into potatoes and mint.

"We've done just about everything since," he said.

Fewel Farms has grown several different vegetable crops over the years, and they have also raised grains and fruit. They have also raised various ornamentals, including pumpkins, on the farm's 880 acres.

"We've always tried to find a niche here or there, and have looked to doing what is profitable," Josh said.

In so doing, they have dropped some crops, such as potatoes and mint, when they were not profitable enough for them. These two crops in particular, they found, required a lot of land to make money. It was better to raise other vegetables.

When they decided that apples would also be profitable, they entered the apple market.

This willingness to make changes has led to a degree of success, they said.

"It's kept us around, anyway," Scott said.



Erick Peterson/For the Capital Press
Scott and Josh Fewel stand on the grounds of Fewel Farms in Prosser, Wash.

But in addition to merely sticking around, they have expanded. They purchased another 800-acre farm, which is in Hermiston, Ore.

Challenges are numerous, according to Josh and Scott, and they complain of competing farms and of retailers who keep prices down.

Perhaps the largest concern, however, is labor. The farm employs 20 to 300 workers, depending on the time of year. And it is often difficult to attract all the people needed.

Wages for the workers increase, as they are in demand. They also go up with the

state's minimum wage.

"We'll be paying people \$18 an hour before too long, I'm afraid, just to get people up here to work," Josh said.

Many other farms in the area have hired people during the off-season and have kept them occupied until they are

Fewel Farms

Owner: Scott and Josh Fewel

Started: 1977

Acres: 880

Location: Prosser, Wash.

Crops: Pumpkins, watermelon, apples, peppers, asparagus, cucumbers, peas, corn

most needed. This is expensive, they said, but there is not much choice for local farmers. Fewel Farms has also followed this practice.

"It's been tough," Josh said. But he added that next year might be easier, as the year's apple crop looks to be small. Workers, who would ordinarily flock to nearby large fruit companies, may be looking for other work.

Fewel Farms' labor competition with local fruit companies is less of an issue than with some other farms, as Fewel's fall ornamentals harvest does not have much overlap with local apples. Blueberry and cherry growers, they said, have a larger

conflict with large apple producers.

Still, the people at Fewel Farms have sought ways to mitigate their labor issues. They have, for instance, experimented with automated pickers. Though the machines have not worked well for them — as there were issues with the size variation in ornamentals — the owners will continue to observe new technologies.

Likely, they said, future machines will do what is needed and be gentler to crops.

Until then, the farm will continue its tradition of change, increasing apple plantings and whatever else will lead to greater profits.

"We'll continue down the same road that we have," Scott said. "If something looks good to us, we won't be afraid to try it."



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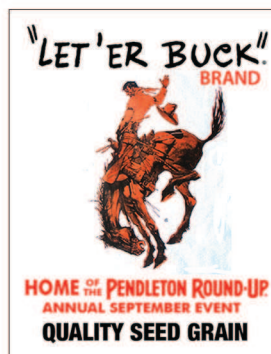
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