

Orchardist uses unique tactics to overcome blight

By DENISE RUTTAN
For the Capital Press

West of Silverton, Ore., near the old North Howell store, you'll find a hazelnut orchard that carries the legacy of John Meye's family.

That same legacy brought this educator-turned-farmer from Illinois to Oregon to help out his grandmother on the farm when his grandfather became too ill to work. After his grandfather passed away, the farm then skipped a generation and changed hands directly to the grandson. Meye was in his 30s when he dropped his plans to obtain a Ph.D. in education and fell instead for the lure of agriculture.

"I'd worked at the farm all my life and always enjoyed coming up here. I ended up changing careers and my life,



Denise Ruttan/For the Capital Press

Nuts from John Meye's hazelnut farm west of Silverton, Ore., are shipped around the world.

and lo and behold, 20 years later I'm still a full-time farmer and part-time musician," Meye said.

When Meye is not playing piano for a local church, he tends to his 27 acres of nearly 2,800 trees, mostly of the Bar-

celona variety, that his grandfather planted in 1972. Part of that legacy, unfortunately, has meant dealing with the nuisance of Eastern filbert blight.

Orchards such as Meye's that were planted in the 1970s and 1980s are largely Barce-

lonas, an older variety that is susceptible to blight. Over the years that Meye visited his grandfather's farm, he saw the disease become a problem.

"A lot of the old orchards are full of blight and many farmers just take out their trees because they don't want to deal with it," Meye said. "Oregon State University has since developed blight-resistant hazelnuts so there are lots of new orchards now with blight-resistant varieties."

Why does Meye keep at it, then? He wants to keep his grandfather's legacy alive — and, through the orchard, he's managed to stay fully self-employed since 1983, a life he relishes.

But it hasn't been easy, thanks to this disease. When the fungus first appears, it

looks like a small, black, football-shaped canker.

"After a few years and you don't deal with it, it will start killing sections of the tree and if you don't deal with it at all it will kill the whole tree," Meye said. "It will take a few years but it will kill a whole tree if left unchecked."

To fight it, Meye has attacked on several fronts.

"Theoretically, if you prune enough and spray hard enough it will eliminate it but the cost is astronomical," Meye said.

Meye has developed a system of his own in which he sprays just a little fungicide early as he finds the disease and as late in the season as is necessary. He prunes what he can but not too heavily.

He's also tried a tactic that involves neither spraying nor

pruning, nor even replacing the whole orchard. Filberts must cross-pollinate with another variety to produce nuts. Many orchardists in the old days planted an extremely blight-susceptible variety to pollinate every 20 Barcelonas.

"If the pollenizers got blight, the disease would spread like a brush fire," Meye said.

About eight years ago Meye removed his blight-susceptible pollenizers and replaced 500 to 600 of them with several newer varieties like Lewis, Yamhill and Gamma, which are far more resistant to blight. The key is diversity plus disease resistance.

The tactic has paid off.

"The pollenizers are now pretty clean," Meye said. "It hasn't cured it but it's helped heal it."

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