

## People &amp; Places

## HARVESTER BOOSTS BROCCOLI

Ron Pearmine hopes mechanical harvester will help growers, crop

By GEORGE PLAVERN  
Capital Press

GERVAIS, Ore. — Ron Pearmine describes himself as a “broccoli ambassador” for the Willamette Valley.

This year, Pearmine is growing 175 acres of broccoli at his family’s farm in Gervais, Ore. But the crop, while desirable, has declined significantly in the area due to labor shortages and rising production costs.

Broccoli is harvested today almost exclusively by hand, with crews of about 20 people going over fields two or three times to maximize yields. Without enough workers, local farmers are growing just half as much broccoli as they were six years ago, according to NORPAC Foods, a farmers’ cooperative and food processor based in Salem.

Ever the engineer — he has a bachelor’s degree in computer science engineering — Pearmine began tinkering with machinery to come up with a solution. He created a mechanical harvester out of a 1976 Chisholm-Ryder bean picker that he believes could promote increased acreage, while replacing hand crews entirely.

“I’m excited about it,” Pearmine said. “It does create a new opportunity for broccoli here in the valley.”

Pearmine’s goal is to machine-harvest 80 acres of broccoli at his farm this season. Other growers have also shown interest, allowing Pearmine to harvest several smaller plots in their fields.

On Aug. 2, Pearmine mounted the harvester and began a trial run at Obersinner Farms on Howell Prairie



Ron Pearmine, of Pearmine Farms, tries out his mechanical broccoli harvester at Obersinner Farms near Silverton, Ore., filling large crates with broccoli bound for NORPAC Foods.

between Salem and Silverton. It took 20 minutes to make one pass down a quarter-acre row, filling four large wooden crates with broccoli bound for NORPAC.

“It works. It’s effective,” Pearmine said. “We could pick our broccoli mechanically if we choose to. It’s a viable option.”

### ‘The big fail’

Pearmine is not the first to conceive of a mechanical broccoli harvester — though nothing has been developed so far that’s widely used commercially.

Pearmine was inspired to come up with his own design after a trip to Case Equipment Manufacturing in North Dakota, where he saw robots welding parts for machinery. If robots can weld, then he figured they can also pick broccoli.

The first attempt came in 2013, or what Pearmine calls “the big fail.” Nothing about that system worked right, he said, and the setback lingered for several years before he went back to the drawing board.

“I have an engineering

brain, I guess you could say,” Pearmine said with a chuckle.

By sheer innovation — or insanity, as Pearmine jokes — he assembled a working prototype last year by rigging the old bean picker with three rows of spinning blades in front, similar to a corn harvester. Once cut, the broccoli is carried up a conveyor belt over a series of metal rollers that pinch off the leaves and dropped into bins on a flat trailer.

Pearmine gave a presentation on the harvester at a NORPAC grower meeting in December 2017, where he caught the attention of fellow growers like Tom Fessler, of Fessler Farms in Woodburn, who agreed to participate in field trials.

“There’s been talk we need to move in that direction,” Fessler said. “Ron took the bull by the horns, and developed a machine.”

### Crop uniformity

From a technical standpoint, Fessler said the harvester works well. The problem: It cuts everything at once, though broccoli often does not mature at the same rate.

That means potentially sacrificing yield with machine harvesting, for the sake of efficiency.

“You’re going to have some (plants) that are slightly over-mature, some that are just right and quite a few that are on the small side, based on our experience right now,” Fessler said.

Pearmine acknowledges that, unless broccoli fields are uniform in maturity, the harvester has its drawbacks.

“That’s part of the reason why I want to get it out, so guys can have that experience,” Pearmine said. “How much do you want to give up on yield? If you don’t want to give up anything, you’ll continue picking by hand.”

Pearmine is nonetheless bullish that mechanical harvesting will eventually prove to be a boon for the industry, reversing the trend of lost acreage brought on by mounting labor shortages.

### Labor costs

Randy Lyons, vice president of agriculture services for NORPAC, said fewer workers combined with Oregon’s rising minimum wage have



## Western Innovator

Ron Pearmine

Age: 68

Occupation: Farmer,  
Pearmine Farms

Hometown: Gervais, Ore.

Family: Wife, Pat, and kids Ernie, Molly, Alli and Grey

Education: Bachelor’s degree in computer science engineering, Oregon State University, 1972

driven the decline in broccoli production from 2,000 acres in 2012 to just 1,000 acres this year.

