



John and Debbie Pitney

Keeping the Garden

Packing productivity into a small yard

BY RACHEL FOSTER

I could tell there was something special about John Pitney's garden the first time I cycled by. Perhaps it was the fleeting impression of roses, abundant fruit trees, and a general lushness and variety. Perhaps it was the impressive freestanding photovoltaic array or the electric Gizmo parked out front. Last month I met the owner there for a closer look, and saw just how much productivity and pleasure can be packed into one small space.

To start with, there are well over two dozen apple trees on mini-dwarfing stock, planted only a few feet apart. In winter they are under planted with cover crops, in summer with many kinds of vegetables rotated with grains and flowers. Pitney has grafted branches of additional varieties on these little trees. Grafting is something he really enjoys, he says. In addition to all the other usual tree and vine fruits, there's a nectarine, an almond and a fuzzy kiwi. "We had our fist kiwi fruit last year," he said, with obvious satisfaction.

Mature blueberries and deciduous azaleas, here when the Pitneys arrived eight years ago, share their bed with hybrid tea roses. Two Japanese maples shade the west-facing front door, and a camellia blooms in a sheltered spot near the patio in back. Making a focal point in the central ribbon of lawn is a stone edged pond. "We put the pond in just because, but then we began to notice dragonflies. One morning I saw a kingfisher perched on a corner of the solar panel." There have also been herons, great blues and once a green.

Pitney, who grew up on a grass seed farm north of Eugene, is a Methodist pastor, social activist and accomplished singer-songwriter. He became interested in food security and environmental issues about 20 years ago. That interest (commitment would be a better word) is embodied in this garden, his lifestyle and the lyrics of his protest songs. We stood in the garden on a nice February day and talked about the future of solar power and the founding of That's My Farmer, a group that brings together members of faith communities and farmers who practice Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

"I was hearing a lot of voices damning the corporate food system but there was very little being done about the situation," Pitney said. "When we started looking at how to keep some profits at home, CSA seemed to be an accessible way to connect churches with an economic system that fit their values." While That's My Farmer organizes primarily through faith communities, everyone is welcome at the annual launch. "TMF uses existing social structures to reach people that wouldn't be investing in local agriculture otherwise, and some of the social structures I know best happen to be religious ones," said Pitney. "The farmers are incredibly enthusiastic about what we're doing." An important part of the annual launch is an opportunity for farmers "to express something that gets below the surface, like what gets you out of bed every morning."

At home, Pitney and his wife, Debbie, do what they can to live consciously. The 990-watt solar array provides about 15 percent of their power. Two more panels on the roof heat their water. Behind a handsome, roomy garden shed are two 250-gallon rainwater collection tanks. A dozen or so thriving chickens enjoy a



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sophisticated coop and ingenious run that extends along two sides of the garden perimeter, taking up very little space. (It took "one Saturday to build it, but a few years to think about it.") Six families share the eggs for eight or nine months out of the year.

A long hoop house covered in plastic film sits beneath grape vines on a pergola — a structure Pitney built to support existing vines. In February the greenhouse held radishes, leeks, and some fine looking broccoli, and Pitney had just sown lettuce, and peas were already coming up. "The greenhouse is dismantled as the grapes start leafing out in the spring," he explained. "Then I like to put in a temporary chicken run to consume what's left of winter greenhouse stuff. ... I try really hard not to kid myself or others that we are growing a significant percentage of what we eat. I invest in the local food economy to do that."

Pitney has now had his Gizmo for six years. "I've driven it about 17,000 miles," he said. "It takes about as much electricity to recharge on an annual basis as we generate with our 1K photovoltaic system." That's food for thought.

8th Annual Launch of That's My Farmer!

This year's launch will be held from 6:30 to 8:30 pm Tuesday, April 17 at the 1st United Methodist Church, 13th & Olive, Eugene.

That's My Farmer is an inter-faith project that challenges people to join farms that practice Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). People who buy into CSAs pay local farmers directly, at the beginning of the season, to share the economic risk with farm families. Farmers get cash to start the season without going into debt. Members receive a weekly box of fresh produce from their farm, May through October. A membership

may be split with another person or family, if a full box is too much.

The event on April 17 is open to everyone. Last year, more than 300 people showed up to sing songs, win great door prizes and enjoy home-made ice cream. People will have the opportunity to talk with the farmers, pick up information about CSAs or buy That's My Farmer Bucks — vouchers redeemable at participating booths at the Farmer's Market. Donations at the door go directly to funding CSA boxes and TMF Bucks for low income families.

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