

OPINIONS

Finding the connection to our ag roots

BY ANDREW SCHWARZ

I started farming in my mid-twenties. Until then there hadn't been a farmer in my family for two generations. My mother's grandfather had a farm in the New Jersey countryside, and my dad's grandfather started an avocado ranch in southern California after he emigrated from Europe during World War II. I know if most of you look back at your family lineage, there is a farmer not that far back down the line.

Today we eat without knowing how food is grown or where it comes from. Eight years ago that existential rift, between the eater and the farmer, led me down the rabbit hole to start farming, a life-changing endeavor that I could have never imagined. It has been like stepping back in time with modern twists and turns around each and every corner.

Historically, agriculture was a way of life that allowed generations to pass on intimate techniques to their next of kin. In my generation, most farmers are starting from scratch. I still have more questions about farming than I have answers to, a situation that probably won't change for as long as I live. Though I have learned an immense amount about farming and land stewardship, the truth is that the modern agricultural landscape is much different from the one my great grandfathers knew. With mechanization, chemical inputs, seed consolidation, topsoil degradation, monoculture production, and globalization, our agricultural system has become more fragile, less resilient, and more dependent on outside inputs than ever.

Through tapping into my agriculture roots, I have discovered many areas of concern and also many people and places that are revitalizing their local food systems. With farmers' markets, CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), regional seed companies, and community education expanding, so, too, does regional food resiliency.

I have spent time working on numerous farms with wonderful people. Throughout the ups and downs of the strenuous season, the highlight is when it comes time to sow seeds. These hold the greatest truths and powers for a farmer to understand. If you have never sowed a vegetable seed, do it as soon as possible. Yes, we have lost an

immense amount of information from our ancestors, but luckily for us, seeds carry with them knowledge and lessons that are activated as soon as you pick them up and plant them. It has been transformative for me to plant seeds every year, and I know this experience is relatable to every other human who eats food. Don't find an excuse—just pick one of your favorite vegetables or fruits, buy seeds, plant them in the garden or a container, and care for them until you enjoy your edible bounty. Not everyone is going to be a farmer, but every person who eats should start a vegetable or fruit from seed that they want to eat. Just get on with it, because it will influence your life for the better, too.

Once you have gotten that tradition growing in your yard, the next question is, where does seed come from? Seasons, weather, soil, and inputs, e.g., lime, mineral calcium, and compost, are part of the variables that influence farming's feedback loop. When you step into the realm of seed saving, you begin to realize that you can have influences on the seeds you save, from how they grow to how they look to how they taste. Over a lifetime, you can create new varieties that are adapted to local conditions and local tastes.

Spend only a couple of years saving your own seeds and you will feel a connectedness to food that will bridge that modern rift between one who eats unaware of the origins of his food and one who knows the miracle of seed to fruit. Saving my own seed has truly brought me full circle in my young agricultural career. I feel humbled to understand what it has taken to create the food oasis we all cherish. I am apprehensive, though, about how quickly so much diversity could be lost through industrialization of agriculture. We all have the ability to make an impact by growing food and saving seeds, even if it is just one plant at a time.

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Andrew owns Ridgeline Meadows Farm in the Applegate and is on the board of Our Family Farms and the Southern Oregon Seed Growers Association. Both organizations work to help educate the public and farmers about local food production and to support and expand seed production in our region.

'Growing' concerns: Locals act

BY JENIFER NOBLE

Is progress always positive?

Robert Williams was most likely under the impression that fighting the Native Americans in 1853 was ushering in progress for the future mining community of Williamsburg, now Williams. Likewise, large marijuana operations moving into Williams today might think they are ushering in "progress." But many residents see the recent influx of industrial-scale corporate marijuana operations not as progress, but as a negative spiral for this rural community.

In light of growing concerns, in January a group of Williams residents formed the Concerned Citizens group, a diverse group of young and mature residents, cannabis growers and non-growers. The group's purpose is to seek reasonable regulations for industrial-sized recreational marijuana operations in order to protect the community's small-town rural lifestyle. Most of these operations—some potentially immense—are or will be operating on "resource zoned" properties (farmland or forestland) in Williams.

Besides their large and impersonal presence, such enterprises could have serious and unwanted impacts on this small rural farming community, such as increased water consumption and the paving or graveling-over of native soils to install mega-greenhouses. In addition, competition for land on which to grow this high-income product puts the cost of land out of reach for the average food farmer.

Other concerns include traffic and safety on residential country roads, the impacts of lights at night, greenhouse fan noise, and increased fire danger.

Heavy trucks and equipment haulers cause wear on roads not built for industrial use. Local residents report higher volumes of construction vehicle traffic. And in one Williams neighborhood, residents report more careless driving—speeding, crossing the center line, and even cars racing each other to work—by drivers who then turn into one of the large marijuana growing operations nearby.

Light from large greenhouses obscures the night sky. Noise from greenhouse fans disrupts natural sounds and rural quiet. Employees have been seen illegally camping in areas with high fire danger and slim firefighting resources.

The Concerned Citizens group has taken several steps. It produced a pamphlet of best practices for maintaining harmony among neighbors, the environment,

and growers. It formed an Approach Committee to encourage dialogue with the corporations moving in to grow marijuana. It drafted a petition to solicit Josephine County to create reasonable regulations for recreational marijuana projects on resource lands.

The group's most recent effort is to create protective standards to address concerns of noise, setbacks, greenhouse square footage, light, and destruction of high-value farmland. The Williams Town Council / Citizens Advisory Committee has been working with the community to draft these standards, which will go through a rigorous process requiring a 66 percent majority vote at both the second of two community input meetings and a Williams district-wide September election before they can be submitted to the county for the county's process.

The best way to ensure the passage of these standards is by exercising your right to vote! If you live in Williams and want to support these efforts, *you must be registered to vote locally*. If you are not already, it's not too late. You can register either in person at the Josephine County Clerk's office, online at oregonvotes.com, or through forms available at Concerned Citizens meetings. If you registered after July 25, you must bring proof of that registration to the September 25 election.

Watch Jo's List, Facebook, and flyers around Williams for reminders of important dates. Tuesday, September 19, will be a "CAC Candidates Night and Protective Standards Q & A" Town Meeting. On Monday, September 25, both the CAC election and the vote on the protective standards will take place from 5 to 8 pm at the Williams Grange. Voters must bring identification, and new voters must bring proof of registration.

Another way to help is to contact Josephine County commissioners and specifically ask them to support the Williams Town Council / Citizens Advisory Committee as they create reasonable regulations for recreational marijuana projects on farmlands and forestlands. You can contact the commissioners individually: Dan De Young at ddeyoung@co.josephine.or.us, Simon Hare at share@co.josephine.or.us, and Lily Morgan at lmorgan@co.josephine.or.us.

Williams welcomes true, positive progress that will maintain our rural community's cherished way of life.

Jenifer Noble • jenifer_noble@yahoo.com

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