

## Orchards:

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having an ample supply of food.

Thomas said cherries, peaches and apples are typically higher-end items at grocery stores. With the economy essentially crashing in April 2020, he was concerned that people would skip those fruits in favor of other items. He said those were but a few of the concerns across the fruit growing industry. Nonetheless, he said 2020 was a stand-out year for cherry sales industry-wide.

Other than making sure orchard workers are socially distanced and wearing masks, COVID-19 did not change much of the farm's day-to-day operation, with the orchards being so remote.

### THE HISTORY AND DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS AT THOMAS ORCHARDS

Thomas, 42, said that he, his father, John, 79, and uncle Jim, 77, each have their areas of responsibilities when it comes to handling the farm's day-to-operations.

Jim runs the mechanical and irrigation side of the business, while John handles the pesticide applications and, during the summer, will drive trucks.

Jeff Thomas said he handles the sales, delivery, payroll and accounting side of the orchards.

He said his wife, Laura, the Monument School District superintendent, helps out on the weekends at times.

The orchards have been in Kimberly since 1902, when the Kimberly family started it. Jeff Thomas said his grandparents purchased a "chunk" of the land in 1947 and bought the orchards outright in 1965.

"We've been here ever since trying to eke a living out one way or another there," he said.

### THE COMPLEXITIES OF OPERATING A FAMILY BUSINESS

Jeff Thomas said his dad could talk about how drastically the farming industry has changed from the 1970s to now.

It seems like year after year, he said, the state throws him another "haymaker," and it gets harder and harder to dodge those issues. With that comes some economic realities that he wants to be "mindful" of when it comes to the next generation.

He said when he looks at his kids, and the question comes up about leaving the business to them to take over some day, he asks



Angel Carpenter/Blue Mountain Eagle  
**Red peaches are ripening at Thomas Orchards in Kimberly.**

himself if he would be "setting them up for success or failure."

Jeff and Laura Thomas have three kids: Josh, 12, Olivia, 8, and Kaycee, 7. Jeff Thomas said, even as young as they are, they talk about how they want to grow up and work on the farm to carry on the family tradition.

"The days of having stable farm income that can support a family, let alone two or three families, those days are gone," he said.

He said when he came back from Western Oregon University to help his dad in 2002, his dad told him that he wanted to make sure Jeff truly wanted to work on the farm.

Jeff said working on the farm fit with what he and his wife wanted to do. She had just finished her degree and her ideal job was to teach at a small school. Soon enough, he said, they got married and Laura started teaching.

While the romance of running the farm faded somewhat given the realities of the business, he nonetheless fell in love with ag life.

"You're one small part of a huge industry that feeds the world," Thomas said. "And there's not a lot of people that can say that."

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