

Fruit farm embraces cutting-edge technology

By DENISE RUTTAN

For the Capital Press

Cutting-edge technology and agriculture may at first seem like strange bedfellows.

On one hand, you have a centuries-old tradition of growing food and other crops. On the other hand, you have drones, “smart” wireless systems and powerful computer chips. Yet more and more, these two worlds are merging.

Darin Olson and his family reflect that growing trend. The Olsons are the fourth generation to own 180 acres of Olson Farms Inc., southeast of Salem, Ore., in the Willamette Valley. They raise peaches, cherries, holly, ornamental almonds, apples, blueberries and nectarines. And they’ve been on modernizing the old ways.

Darin Olson is always coming up with new projects to do just that. At 39, he is the picture of a new wave of young farmers eager to embrace such changes. As a case in point, he calls himself an irrigation specialist instead of a farm owner on his online



Denise Ruttan/For the Capital Press

A custom-built GPS-enabled tractor allows Olson Farms to spray more efficiently and use fewer chemicals.

LinkedIn profile.

Asked to describe his farm in a few words, he says it’s “Dynamic. We’re very innovative.”

For example, he designed and built a mobile chemi-

cal injector powered by solar panels. He also designed and installed solar systems to power an irrigation controller. Furthermore, his farm uses a GPS-enabled tractor custom-built for the smaller rows

between fruit trees. The GPS allows him to design a map of which trees need spraying at which times, allowing him to use fewer chemicals more effectively.

But it’s not only technol-

ogy that inspires his creative thinking.

Using Olson’s contacts in the holly industry, he got the idea to sell blooming branches. Fashioning the flowering cuttings from fruit trees into decorative displays has become stylish on the East Coast.

“We sell them to stores across the country,” Olson said. “There’s a lot of crossover with holly. Otherwise the flower industry is very hard to get into.”

But it’s computers that really get Olson fired up. His entire irrigation system is the farm’s showpiece. This cloud-based system means Olson can simply look at his smart phone or web browser for real-time data on how his irrigation system is doing. In the past he had to physically send people out to inspect every inch of the line, and he still might not know the exact location of each leak. Now, he receives a text message on his phone saying, essentially, “I’m broken, come fix me.”

“I always know exactly what’s going on and the system does a very good job,” Olson said. “It’s a very pow-

erful tool that saves time, energy, resources and labor.”

All this information, though, has created new complications.

“The biggest issue in farming right now is dealing with all these reports you get from all these resources,” Olson said.

It can be a case of data overload. So Olson is developing a database that will act as an umbrella for all the data the farm generates.

“The goal is to help our farm become more efficient,” Olson said.

Name a trend, such as big data in agriculture, and Olson knows it. He’s considered drones before, for example, but the farm doesn’t yet have any. He is waiting to see how this green industry shapes up before making an investment. Regardless, he’s always looking to the future.

“My personal feeling is that farmers who make the best use of technology are going to do well in the future, but guys who stick to the old ways are going to struggle,” Olson said. “Over the years I’ve seen technology save us money and made farming easier.”

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