



PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

# GROWING CONCERN

Yep Yep Farm fights to stay organic BY VANESSA SALVIA

**J**ason Waligoske and his wife, Louisa Waligoske, are farmers.

They have a dilapidated collection of outbuildings and greenhouses on the 4.6-acre former plant nursery site in Dexter they purchased two years ago. The couple battles poison oak while tending greens and tomatoes and checking their water lines. They use amendments listed as acceptable by Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI). They're organic farmers, right?

They think so, but a bureaucratic movement might change that.

"Large organic soil farmers are lobbying for a change to organic regulations," Jason Waligoske says. "They see farms like ours as a threat to their profits."

The Waligoskes practice aquaponics and aquaculture. Water in four 1,000-gallon tanks holding tilapia flows through an interconnected system of troughs holding 4,000 to 5,000 plants and 6,500 gallons of water. The only inputs are fish food pellets for the tilapia, an air pump and a water pump. Nutrient-rich water from the fish tanks, with the fish droppings filtered out, is pumped into the plant troughs to feed the plants and is then re-circulated into the fish tanks.

Though the Waligoskes have yet to eat any of their tilapia, the fish can eventually be harvested.

"The only additive we use is a little bit of ferrous sulfate because the groundwater is naturally low in iron," Jason Waligoske says. "We use the OMRI-listed organic SaferGro brand. This way of growing can be done in a totally humane, sustainable way, that's good for the environment."

"Seventy-five gallons a day for 4,000 plants," Louisa Waligoske adds. "We only use about 5 percent of the water that soil agriculture does."

Jason Waligoske owns New Frontier Market in Eugene, which is a big outlet for the couple's produce. Last year, Louisa Waligoske says, they grew everything a soil farm could grow for a farmstand, including root crops and tomatoes.

They have 100 chicks and will be selling eggs by April. They plan to build a "food forest" with fruit trees, worm composting and mobile coops for ducks and chickens.

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— JASON WALIGOSKE

This year, they're going to try vertical strawberries. Since tilapia is a tropical fish, they might switch to trout.

"We can reduce our energy use even further because trout don't mind cold, unheated water," Louisa Waligoske says.

The fish water supports a variety of microgreens. "Sunflower, pea, broccoli, radish, daikon, cress and cilantro," she says. As of now, their microgreens, nasturtium blossoms and the juiciest, lemoniest sorrel are their specialties.

One of the misunderstandings of aquaculture is that aquaponics plants are grown in GMO sludge. "Not true," Jason Waligoske says. "But a soil farm can still be considered organic if it uses conventional chicken manure from birds that are fed GMOs."

Not to mention, he says, plastic mulches and irrigation systems can leach harmful PCBs and other contaminants into soil.

Oregon Tilth certifies the farm's produce, including chickens, and Jason Waligoske wants that to continue.

Aquaponic produce and hydroponics can be certified when done organically and proven, but there is no U.S. certification for fish or aquaculture. Animals grown for consumption, with the exception of aquatic animals, do have a certification in the U.S. Certifying boards will follow whatever standard the National Organic Standards Board votes to accept for aquaponics and aquaculture. "We know information about this was put in front of NOSB in November, and they're supposed to keep thinking about it," Jason Waligoske says.

In December, Jason Waligoske met with the Organically Grown Company. He says Organically Grown was helpful, and will continue to consider Yep Yep's products, but are reluctant to stock aquaponic produce until the NOSB says that it can continue to be certified.

Jason Waligoske says he was disillusioned with society as a teenager. The Rainbow Family lifestyle resonated with him, so he chose to drop out and live in the woods, backpacking, hitchhiking and traveling. "At some point I had the realization that if I was ever going to change the world I would have to work from within society," he says.

Fighting to keep aquaculture organic could be the way he does it.

*Find Yep Yep Farms' produce at New Frontier Market, local farmers markets and Rain Northwest restaurant, or visit [yepyepporganicfarm.com](http://yepyepporganicfarm.com).*