

## People &amp; Places

## Growing the sweet crop

Michael J. Locati looks to solve labor issues with efficiency, mechanization

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

WALLA WALLA, Wash. — Walla Walla sweet onion harvesters begin their day at 2 a.m., wearing headlamps and working in the cool of the morning.

The early start is “just to beat the heat — we’re getting 90-plus degree days, 100-degree days, so we get the guys in and get them out,” said Michael J. Locati, owner and operator of Locati Farms.

It’s just one adjustment growers of the popular niche onion make to maximize their production.

A fourth-generation farmer, Locati took over the operation from his uncle, Michael F. Locati. He also replaced his uncle as president of the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee two years ago.

His primary goal as head of the marketing committee is to maintain the federal marketing order that protects the Walla Walla sweet onion and keeps competitors outside the area from selling their onions as Walla Walla sweets.

Ten to 15 farmers raise Walla Walla sweet onions on 500 total acres in the area.

The number of farmers and packing sheds has declined,



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press  
Michael J. Locati, president of the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee, in a field during harvest July 10.

Locati said, but he sees a “lot of energy” in the younger farmers who now raise Walla Walla sweets. They’ll pursue new marketing ideas for selling the niche onions, including to food service outlets and restaurants.

“It’s a group effort, for sure, not just me,” he said, adding with a grin, “I just lead the meetings.”

Locati decided he’d follow in his uncle’s footsteps while taking a soil science class his freshman year of college.

“I like the science behind things — how the plant grew, the interactions with the soil,” he said.

Locati also raises wheat, peas, corn, alfalfa, onion seed and onion starts and plans to raise spinach.

But the sweet onions are his primary crop.

The farm is now a joint venture with Pacific Agri Farms, part of Locati’s bid to increase efficiency. “Why should I go hire 10 guys and try to do harvest by myself (instead of) just harvest with a bigger group?” he asked.

Harvest began June 15 and should continue until sometime between Aug. 22 and Aug. 25.

His labor costs are increasing, so mechanization is the biggest need, Locati said.

But that might be a tall order: Walla Walla sweets bruise easily and some become seed bolters, reproducing early and hollowing out the middle of the plant.

A machine can’t easily

deal with those problems, Locati said.

Even if labor costs remained the same, he said, the increased efficiency of mechanization would help. “But it’s a delicate onion — there’s a reason it’s done this way, and it’s been done this way for so long,” he said.

Locati hopes mechanization will be a realistic option within 10 years.

“It’s just going to take some capital and ingenuity,” he said. “It’s on the top of our goals. It’s number one.”

Locati has drawn the compliments of others involved with Walla Walla sweets.

“Mike has always been kind of a leader when it comes to forward thinking and promotion of his product,” said



## Western Innovator

### Michael J. Locati

Age: 27

Title: President, Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee; president, Locati Farms Inc.

Hometown: Walla Walla, Wash.

Family: Single

Education: Bachelor’s degree in science, Washington State University

Website: <https://www.locati-farms.com/>

<https://www.sweetonions.org/>

Dan Borer, general manager of Keystone Fruit Marketing Northwest, a sales agent for Walla Walla River Packing and Storage, which works with the sweet onion farmers. “He’s very approachable and vocal about the industry.”

Locati is passionate, articulate and thoughtful, Borer said.

“I think he’s got a lot of good ideas,” Borer said. “Of course, implementation of those ideas is always the critical part. Getting people to believe in them and see the same vision — I think he has the skills to do that.”

## Ag teachers learn about new technology in shop seminar

By **CRAIG REED**  
For the Capital Press

SUTHERLIN, Ore. — Agriculture and industrial arts teachers recently went back to school to better prepare themselves to teach their incoming students.

Teachers from around Oregon and a couple from Washington state participated in a weeklong Shop Management Seminar in early July at Sutherlin High School. The purpose of the eight-hour-per-day, five-day workshop was for new or inexperienced teachers in metals or woods to learn how to effectively use new technology and how to teach career and technical education classes back in their school shops. A couple of graduate students from Oregon State University also attended and participated.

The workshop was organized through Oregon State University and the Oregon Ag Teachers Association, and was facilitated by Sutherlin High teachers Wes Crawford in the metals shop and Josh Gary in the woods shop with help from local industry representatives and Umpqua Community College welding instructors.

Sparks flew in the metals shop and sawdust fell in the wood shop as the participants got their own hands-on experience.

