

Burnt Ridge Nursery and Orchards: Diversification pays off

By **BRIAN WALKER**
For the Capital Press

ONALASKA, Wash. — Diversification has carried Burnt Ridge Nursery and Orchards, including the past year during the pandemic.

The 21-acre operation on logged forestland in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains in Lewis County, Wash., grows chestnuts, mulberries, kiwi berries, figs, elderberries, apples, Asian pears and blueberries.

“With nearly 1,000 different named varieties of fruits and nuts, we distribute plants, as well as seeds, scion wood and cuttings to interested growers,” said owner Michael Dolan.

The pandemic has meant busier times at the farm, Dolan said.

“Many people have more time on their hands at home and are concerned with food security, resulting in a doubling of demand for food-producing woody plants that we sell,” he said.

Dolan said the initial focus

of the farm, founded in 1980, was to grow nut trees commercially and a variety of fruits for personal use.

“Many of the fruit and nut trees were not commercially available at the time, so learning plant propagation was a necessity,” he said. “Surplus nursery stock became a cash crop before the orchards came into production.”

Dolan married his wife, Carolyn, in 1989, and her managerial and office skills allowed the nursery to expand into a mail-order business that prints 50,000 catalogs a year and ships plants throughout the U.S.

Carolyn supervises a staff of 14 and leads the wholesale sales of the certified organic fruit and nuts.

Michael writes the catalog, heads up the research and plant propagation, answers customers’ questions about the plants and leads retail sales.

Plants are sold primarily by mail, although customers can pick them up at the nursery if they are pre-ordered or



Burnt Ridge Nursery and Orchards

Michael and Carolyn Dolan supply fresh fruit and nuts to two food co-ops in Olympia, Wash., as well as three wholesale buyers. They are shown here during last year’s apple harvest.

by appointment.

Burnt Ridge supplies fresh fruit and nuts to two food co-ops in Olympia and three wholesale buyers. It also sells its products at farmers markets in Chehalis, Toledo and Olympia.

“We have sold at the Olympia Farmers Market from April

to December for 36 years,” Michael said.

The business also has a commercial kitchen, where jams, jellies, sauces, wine and hard cider are made from certified organic fruits produced on the farm.

Many of the fruit and nut varieties grown at Burnt Ridge

are experimental to explore what potential they have in western Washington.

“With chestnuts, the literature suggested planting Chinese chestnuts so we did,” Michael said. “Ten years later, we removed them due to their inability to crop well here in our relatively cool maritime mountain location.

“Observing massive 100-year-old chestnut trees on old homesteads still producing huge crops annually despite neglect suggested that worked well in the Eastern U.S., but it wasn’t the right species for the Northwest.”

However, success with chestnuts came when varieties from Italy, France and Japan were introduced, Michael said.

“Trialing more than 100 varieties, over the course of 30 years, we have identified the most desirable and consistent producers for our bioregion,” he said. “Demand is good, yet most domestic consumption of chestnuts is still being met by imports.”

Burnt Ridge sells its chestnuts as seed nut for planting, as well as in shell for eating.

“Some regional growers are further processing and selling their nuts as peeled and ready to eat; others have dried their crop, grinding it into a gluten-free flour for baking,” Michael said.

“For us, it has become a fall and winter staple, finding its way into our mouths on a nearly daily basis, either freshly roasted as is, or into the soup pot, stuffing, casserole or mixed with vegetables,” Michael said.

Other crops Burnt Ridge has helped introduce into commercial production include kiwi berries, mulberries and a unique apple variety.

“The Monty’s Surprise is by far the most nutritious apple on earth,” Michael said. “Originating in New Zealand, we initiated the process of importing it as a stick of scion wood more than 10 years ago. It is still in quarantine until next winter, when we can make the trees available to the general public.”

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