

# People & Places

## Organic manager a natural fit

**Brenda Book has led WSDA's program since 2011**

By **DON JENKINS**  
Capital Press

As a college student, Brenda Book took a summer job at an organic herb farm in Iowa.

That, she says, is ultimately why she now manages the Washington State Department of Agriculture's organic program.

She grew up on what she describes as a "typical Midwest farm" — corn, soybeans, hogs, cattle. "I did all the stereotypical Iowa farm girl activities," she said.

She was studying botany at the University of Iowa. A summer job at the Frontier Co-op in Norway, Iowa, was her introduction to organic farming, and she's never left the field. She began as an intern in WSDA's organic program in 2002 and became the manager in 2011.

And yes, she eats organic food.

"I do support our farmers," she said.

### Growing sector

Book, 41, works with a sector of agriculture that has been growing in sales, and rules. Washington was a pioneer in certifying organic farms and in the beginning, in 1985, the regulations fit on a notebook-sized piece of paper.

The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 authorized federal standards. "It's way more than an 8 1/2-by-11 piece of paper now," Book said.

WSDA enforces the federal standards and constantly updates a list of approved organic inputs such as fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides. The current list has more than 1,000 products and fills 75 pages.

At stake is the virtue of what the USDA reports is a fast-growing industry. U.S. farms and ranches sold \$7.6



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Brenda Book, manager of the Washington State Department of Agriculture organic program. "We rarely deny certification on the first go-round because it's a process," she says. "There's back and forth. There's dialogue."

billion in organic products in 2016, a 23 percent increase over 2015, according to a USDA survey released in September.

Growth in Washington sales was a modest 1.5 percent, but the state still ranks third in sales, \$636 million. It was far behind No. 1 California, close to No. 2 Pennsylvania and comfortably ahead of No.4 Oregon.

The lull in sales growth may be temporary. The number of certified organic farms grew by 11 percent to 677 and the number of organic acres increased by 8.8 percent to 78,739.

### Help available

"We're seeing that growth because (organic farmers) are having success," Book said. "It's a sign of the strength of the industry."

In addition to certifying organic operations, WSDA has a program to help farmers

convert to organic production. It's voluntary and costs a few hundred dollars, but it's meant to help growers stay within the rules during the mandatory three-year transition period.

"We do it as a customer service, so you're not out there on your own," Book said. "We can't get involved in telling you how to do things, just if what you're doing is meeting the requirements, and we can help lead you to resources."

"It gives you the opportunity to work with us throughout the process," she said. "So when you get to the year you want to establish yourself as organic, you're not caught off-guard by something you did two years ago."

The big danger is applying a chemical not approved for organic production. That resets the clock.

"The application of prohibited material, there's not really a way to mitigate that," she said.

On other aspects of organic production, such as buffers for conventionally farmed fields, the rules are more flexible, she said.

Some fields may be ready for organic certification, even if other fields aren't, she said.

"A lot of farmers worry, 'Am I going to pass?'" Book said. "We rarely deny certification on the first go-round because it's a process. There's back and forth. There's dialogue."

In November, Book gave back-to-back presentations at a conference in Vancouver organized by the Tilth Alliance, a group focused on organic agriculture.

### 'Organic' marijuana?

About a dozen people attended the first workshop, which was on the transitional program, "a service that is often under-utilized throughout the state," Book said.

The next workshop was on



### Western Innovator

#### Brenda Book

Age: 41

Position: Washington State Department of Agriculture organic program manager

Education: The Evergreen State College, degree in sustainable agriculture; studied botany at the University of Iowa.

certifying marijuana as organic. Attendance quadrupled, and the room became more crowded.

Washington was a pioneer in legal recreational marijuana. In that pioneering spirit, the Legislature has approved a proposal by WSDA to certify organic marijuana farms.

WSDA has just started to develop the rules. Interest appears keen. WSDA plans to start certifying organic marijuana in 2019. If so, Washington likely will be the first state to have certified organic marijuana.

The first rule with organic marijuana will be not to call it "organic marijuana." The USDA has a lock on "organic" to describe food produced in a certain way. Since marijuana is still illegal under federal law, Washington will need to come up with another word or term to signal to users that their marijuana is organic.

"The industry needs to come up with a term that they want that means the same thing," Book said. "The term has to be something the industry is behind."

Retailers already make advertising claims about having "organic" marijuana.

"There are a lot of claims that are happening out there now," Book said. "We are protecting the organic claim."

## Wheat weaver's artwork draws worldwide admiration

By **DIANNA TROYER**  
For the Capital Press

POCATELLO, Idaho — Toni Zweigart's wheat weavings not only adorn her Christmas tree, they also grace offices internationally.

The Pocatello resident's artwork, woven from wheat straw, has been given as gifts during Idaho trade trips worldwide.

"I feel honored that my pieces are hanging in offices in China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Mexico," says Zweigart, 65, who learned the ancient folk art in 1986.

