

People & Places

Washington farmer finds grass seed more fruitful than berries

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

Southwest Washington farmer Kevin Dobbins pulls out a contract to show a visitor. It states how much grass seed that meets the buyer's specifications will be worth. That explains why Dobbins grows grass seed, rather than berries. "With berries, you don't know what you're going to get paid," he said. "I couldn't roll the dice on that." Dobbins, 35, owns Dobbins Farms, based in Clark County. Under his grandfather Jerry Dobbins, the farm was known for berries, though he also grew some grass seed. Jerry Dobbins died in 2018. Taking over as the sole owner, the grandson opted to lean heavily on grass seed.

If prices are down, grass seed can be stored, while berries can't, Kevin Dobbins said. If the seed doesn't meet the buyer's specifications, it can still be sold as "variety not stated." "I couldn't bet the farm on berries," he said. "The seed end was more reliable." Blueberries, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries are grown commercially in Clark County, but the acreage has trended downward, according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. The 2007 Census of Agriculture recorded 1,335 acres of berries in Clark County. By the 2017 census, the num-



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Southwest Washington grass seed grower Kevin Dobbins farms in fast-growing Clark County. Note the housing development on horizon.

ber was down to 955 acres, a 28% drop in a decade. Growers cite rising labor costs, and low and uncertain prices for the decline in production. "The crop is gone, out of your possession, before you even know a price," Dobbins said. Another Clark County berry grower, George Thoeny, once had 144 acres of raspberries. Now he has a half-dozen. He also grows strawberries and Marionberries, mostly to sell at roadside stands and farmers markets. Fresh market sales have been good this year, he said. Apparently a lot of people

are staying home and canning during the coronavirus pandemic, he said. "I believe there is a great opportunity to raise berries on a small basis." On a bigger scale, however, "the money just wasn't there," Thoeny said. "There's not enough good years to make up for the bad ones." Thoeny said he started growing grass seed seven years ago. "If I had to do it over again, I would have planted grass seed 20 years ago," he said. "Kevin is doing a real good job with it," Thoeny said. "For him to jump in by

himself, I got a lot of respect for that." Dobbins, who has three employees, said he aspires to "plant as much as I possibly can handle." He's said he's leased as many as 300 acres and is now at about 200 acres. He said he loses about 50 acres a year to development in fast-growing Clark County. "It will push me north," he said. To keep up the acreage, he leases land across the Columbia River in Scappoose, Ore., and as far north as Lewis County, Wash. Jerry Dobbins took up farming in mid-life, after a



Western Innovator

KEVIN DOBBINS
Age: 35
Occupation: Clark County, Wash., farmer
Heritage: Grandfather Jerry Dobbins started the berry farm; Kevin Dobbins has made the farm's focus grass seed

career selling, repairing and racing motorcycles in Portland. Kevin Dobbins grew up around the farm, but he too didn't go into farming as his first career. He tried his father's occupation, river pilot on the Columbia, but found the quarters too confining. He worked in construction for 15 years. He then joined his grandfather to manage the farm's grass seed business. He said his grandfather didn't want him to make farming a career. "It's what I decided to do. I enjoy it. I hope to keep doing it," he said. "It's a product of your labor and everything you do," he said. "You bear the risk and also bear the rewards."

Farmer returns prosthetic leg that skydiver lost during jump

WEST ADDISON, Vt. (AP) — A Vermont skydiver who lost his prosthetic leg during a jump has it back, thanks to a farmer who kept an eye out for it and spotted it in a soybean field. Double amputee Chris Marckres, of Hyde Park, went for a jump Saturday at Vermont Skydiving Adventures in West Addison and lost one of his prosthetic legs after leaping from the plane. "I think my adrenaline was so high and I was just



Getty Images

A skydiver lost his prosthetic leg over the weekend — and a farmer found it in his soybean field.

so excited, I didn't realize I had lost it," Marckres told

NECN and NBC10 Boston. Marckres, who was harnessed to an instructor, landed safely. He then put out the word on social media that he'd lost his leg. Farmer Joe Marszalkowski saw the post before finding the prosthetic on Sunday in a soybean field. Beyond a few scratches, it was undamaged. "You've always got to keep an eye out," said Marszalkowski, who compared the discovery to a

needle in a haystack. He said he was grateful he found the leg without running it over with a machine during the fall harvest. "Or, God forbid, the combine sucked it up — it would've destroyed it," Marszalkowski said. Marckres said losing his leg turned into a positive experience. "We kind of take for granted sometimes how many truly good people there still are in the world," he said.

CALENDAR

Submit upcoming ag-related events on www.capitalpress.com or by email to newsroom@capitalpress.com.