To make up the difference, Lyons said the co-op is buying twice as much broccoli from Mexico to use in its line of soups and frozen vegetables. NORPAC is excited about the potential of Pearmine’s harvester, Lyons added, though crop quality will be the ultimate test.

“We’re working with him real closely to make sure what he’s bringing into the plant, we can make the best use of,” Lyons said. “It has to be as good as what’s in the marketplace, or better.”

In addition to NORPAC, Pearmine said he has received support from Wilco and Marion Ag Services. After harvest, he intends to compare machine-harvested yields to those of hand crews, and continue working with partners to fine-tune the system.

“People are interested. They’re supportive, and they’re excited,” Pearmine said. “It creates a new future, I think, for NORPAC and broccoli.”

## Auction of lamb raises \$23,200 for special 11-year-old

By JADE MCDOWELL  
EO Media Group

HERMISTON, Ore. — Henry the lamb might just be the most valuable lamb in history.

When Maddy Thomas, an 11-year-old 4-H student from Echo, showed him at the Umatilla County Fair his sale brought in \$23,200 — totaling about \$162 per pound at an auction where lambs were averaging \$7 per pound.

The auction marked the one-year anniversary of Maddy’s diagnosis of a brain tumor, and the money will go to help her family cover continu-

ing expenses related to her treatment. Her mother, Jenny Thomas, said she doesn’t have words to describe how grateful she is for the “unbelievable” show of support.

“Anyone who has had a sick child knows the kind of bills that come, and I’ve had to miss a lot of work,” she said.

The lamb didn’t start out as a fundraising idea. Maddy just wanted to participate in a “normal” activity after finally finding a cancer treatment that was working and she was regaining some of her strength. She got Henry in May and began walking, feeding and

grooming him. “I liked him because he liked to head butt me and he was always playful,” Maddy said. “I liked walking him around the house.”

Jenny said the exercise was so good for Maddy — using muscles she hadn’t used in months and giving her an incentive to stay outdoors — that doctors told her she could drop her occupational and physical therapy. She lost some of the weight that steroids in her treatment had caused her to gain, and color returned to her cheeks.

“He gave her a purpose,” Jenny said.



Courtesy of Marie Linnell

Maddy Thomas, 11, with her market lamb, Henry, during the Umatilla County Fair Livestock Auction. The lamb brought in \$23,200.

## Calendar

To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at [www.capitalpress.com](http://www.capitalpress.com) and click on “Submit an Event.” Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301 or emailed to [newsroom@capitalpress.com](mailto:newsroom@capitalpress.com). Write “Calendar” in the subject line.

### Through Monday Sept. 3

Oregon State Fair. Oregon State Fair and Exposition Center, 2330 17th St. NE, Salem, Ore. <https://oregonstatefair.org/>

### Through Saturday Sept. 8

Eastern Idaho State Fair. Eastern Idaho State Fairgrounds, 97 Park St., Blackfoot, Idaho. Website: <https://funatthefair.com/>

### Through Sunday Sept. 23

Washington State Fair. 110 Ninth Ave. SW, Puyallup, Wash. Website: [www.thefair.com/](http://www.thefair.com/)

### Tuesday, Thursday Sept. 4, 6

Meat School 2018. 5:30-9 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research & Extension Center, Auditorium, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore.

### Friday-Saturday Sept. 7-8

60th Annual Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association Tree

Fair & Trade Show. Holiday Inn, Portland Airport, 8439 NE Columbia Blvd. Portland, Ore. The world’s largest trade show in the Christmas tree industry. Members have market exposure at the Tree Fair and Trade Show, where buyers and sellers meet. It also features industry equipment and supplies on display. Cost: \$19-\$29 Website: [www.pnwcta.org](http://www.pnwcta.org)

### Tuesday, Sept. 11

Meat School 2018. 5:30-9 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research & Extension Center, Auditorium, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. The fourth session of a series on producing and marketing grass-fed and grass-finished meat animals. The program covers cattle, sheep and goats. Details: <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sorec/events/grass-finished-meat-school-class-1-5-part-series>. Class 5, Sept. 18. Each class is 5:30 to 9 p.m.