"It's fascinating to think of how something as brittle as a piece of straw can be transformed into something beautiful," she says of the craft that was developed in agrarian societies to symbolize goodness and to ensure prosperous harvests.

After her pieces won awards at art shows sponsored by the Idaho Grain Producers Association, state officials asked her to make five-pointed stars and other



Dianna Troyer/For the Capital Press

Toni Zweigart weaves wheat straw into many shapes.

decorations for gifts.

"They told me to not place the pieces of straw in groupings of 4, 13, or 14 because those numbers are considered

unlucky in some Asian countries, so I put the grain heads in groups of 15."

Her woven artwork was framed and placed under glass

for protection.

She kept a star for herself and placed it on her living room wall beside a cross, heart and a wreath. Her woven wheat ornaments adorn a small Christmas tree set up for her grandchildren.

Zweigart's interest in wheat weaving was kindled after she saw a wreath at a craft store. She bought the wreath and learned the local person who had made it also taught classes.

"I signed up and still remember our first lesson of making a simple two-plait weave. It was discouraging because I couldn't get both straws even and tight. I thought I'd never learn, but my persistence eventually paid off."

She became proficient with a variety of techniques including spiral weaves and flat weaves done on a tabletop. She also learned the techniques of marquetry, in which the straw is cut, ironed, and inlaid in patterns.

To start a project, she sorts pieces of straw to find those

with a uniform diameter and grain-head size.

"To make a five-pointed star, I need 75 straws," she said. "It takes about three or four hours to sort out the right ones, which is about the same amount of time it takes to make the star."

Once she has selected the pieces, she soaks them in hot water for 45 minutes to an hour to make them soft and pliable.

She has also used strands of barley.

"A woman from Grace asked me to make something from the barley they raised," she says. "I made a heart using a push-pull plait technique."

Zweigart accepts commissions and also will teach a few people, depending on how much spare time she has after working at America's Best Contacts and Eyeglasses.

"It's relaxing to do," she says.

Examples of wheat weaving techniques are shown at the National Association of Wheat Weavers' website, www.nawwstraw.org.

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#### Saturday, Dec. 2

NE Washington Haygrowers Association 2017 annual meeting. 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Deer Park Diesel, 4608 Wallbridge Road, Clayton, Wash. Two pesticide applicator recertification credits available. Cost: \$20-\$30.

#### Sunday-Wednesday Dec. 3-6

California Farm Bureau Annual Meeting. Hyatt Regency Orange County, 11999 Harbor Blvd., Garden Grove. Website: http://www.cfbf.com/am2017

#### Monday-Thursday Dec. 4-7

How to Raise Free-Range or Pasture Poultry. 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m. University of California-Davis. Prospective, beginner or intermediate farmers are invited. The lessons will apply to both egg-laying hens and broilers. UC Agriculture and Natural Resources, the National Center for Appropriate Technology and the Farmer Veteran Coalition have partnered to provide training

for military veterans who are embarking on careers in farming, but all farmers are welcome. Cost: \$80 and includes lunch. Website: http://ucanr.edu/newpoultryfarmer

#### Tuesday, Dec. 5

Wheat U. 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Spokane Convention Center, 334 W. Spokane Falls Blvd., Spokane, Wash. Wheat U is a farmer-focused event that provides resources to make informed production decisions. Sponsored by BASF, Capital Press, High Country Journal. Website: wheatu.com

CORE Pesticide Training. 8 a.m.-12:15 p.m. OSU Extension, Lane County, 996 Jefferson St., Eugene, Ore. Includes presentations on worker protection standards, safety data sheets, spray application technologies and preventing drift. Cost: \$40. Website: http://extension.oregonstate.edu/lane/farms

edu/lane/farms

#### Tuesday-Thursday Dec. 5-7

Oregon Farm Bureau Annual Meeting. Pendleton Convention Center, 1601 Westgate, Pendleton, Ore. Among the speakers will be Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation. Website: http://oregonfbf.org/convention/

Idaho Farm Bureau Annual Meeting. Fort Hall Convention Center, Fort Hall, Idaho. Website: https://www.idahofb.org/events#event-17

#### Wednesday, Dec. 13

Developing or Expanding Your Farm Stand or Agritourism Operation, Part 2. 9 a.m.-4 p.m. OSU Extension, Auditori-

um, SOREC, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. Social Media Training for Small Farms. Website: http://bit.ly/JacksonSmall-Farms

#### Thursday, Dec. 14

Four-Part Farm and Ranch Succession Workshop 6-8:30 p.m. Online or Clackamas Community College Harmony Campus, 7738 SE Harmon Road, Milwaukie, Ore. Learn from an attorney, an accountant, an appraiser, a banker, the director of Oregon State University's Austin Family Business Program and farmers who've been through the process. Receive free one-on-one succession counseling sessions between each event. Part four of four parts. Cost: Free. Website: http://bit.

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