FRIDAY, AUG. 7
Friends of Oregon Agriculture Golf Tournament: 7 a.m. Chehalem Glenn Golf Course, 4501 E. Fernwood Road, Newberg, Ore. In a modified scramble format, teams of four combine their skills to play 18 holes, buying mulligans, gimme string and a PGA Pro-Shot to outscore the other teams and win the tournament. For our Golf Ball Drop fundraiser, pre-numbered golf balls are sold to the public. Each ball will be dropped from a helicopter onto the driving range at the conclusion of the golf tournament. The ball that lands in the hole first, or is closest to the hole, wins a \$1,000 Visa gift card. Website: <https://aglink.org/events/friends-of-oregon-agriculture-golf-tournament/> Contact: info@aglink.org 971-600-0466

THURSDAY, AUG. 13
7th Annual Ag World Golf Classic: 11 a.m. The Links at Moses Pointe, 4524 Westshore Drive NE, Moses Lake, Wash. Contact: 509-765-0698 Website: <http://www.agworldgolf.com/golf>

WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY AUG. 19-21
R-CALF USA annual convention: The Lodge at Deadwood, 100 Pine Crest Lane, Deadwood, SD. Topics will include antitrust enforcement, trade reform, globalization and animal welfare as well as an update on R-CALF's lawsuit against the four big packers. Contact: 406-252-2516 Website: <http://www.r-calfusa.com>

TUESDAY, AUG. 25
WSTFA Annual Golf Tournament: 8 a.m. Highlander Golf Course 2920 Eighth St. SE, East Wenatchee, Wash. Join us for the 27th Annual Washington State Tree Fruit Association Golf Tournament. Your participation in our tournament helps raise money to support scholarships that are awarded to students in honor of past tree fruit industry leaders. As part of our tournament, we are doing a silent online auction of the Washington apple No. 3 license plate. Website: <https://wstfa.org/golf-tournament/>

WEDNESDAY AUG. 26
Safety Lockout-Tagout (webinar): 1 p.m. In this free one-hour webinar we will cover the requirements of 29 CFR 1910.147 Control of Hazardous Energy, provide best practices that can be applied immediately, discuss some common issues and discuss some methods to ensure your program is compliant. Information: 208-426-3820, [janehokan-](mailto:janehokan-son@techhelp.org)

son@techhelp.org Website: <https://techhelp.regfox.com/lockouttagout>

SATURDAY SEPT. 19
Small Farm School 2020: Clackamas Community College, Clairmont Hall, 19600 S Molalla Ave., Oregon City, Ore. Small Farm School is a full-day event with hands-on workshops and classroom sessions for beginning and small-scale commercial farmers. Subscribe to the mailing list for updates. Fee: \$75 Contact: Clint Taylor, 979-820-3980 or clint.taylor@oregonstate.edu

WEDNESDAY-FRIDAY SEPT. 23-25
Public Lands Council Annual Meeting: Nuggett Casino Resort, Sparks, Nev. The meeting will include featured speakers, educational webinars and legislative and agency updates. Livestock producers can attend in-person or online. Website: <http://publiclandscouncil.org>

FRIDAY-SATURDAY SEPT. 25-26
Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association Trade Show: Sheraton Portland Airport Hotel, 8235 NE Airport Way, Portland. This is the annual meeting and trade show of the Pacific Northwest Christmas Tree Association. Contact: Angie Smith, 503-364-2942, smith@pacwest-com.com Website: www.pnwcta.org

SATURDAY, SEPT. 26
Women in Ranching WIRED Program: 7:30 a.m.. Yolo Land and Cattle Co., Woodland, Calif. The Northern California Women in Ranching WIRED symposium will be held on Sept. 26 at Yolo Land and Cattle Co. in Woodland, Calif. Speakers who are experts in their field have agreed to share their knowledge with participants. Several event sponsors have been engaged in order to keep the participant's registration fee low. Cost: \$50 per person. Website: <http://www.ancw.org>

SATURDAY, OCT. 10
Rough Rider Roundup Special Needs Western Day & Rodeo: 10 a.m. Roughout Ranch, Redding, Calif. Rough Rider Roundup is an inclusive, family-friendly outdoor event designed for the special needs community of Shasta County, Calif., and the surrounding area. Rough Rider Roundup incorporates rodeo-, ranch- and western-themed events into adaptable and accessible activities for children and adults of all ages and abilities. The inaugural event is free and hosted by Roughout Ranch Foundation Inc., a 501©3 nonprofit public service organization. Registration is required to participate or to volunteer. Contact: Kathy O'Donnell, 209-256-9640, skyland@frontier.com.

Young farmer takes his job seriously



Courtesy of Jeanine Norman

Two-year-old Wyatt Norman takes his job seriously when he's helping his parents, Jeanine and Cody Norman, on their Beaver Creek, Ore., farm. "Wyatt is our first and only child (for now) and he has done the farm chores with us since he was born," says his mother, Jeanine. "Started out in a front pack, then to a back pack and now he is just running everywhere and wants to ride on all the tractors he can. As soon as he gets in the tractor seat he says 'vroom vroom.'" Do you have a young farmer at your place? We'd like to know. Just email a photo and brief description to newsroom@capitalpress.com and we'll post it on our website and, space available, in the print edition.



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CORRECTION

An article in the July 31
edition of the Capital Press
included incorrect infor-
mation about blueberry
research at Oregon State
University's North Willa-
mette Research and Extension
Center. The eight-year
project has led to tighter in-
row spacing and trellises to
hold up blueberry bushes.
The Capital Press regrets the
error.

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