

In 1950, the Huntons, like so many Willamette Valley farmers, started growing and selling grass seed.

According to the Oregon Seed Council, grass seed is Oregon's fifth largest agricultural crop. Statewide, grass seed is grown on nearly 400,000 acres. Of those, 360,000 acres are in the Willamette Valley. That is nearly equal to the acreage of all other types of agriculture combined.

Each year, less than two percent of grass seed grown in Oregon is used in the state. And between 15 and 20 percent is exported outside the U.S.

This is big business. Overall, grass seed farming drives more than \$1 billion in annual economic activity in Oregon.

But throughout our area, there's a movement towards relocalizing economies and focusing on using the inherent richness of the Willamette Valley to grow food.

"It's changing in many ways. It's not about yield, but about delivering baking performance and flavor," Hunton says. "There's still a lot of grass seed being grown. For many soils, that's the best adaptation. But we're seeing now where grass seed acres are going into hazelnuts, grain varieties and legumes. This is a new market, one that's not commodity-based."

In a typical grain economy, Hunton explains, farmers will have large fields planted with multiple varieties of, let's say, wheat. (Think of that bag of generic all-purpose flour in your pantry; any number of wheat varieties ended up in it.)

But with consumer demand, that's changing.

"We do identity-preserved growing," Hunton says. "And our customers help us choose what they like, with different varieties that have different baking characteristics."

WILLAMETTE VALLEY BOUNTY

Farming, as we know it, is a fairly recent activity in the Willamette Valley. But this area's first-known residents, the Kalapuya Indians, "intensively managed plant communities to their advantage for millennia, with the skilled use of fire," says UO archeologist Thomas Connolly. "Annual burns expanded the range of nutritious seed-bearing plants over brush."

The region's verdant ecosystems provided a sustaining and healthful diet for the thousands of indigenous peoples who migrated in and out of the valley over millennia. Local food sources included abundant fish along riparian waterways, game — especially deer and waterfowl — tarweed seeds, acorns and hazelnuts, berries and fruits and the root of the camas flower.

Between about 1770 and 1840, mortality of indigenous people in the valley exceeded 95 percent. They had no immunity to the diseases brought to the region. "By the time settlers made their way in greater numbers across the Oregon Trail, beginning in 1843, this was already the post-apocalyptic Kalapuya world," Connolly says.

TOM AND SUE HUNTON



If we could go back in time and look at this area just a couple of centuries ago, it would look very different, before settlers began to drain and cultivate wetland areas.

Once the Kalapuyas' annual burning was suppressed, the forests began to encroach on the valley, and parkland and savannas filled with brush.

The introduction of grazing domesticated animals — cattle, sheep and hogs — impacted water sources and streambeds as well as the plant and animal life they once supported.

Livestock was tough on the indigenous food supply. George Riddle (the Douglas County town is named for his family) wrote about the native peoples' carefully tended tarweed fields: "At that time Cow Creek valley looked like a great wheat field. The Indians, according to their custom, had burned the grass during the summer, and early rains had caused a luxuriant crop of grass on which our immigrant cattle were fat by Christmas time."

And pigs destroyed the camas fields.

For thousands of years the Willamette Valley offered a bounty of food sources to its people. But in little more than a century, food across the country, and here at home, has been financially and systematically commoditized. Though we live in one of the lushest food-growing environments in the world, the food on your plate likely rolled in by truck or train, or on a plane.

Is it possible to bring what we eat back in line with local food systems?



NEW VISTAS

What if our local farms could grow our food?

The Camas Mill story, with its transition from forage and turf grasses to clover and meadowfoam, then to vegetable and cover crop seeds, and most recently to beans, lentils and grains, is about adaptation and a good deal of juggling.

The Huntons manage 2,800 acres and 10 to 12 crops, with a total of 20-plus varieties included in those.

"It complicates matters a lot, with so many more crops," Hunton says. "We're growing seven different varieties of wheat. It used to be grain was harvested and shipped in the fall, but now we have to maintain inventory for 15 to 18 months, which impacts cash flow."

The Huntons serve as a seed source for many other farmers. And as the prices for one crop, like grass seed, falls, other crops, like hazelnuts or durum wheat, might just prove more lucrative.

"Most growers want to grow," Hunton says.

And as farmers like the Huntons have kept abreast of changes in the food landscape, it's opened new vistas for their efforts. "We supply bakeries, high-end chefs, as well as the craft brewing and distilling movement," Hunton says.

For the farm of the future, it might not be about more, but about different. "We're maxing out our arable acres. But we knew we'd never win in a commodity community," Hunton says. "We knew we had to be different in how we processed the grain, that we'd find value there."

The Huntons favor crops that have an inherent adaptability and that are disease resistant.

"We have organic and conventional both," Hunton says. "Our organic uses only organic inputs, milling and designated processing equipment."

Hunton points to an example. The farm recently began growing buckwheat, which had traditionally been grown only as a cover crop or as a component of animal feed. But with the addition of an onsite roaster and de-huller, their mill has begun to produce kasha, or buckwheat groats.

"The mill became a critical piece of infrastructure," Hunton says.

A few miles from their country store, the Camas mill millstones whirl with a constant hum. On the day I visit, they're processing rye grain destined for the Fremont Mischief Distillery in Seattle.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Camas Country Mill, in its own humble way, is as cosmopolitan as it comes, adapting to global appetites and providing key ingredients to a variety of food preparers — from home cooks to high-end chefs.

"We had to learn not just how to grow and to process, but how to market our product," Hunton says.