

Williams family moves ahead with orchard in wake of loss



Brad Carlson/For the Capital Press

Jackie Williams and son Bryan Williams in their apple orchard.

By **BRAD CARLSON**
For the Capital Press

Members of the Williams family aim to carry their patriarch's on-farm experiments toward hoped-for fruition.

Harold Williams died in January at 83, leaving Emmett, Idaho-area Williams Fruit Ranch in the hands of his widow, Jackie, who has worked in the operation for decades and continues to tap the experience of their children as the family moves the enterprise ahead.

The Williams family aims to build on past successes and keep trying new approaches, a nod to Harold's leadership and historically a key to keeping the family's 136-year-old business thriving.

"We're moving forward with the plans he already had made," said Bryan Williams, 54, Harold and Jackie's son. He said his dad was especially excited about recently grafting a Red Delicious apple block to a Royal Red Honeycrisp block, and continuing to expand and revitalize a peach orchard hit by a pre-dormancy hard freeze three seasons back.

"It's just a matter of continuation. It's going to be the same," said Jackie, who turns

78 this month. But noticeably absent will be the frequently heard inquiry, "Harold, what do I do?" she said.

This year's goals, Jackie and Bryan said, include sustaining a pattern of improvement in local sales, the fruit operation's lifeblood that includes "U-pick" sales to visitors who gather fruit themselves and sales to operators of fruit stands.

Jackie focuses on business strategy and, with daughter Lisa Garcia, supplying a handful of client fruit stands. They also operate their own stand and take some Williams Fruit Ranch yield to farmers' markets. Jackie's daughter Lori Lutskas works at Washington State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Pullman, Wash.

Bryan, also a long-haul truck driver, oversees labor and field work in cooperation with longtime foreman Harold Spicer. Tasks include monitoring Cameo apples now in full production after an earlier Red Delicious re-grafting project.

Williams Fruit Ranch, on South Slope Road, comprises 100 acres. More than one-third is alfalfa going into its fifth season. Once about twice as big, the operation downsized and refocused starting around 1990. Bryan gave up a lease on some or-

chard ground that he had worked full-time after college. The business began unwinding its sales to packing facilities during a period of high supply and other less-attractive economics, ultimately moving toward selling locally. The orchards produce apples, peaches, cherries, plums and prunes.

About 80 percent of revenue is from U-pick customers who come from a wide geographic area. Most of the rest comes from fruit stands, a segment with growth potential but its own competitive and operational challenges, Jackie said.

She enjoys hosting people on-site as they pick fruit or buy it from the stand. Some customers have been coming for decades.

"It's good work. They are happy to get their product," Jackie said. Customer volume has been high in recent years, partly reflecting growth in southwest Idaho.

Bryan said Williams Fruit Ranch has recently begun to receive more requests to use the rolling property, on a rise overlooking town, as a backdrop for engagement, wedding and family photographs.

He said his dad enjoyed sharing information with neighbors, including fellow food producers, about fruit production and the local area in general.

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