### Tuesday, Sept. 18

Oregon Farm Bureau Classic Golf Tourney. 1 p.m. Stone Creek Golf Club, 14603 S. Stoneridge Drive, Oregon City, Ore. Contact: [tiffany@oregonfb.org](mailto:tiffany@oregonfb.org)

Meat School 2018. 5:30-9 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research & Extension Center, Auditorium, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. The fifth session of a five-evening class series on producing and marketing grass-fed and grass-finished meat animals. Details: <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sorec/events/grass-finished-meat-school-class-1-5-part-series>.

### Tuesday-Wednesday Sept. 18-19

Safety and Health in the Cannabis Industry. Riverhouse, 3075 N. Highway 97, Bend, Ore. Topics for growers include OLC requirements, grow operations, extraction methods, fire regulations, worker protection and Oregon OSHA consultation services. Website: [osharegion.gov/conferences](http://osharegion.gov/conferences)

### Saturday, Sept. 22

Hood River Hops Fest. Noon-8 p.m. Columbia Lot, Fifth and Columbia, Hood River, Ore. The Hood River Hops Fest is an annual celebration of beer’s bitter friend, freshly harvested hops. Hood River County is surrounded by world-renowned hop growing regions, and since 2003 brewers have gathered each September in downtown Hood River to share their fresh-hop beer creations. The family-friendly event features more than 50 breweries with more than 60 fresh-hop beers, plus a variety of food vendors, live music, and an awesome collectible mug. Website: <http://hoodriver.org/hops-fest/>

### Friday-Sunday Oct. 12-14

Hood River Valley Harvest Fest. 1-6 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday. Hood River Event Site, North of Exit 63 off Interstate 84, Hood River, Ore. Celebrate Hood River’s harvest season. Presented by Pacific Power and produced by the Hood River County Chamber of Commerce.

This old-fashioned fall festival brings together more than 120 vendors offering local produce and food products, plus arts and crafts, wine, cider and beer tastings. Held along the scenic Hood River waterfront, this is the Columbia River Gorge’s biggest celebration of the region’s incredible fall bounty. Website: <http://hoodriver.org/harvest-fest/>

### Tuesday-Wednesday Oct. 23-24

Nutrient Management Conference. 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Embassy Suites, 1441 Canyon Del Rey, Seaside, Calif. The agenda will focus on the latest FREP-funded research results and practical applications of fertilizing materials for agricultural production in the state of California. Grower, CCA, and PCA credits will be requested. Website: <https://www.cdca.ca.gov/ls/ffdrs/frep/FREPConference.html>

### Friday-Sunday Nov. 9-11

Tilth Conference. Davenport Grand Hotel, 333 Spokane Falls Blvd., Spokane, Wash. Tilth Conference brings together hundreds of farmers, producers, researchers and food system professionals for a weekend of learning, building relationships and sharing best practices for growing a healthy food system. The speakers will include Mai Nguyen, who grows heirloom, ethnic grains in Sonoma, Calif., and is the California Organizer for the National Young Farmers Coalition, and Audra

Mulkern, the founder of “The Female Farmer Project,” a documentary project chronicling the rise of women working in agriculture. Website: [www.tilthalliance.org](http://www.tilthalliance.org)

### Friday, Nov. 16

Denim and Diamonds Dinner Auction, 5-10 p.m. Salem Convention Center, 200 Commercial St. SE, Salem, Ore. Oregon Aglink hosts Denim & Diamonds, an awards dinner and auction, which raises funds for the Cultivating Common Ground initiative, ultimately supporting all of Aglink’s programs like Adopt a Farmer and telling ag’s story. This event serves to recognize those who have gone above and beyond in advocating the importance of agriculture to the economic, environmental and social well-being of the state of Oregon. Website: <http://www.aglink.org/event/denim-diamonds/>

### Wednesday-Friday Nov. 28-30

Washington Small Fruit Conference & Lynden Ag Show. NW Washington Fairgrounds, 1775 Front St., Lynden, Wash. The Washington Small Fruit Conference is a three-day conference with the latest relevant research information delivered by the scientists performing the research. Lunches each day are provided. This conference is presented in association with the Lynden Ag Show, a trade show featuring vendors serving the small fruit community. Website: [www.wasmallfruit.com](http://www.wasmallfruit.com)

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We want to publish corrections to set the record straight.

### Correction

The first name of Chad Higgins, a professor at Oregon State University’s Biological and Environmental Engineering program, was incorrect in a story on Page 10 of last week’s editions. The Capital Press regrets the error.