

Without tech, mules make farm go

By ANN BLOOM
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The rich, black sod peeled away like chocolate curls as the mule teams pulled the sharp plows through the earth cutting straight lines, guided by the sure hand of their owners.

The Lazy Mule Farm plowing bee, held on a recent Saturday, despite the dark skies overhead and occasional rain, went on as planned.

There were two teams on hand to prepare the land for planting the garlic that will be sold in the fall by owners Jessica Bass and Adam McGrath. Salad greens also are planned, which will be sold to restaurants and stores. The seed garlic will be sold to nurseries and wholesalers. They also plan to have a farm stand offering produce.

The Lazy Mule Farm is named after resident mule, “Charlie,” who would rather receive petting and lay in the sun sometimes than work. The couple’s other mules in addition to Charlie, include “Mae” and “Pete.” There is also “Belle,” a Belgian draft horse.

“They (the mules) are our employees,” said McGrath.

McGrath describes the relationship between the mules and the use of them, as opposed to mechanized farming, as being positive for the planet.

“It’s an attractive application,” he said, “horses have no ‘off’ button. They have strengths and weaknesses,” like any relationship, plus, “it’s fun!”

He said the size of their property is just right for the two of them and allows them to make ends meet while still being able to pursue other interests and activities. McGrath said the operation allows them to, “select the things we like with the size we have and merge the things we’re both passionate about.”

The mules can work into their early 30s and the draft horses to their early 20s. McGrath says it’s important to keep them active, “chugging along, plowing and turning the sod — it’s the single hardest draft task.”

McGrath and Bass will plow five plots that are three-quarters of an acre, but will only grow one plot of garlic at a time. They will rotate the plot that contains garlic each year so the soil is not overused and would thus encourage pests and disease. The other four plots will be planted in a cover crop, mostly alfalfa.

“This is the best crop (alfalfa) to



‘Pete,’ the mule, and ‘Belle,’ the draft horse, are driven by Jessica Bass and Adam McGrath.

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follow garlic because it fixes nitrogen as well as accumulates other important nutrients in the soil,” Bass said. “The second reason we chose alfalfa as a cover crop is because it can feed our stock. Alfalfa provides a source of protein for the mules and gives them a healthy boost as they age and continue to work.”

McGrath explained that by doing a wholesale operation, and confining the size to what they have, it allows them to make a living and still leave time to pursue other activities.

They can also branch out to what McGrath calls tertiary venues; places which buy salad mixes may also buy flowers, which the couple will grow. They also plan to use the team to deliver produce to customers in Enterprise and offer wagon rides as an extra source of income.

McGrath said one of their biggest challenges has been that they did not come from a farming background. Also, finding farm ground to purchase continues to be a challenge. He said some people may have a romanticized perception about farming.

“Farming with mules is not tidy,” he said, “but I wouldn’t farm if I couldn’t farm with mules.”

He said the couple looked for a couple of years before they found their land, which he said could have discouraged other people.

He said the number of farmers who farm using mules is not large. Many that use mules or horses to farm are faith-based, such as the Amish, and are often located in other parts of the country. There is a farm in Walla Walla, Washington, called the Hayshaker Farm, which uses mules and is not Amish.

“They are young folks about our age that learned how to drive a team from the same mentor as us, John Erskine, who lives in Sequim, Washington, on the Olympic Peninsula,” Bass said. “We have collaborated with Hayshaker Farm a couple of times for plowing. We went to their plowing bee last year and they came and helped us plow this year. We plan to continue to help each other out in order to keep the tradition alive,” Bass said.

Another draft-powered, non-Amish farm, the Hedgerose Farm, is located at

Halfway.

McGrath grew up on the front range of Colorado and has been a skier all his life. He moved to western Oregon at 18. From there he moved to the Olympic Peninsula in his early 20s. He learned to work with horses and drive a team more than a decade ago and has been farming with horses for about seven years. He met Bass when they worked together at the River Run Farm on the Olympic Peninsula.

Bass, a born-and-raised, self-proclaimed city kid from Minneapolis, learned to drive a team in her mid-20s when she worked at a dude ranch in Colorado. She continued to hone her skills, and learned to farm, while working at the River Run Farm after moving to the Olympic Peninsula. McGrath and Bass bought their first team, Charlie and Mae, a pair of Belgian mules, about three years ago.

“We chose to start a farm because we are passionate about the work. We both love making ecological observations, watching plants grow and caring for livestock,” she said. “We hope to earn a living doing work we enjoy, while also being able to pursue other passions that relate to that work,” she said.

Of farming with mules, McGrath sums it up this way: “It’s just a choice we made, and we really like it.”



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