“This workshop is an opportunity to prepare teachers to be better shop teachers when they go back to their schools,” Crawford said. “It’s a chance for teach-



Craig Reed/For the Capital Press  
Shane Hagberg of We Repair Welders of Douglas County, Ore., discusses the details of welding with Oregon State University graduate student Abby Lohman. Hagberg helped instruct at a weeklong workshop for ag and industrial arts teachers at Sutherlin High School in Sutherlin, Ore.

ers to learn skills they haven’t learned before, and then learning how to teach those skills to their kids.”

There were 20 participants in the metals workshop and 15 in the woods shop. The workshop gave them the chance to network and share ideas and projects, but also to make items such as brackets and shelves, picture frames, jewelry boxes and birdhouses that they can later use as examples when their students are working on similar projects.

“It’s a changing world out there,” said Ben Kercher, the ag sciences and technology teacher at the Glide, Ore., High School. “Many businesses are using computer cutting. When new technology is purchased such as computer cutting devices, we need to learn how to use them and how to safely teach kids how to use them.”

Oregon State had the capabilities of teaching technological classes on its Corvallis campus until a few years ago when its antiquated building was torn down. A new, modern facility is not ready yet, so for the second year Crawford and Gary have been the hosts of a workshop at Sutherlin High.

Ian Fisher and Duane Thompson, the welding instructors at UCC, Shane Hagberg of We Repair Welders, a Douglas County, Ore., business, Cameron Burks of Airgas in Roseburg, Ore., and a handful of Sutherlin High students who are advanced in metals and woods helped out at various times at the workshop.

Josh Stewart, the director of teacher education in agriculture at Oregon State, said he was impressed with what he saw and experienced at the workshop.

“The value of the professional development these teachers are getting here is probably unmatched,” Stewart said. “In a short amount of time, they get to put their hands on equipment, use it and learn how to teach about it to their students. By doing it themselves, they’ll better understand any problems students

might have later.

“Wes and Josh may not consider themselves teacher educators, but that is what they are doing here,” he added. “They’re good at teaching these teachers how to teach in these classes.”

Gary said that with the recent passage of Measure 98 there will be more funding for career technical education, resulting in more shop classes being offered at Oregon high schools. He said teachers need to be better prepared for those classes.

Brian Agee, the shop teacher at the Yoncalla, Ore., High School, said he is drawing on the expertise of the instructors in the workshop. He explained Yoncalla had had no career and technical education classes for several years until reinstating them during the last school year. Agee said about 95 of Yoncalla’s 135 students in seventh through 12th grades participated in at least one of those classes.

“This type of workshop is invaluable in growing the program at Yoncalla,” Agee said of the opportunity to learn as a teacher. “This is where tomorrow’s technicians will come from so as teachers there is no substitute for getting in and putting your hands on stuff to become better teachers. To watch students blossom and grow in these areas, to me that is exciting.”

In this workshop, it was the teachers who were given the opportunity to learn in the shop classrooms.

## Calendar

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**Through Saturday, Aug. 12**  
Skagit County Fair. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Skagit County Fairgrounds, 479 W. Taylor St., Mount Vernon, Wash. Website: <https://www.skagitcounty.net/Departments/Fair/main.htm>

**Saturday, Aug 12**  
Organic Valley McMinnville Creamery Grand Opening. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. McMinnville Creamery, 2142 NE McDonald Lane, McMinnville, Ore. Join us for a community celebration of the grand opening of Organic Valley’s McMinnville Creamery. Explore how organic butter is made, and make your own. Learn about the Organic Valley brand, how the new plant works, and enjoy a free organic picnic lunch. At 1:30 p.m., we’ll have a brief program including comments from our company’s leadership and local leaders. You can even take home a free pound of butter, while it lasts. Website: <http://bit.ly/2UvZ8M4>

### Tuesday-Thursday Aug. 15-17

Future Farm Expo. Pendleton Convention Center, 1601 Westgate, Pendleton, Ore. The Expo has a new name and a program more ambitious than ever. The Future Farm Expo 2017 will now span three full days and feature outside technology demos in addition to its tradition of world-class presenters and exhibitors. Growers, processors, crop consultants, service providers, and technologists are all invited to connect and share knowledge. The 2017 Expo will cover topics such as ground sensors, crop imagery, data use, precision irrigation, robotics, automation, soil science and more. Website: <http://www.futurefarmexpo.tech/>

