

New owners, same Warrenton street

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — After buying the Main Street Market, Tommy and Jeanne Smith are hoping to keep a good thing going.

The couple from Springfield, Mo., took over Aug. 10 from Mike and Tami Aho, who owned the downtown Warrenton market for 25 years.

The Smiths both grew up in Washington state, Tommy Smith said, and wanted to move back. They Googled grocery stores for sale in the area, and found the Main St. Market.

"It was just time to slow down and smell the roses," said Mike Aho, adding he and Tami told employees of their intent to sell in January.

In March, the Aho's won an Outstanding Customer Service award at Clatsop Economic Development Resources' annual banquet. It was presented by Skip Hauke, for whom Mike Aho had worked 12 years at Hauke's Sentry Market.

"It was nice to be recognized for how we run our business," Mike Aho said, adding he believes the new owners will carry on that tradition. For now, he said, the couple is semi-retired before charting their next move.

Raised on groceries

Jeanne Smith said she and her husband "met in a grocery store." "He was on the grocery side; I was on the drug side."

Tommy Smith said he has been in groceries since he was 15, advancing to an officership



From left, Jeanne and Tommy Smith have taken over Main St. Market, employing their daughter Jordan Smith and most of Main St.'s staff, including Store Manager Sherri Reed.

Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian

at Associated Wholesale Grocers. For the past eight years, his job has been telling other supermarkets how to operate — so he thought it was time to test his own theories.

The family moved from Washington to Arkansas for four years, followed by another four years in Oklahoma and

a final 14 in Missouri, before deciding they wanted to retire in a place where they vacationed as children.

Jeanne Smith said she spent 22 years as a stay-at-home mom and volunteer. This is her first jump back into the labor force, and the first job for the couple's 16-year-old daughter,

Jordan Smith, a junior at Warrenton High School. The couple has an older daughter, Kailee Kobe, who works at the store, and a middle son at Missouri State University studying business management.

When the Aho's won their award, they employed about 13 people. All but two have

been brought back, Tommy Smith said, making room for his family.

Besides adding new products and changing some arrangements, such as a tailgating section for football season, the store is largely remaining the same. Kobe manages the store's Facebook page, offer-

ing special deals to customers. In the long run, the Smiths hope to add a sit-down deli in the back of the store.

"I'd like my kids to take it over after 15 years," Tommy Smith said. "We'll stay with it as long as we enjoy it. There's always a place for the small, independent grocer."

Researchers explore possibilities with dry farming project

With drought as a backdrop, OSU project skips irrigation

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

CORVALLIS — The squash plants' leaves are wilted and crinkled in the mid-day heat, and look like they desperately need water. But unless it rains, they won't get any.

In fact, they've never been irrigated since they were planted this spring. Neither have the zucchini, dry beans, potatoes, melons and tomatoes growing alongside them.

The vegetables are part of a dry farming demonstration project at Oregon State University's Oak Creek Center for Urban Horticulture. In three 10-foot-by-100-foot plots, OSU Extension instructor Amy Garrett is examining the possibilities of growing food crops without irrigation.

It's a topic under serious review as drought grips the West.

Hold the water

Irrigators throughout the Pacific Northwest and California have been restricted or shut off entirely this summer, the mountain snowpack that feeds streams in late season has already melted and many storage reservoirs are at alarmingly low levels.

Climatologists believe longer, hotter, drier summers and winter precipitation that falls as rain rather than snow is the "new normal."

Beatrice Van Horne, director of the USDA's Northwest Regional Climate Hub in Corvallis, said that will be the trend for the coming decades, although



Eric Mortenson/EO Media Group

Amy Garrett, an instructor with OSU Extension's Small Farms program, shows vegetables grown without irrigation this summer in Corvallis, Ore. Dry farming may be an option for some growers if drought persists in the West.

individual years may vary. "Those are pretty clear results" of climate modeling, she said.

Faced with that reality, some farmers and ranchers are thinking about making changes.

About 100 people attended a dry farming field day that Garrett hosted at her OSU demonstration plots in early August. She'd expected that 30 people might show up.

Dry crops

What they saw may have surprised them. Garrett is growing four varieties of dry beans, her Yukon Gold potatoes are producing about four pounds per plant and the squash, despite looking withered, have produced nice-looking Stella Blue and Blue Hokkaido varieties.

Then there are the Dark Star zucchini, which look as vigorous as if they'd been irrigated all summer. Planted May 27, they were in full production by early July. Garrett said she's

picked lots of "zukes" in recent weeks.

"It's like a machine, a zucchini machine," she said with an admiring glance.

The hit of Garrett's field day, however, were the small, striped Little Baby Flower watermelons, which easily won a taste test.

"Across the board, they preferred the flavor, sweetness and texture of the dry farmed melon over an irrigated one of the same variety," Garrett said.

Old school

Dry farming is not new, of course. Mediterranean growers have been raising wine grapes and olives without irrigation for centuries. Some California growers do the same, and the term "old vine Zinfandel" often refers to dry-farmed vineyards that are more than 75 years old, according to the California

Agricultural Water Stewardship Initiative.

Other California crops that are sometimes dry-farmed include tomatoes, cantaloupes, squash and potatoes, according to the group.

Pacific Northwest producers grow wheat and other grains without irrigation, but Garrett wants to see what else can be grown that way.

Many of the farmers interested in the project are relatively new to the profession or are just now venturing into commercial production. In some cases, they've leased or bought land, then discovered it did not come with water rights, or they are in a state-declared groundwater limited area and can't sink a new well.

It's not easy

Dry farming is not an easy option. Without irrigation, yield



Eric Mortenson/EO Media Group
A dry-farmed watermelon variety called Little Baby Flower won a taste test over irrigated melons during a field day at Oregon State University in early August.

and size are almost certainly reduced, although quality remains good.

It requires altered techniques, revised expectations and the right conditions, starting with the soil. A layer of clay in the soil, common in Oregon's Willamette Valley, holds moisture that plants can access during the summer. Dry farming is less likely to work on soil that's sandy and porous.

Soil preparation, seed selection and the timing and method of planting are critical, Garrett said. Many of the seeds she planted come from varieties that are dry-farmed elsewhere. The Stella Blue and Blue Hokkaido squash come from a line originally developed by a Veneta, Ore., farmer who has been dry-farming vegetables for 40 years.

Dry farming calls for deeper planting and more space between plants to reduce competition for water. When planting, some farmers step on the seeded area to compress the soil and force water up from the clay level to germinate the seed. Garrett said she planted bean seeds four to six inches deep

and transplanted tomatoes into holes up to a foot deep.

The technique can work, and small farms could certainly feed themselves with dry farming methods, but it's not clear whether it can pay off commercially.

Dave Runsten, policy director with Community Alliance with Family Farmers, based in Davis, Calif., said the practice "flies in the face" of what supermarkets want and what agricultural universities have taught.

Big yields of big fruit and vegetables are favored by the market and researched at universities, Runsten said. Dry-farmed crops are smaller in both regards.

A place for dry

But he said there's a place for it. Some California growers are tearing out avocado and orange groves because water is so expensive, he said, and dry-farmed wine grapes may replace them.

The practice may work in Western Oregon and Washington, which get plentiful winter and spring rain that could sustain some crops through a dry summer, he said.

Garrett, the OSU instructor, said it's an open question whether dry-farming producers can break even.

"That's the kind of research I'd like to do," she said. "Does it make economic sense to grow things this way?"

The work is partially funded by the National Institutes of Food and Agriculture under its Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. Oregon State's Center for Small Farms administers the grant.

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