

Mt. Hope Farms: Table grapes, unique fruits a hit

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

MOLALLA, Ore. — Laura and Mike Ellis of Mt. Hope Farms have built a thriving business based on table grapes and unusual berries.

After moving back to his native Molalla to farm with his dad, they began looking for a productive way to utilize their own patch of ground. They tried various crops and livestock, taking their products to Saturday markets.

“There are a lot of great farmers growing those things, and to make money you really need to be larger scale,” Mike said. “We were looking for something higher value that we could make a living on without having to rent so many acres.”

Around 2014 they planted 2 acres of table grapes, primarily Jupiter, Reliance and Thomcord, a cross between a Concord and Thompson seedless that have the Concord flavor but are seedless and have thin skins.

Their company, Mt. Hope Farms,



Mike Ellis surveys a crop of table grapes destined for markets around the region. With rave reviews from customers, demand for the grapes continues to rise.

now sells grapes to several New Seasons markets and LifeSource Natural Foods in Salem — to rave reviews.

“The feedback we get is that they

are like nothing they’ve ever tasted,” Mike said. “The grocery store has been taking everything we can grow and wanting more, but we’re also

trying to diversify.”

They wanted to grow unique fruits and have since become one of the first in the Pacific Northwest to grow the aronia berry, also known as the chokeberry, which is full of antioxidants and has other natural health benefits.

“It loves our climate,” Mike said. “Put a little bit of water to it and it will grow like there’s no tomorrow.”

They then ventured into haskaps, also known as honeyberries, another antioxidant-packed “super berry” resembling an oblong blueberry that tastes like a combination of rhubarb, blueberry and raspberry.

“Maxine Thompson, who recently passed away, worked on OSU’s hazelnut breeding program for most of her career, and after she retired she started working on the haskap breeding program,” he said. “She was looking for feedback on how they perform and supplied us with over half a dozen different varieties that we put into a test plot. It was a real treat to be able to work with her.”

Meanwhile, Laura was developing a line of fruit spreads in her kitchen.

“We wanted to do some shelf-stable products we can grow here and without any junk in them,” Laura said. “They have very little sugar and can be used in all kinds of things — breads, vegetables, cheeses, meats, desserts and even cocktails.

“We try to keep everything local and unique and just showcase the fruit,” she said. “Ordinary jam is one of those things that people don’t typically get too excited about but if they see it as an ingredient and know why it’s special it’s a different story.”

Laura developed several unique fruit spreads, currently shipping more than 20,000 jars a year all over the country.

“It’s been an adventure and something where our kids are fully involved,” she said. “It’s definitely not easy but I have learned so much more doing this than I ever did in school.”

Your Dealer of Choice for Quality Orchard Equipment and Services!

Harvesting

- Weiss McNair • Kubota • DeJong • Gillison
- Harvester & Equipment Maintenance Services



Spraying

- Gearmore • LectroBlast • Rears
- Sprayer Cleaning & Testing Services



OVS McMinnville
2700 ST. JOSEPH RD.
MCMINNVILLE, OR
(503) 435-2700

OVS Aurora
19658 HWY. 99 E.
HUBBARD, OR
(971) 216-0111

www.ovs.com • 800-653-2216

STORE HOURS: Mon-Fri: 8-5 • Sat: 8-Noon

FULL SERVICE SHOPS AT BOTH LOCATIONS!



Visit our website at www.ovs.com for more information and to check out our large inventory of Used Equipment!

(800) 653-2216 • www.ovs.com

AG SUPPLIES & AGRONOMIC SERVICES ALSO AVAILABLE