### Friday, Aug. 18- Sunday, Aug. 27

Western Idaho Fair, noon-11 p.m. Western Idaho Fairgrounds, 5610 Glenwood St., Garden City, Idaho. Website: <http://www.idahofair.com/>

### Thursday, Aug. 17

Stream Restoration Workshop. 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Federal Building Meeting Room, corner of Seventh Street and College Avenue, St. Maries, Idaho. Those wishing to participate should

pre-register at the University of Idaho Extension office in Benewah County by Aug. 11. Registration is limited. A \$20 registration fee covers resource materials and refreshments. For registration questions, contact the UI Extension office at (208) 245-2422. Website: [www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry](http://www.uidaho.edu/extension/forestry)

### Saturday, Aug. 19

Total Solar Eclipse Weekend. Noon-4 p.m. Left Coast Estate, 4225 N. Pacific Highway W, Rickreall, Ore. Vineyard tours, food and Left Coast Estate Wines. Vineyard truck tours will be rolling all day long. Learn about our viticulture practices, our sustainability efforts, where your favorite wine comes from and more. Our Tasting Room and Cafe will be your complete sense of eclipse serenity with peaceful views of the vineyards. Nearby, our Treehouse Pavilion will feature live music. Cost: \$30 Website: <http://leftcoastcellars.com/>

### Sat.-Sunday, Aug. 19-20

11th Annual Harvest Fest. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Yamhill Valley Heritage Center, 11275 SW Durham Lane, McMinnville, Ore. The event will feature threshing, baling and binding oats using vintage equipment, pioneer kids activities, petting animals, pedal tractors, tractor pa-

rade, working sawmill and blacksmith shops, stagecoach rides, museum tours, old timey music and food. Cost: \$8 admission; historical society members and youths under 12 free. Website: [www.yamhillcountyhistory.org](http://www.yamhillcountyhistory.org)

### Saturday, Aug. 26

Oregon AgLink Barn Dance. 6-10 p.m. Victor Point Farms, 13166 Riches Road SE, Silverton, Ore. Ben Rue will be the featured performer. Over 21, please. Tickets are \$75 and available online only. Website: [www.Aglink.org](http://www.Aglink.org)

### Sat.-Sunday, Aug. 26-27

Importer Safety Training. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monarch Hotel, 12566 SW 93rd St., Clackamas, Ore. Food Safety Modernization Act training for the safe importation of human or animal food. Two-day course with Food and Drug Administration standardized curriculum. Certificates awarded upon completion. Cost: \$850. Website: <http://www.feedpctraining.com/fsvp.html>

### Friday, Aug. 25- Monday, Sept. 4

Oregon State Fair. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Oregon State Fair & Exposition Center, 2330 17th St. NE, Salem, Ore. Website: <https://oregonstatefair.org/>

### Wednesday, Aug. 30

Grazing Lease Workshop. 9:30 a.m.-noon. Stanislaus County Farm Bureau, 1201 L St., Modesto, Calif. Speakers will include certified rangeland managers Tim and Clayton Koopmann, who will discuss identifying land and preparing lease proposals. The California Cattlemen’s Association is the sponsor. Cost: Free. Website: [calcattlemen.org](http://calcattlemen.org)

Rice Experiment Station Field Day. 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Rice Experiment Station, 955 Butte City Highway, Biggs, Calif. Website: <http://cesututor.ucanr.edu/>

### Friday, Sept. 1- Saturday, Sept. 9

Eastern Idaho State Fair. 8 a.m.-10 p.m. Eastern Idaho State Fairgrounds, 97 Park St., Blackfoot, Idaho. Website: <https://funatthefair.com/>

### Friday, Sept. 1- Sunday, Sept. 24

Washington State Fair. 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Fairground in Puyallup, 110 9th Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. The Washington State Fair, commonly referred to as the Puyallup Fair, is the largest single attraction held annually in the state of Washington. Closed Tuesdays and Sept. 6. Website: [www.thefair.com/](http://www.thefair.com/)

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## Correction

An article in the Aug. 4 edition of Capital Press should have attributed to Jerome County, Idaho, Commissioner Charlie Howell comments that dairymen are concerned that more presence of Immigration Customs Enforcement in the community is going to intimidate their workers who think “ICE will be looking for them, raids in the cornfield.” Bob Naerebout, executive director of Idaho Dairymen’s Association, did not make those comments.

Capital Press regrets the error.