

# ‘Kale master’ finds joy in helping fledgling gardeners

By KATHY ANEY  
STAFF WRITER

Joe Hodge is an apartment dweller with a green thumb.

The Hermiston man went from neophyte gardener to award-winning master gardener in a span of 10 years. In 2012, though he lacked a backyard, Hodge decided to try gardening so he secured a plot at the Hermiston Community Garden at Good Shepherd Medical Center.

Since his gardening experience consisted of weeding his parents’ flowerbed during boyhood and tending a tomato plant or two as an adult, Hodge peppered veteran gardeners with questions, read up on plant cultivation and jumped in with both feet. He winces at some of his rookie mistakes.

“I had to learn about plant spacing that very first spring,” Hodge recalled. “I planted too close and suddenly all these plants were almost on top of each other.”

Tomatoes, for example, bush out quickly and need about 3 feet of clearance. Hodge kept learning and eventually earning his master gardener certification. He started sharing his knowledge with beginners. In July, Oregon State University Master Gardeners honored Hodge with a statewide award.

Hodge shakes off the adulation like confetti stuck in his hair. His gardening prowess, he says, is merely the lucky result of discovering a passion. He helps others realize they can do it too.

## Taking a unique path

Hodge’s path to this present moment includes attending West Point and serving 10 years in the Army as an officer in the Tank Corps. He started as the human resources manager for the transportation office at the Walmart Distribution Center in Hermiston when it opened in 1998 and later he became operations manager. Hodge, divorced with two grown children, retired in 2018 after 20 years with the company.

Hodge, 56, is a competitive runner who sometimes runs the 1.5 miles from his apartment to the community garden, where he frequently spends 12 hours a week during the height of the season. When questioned about his zeal for gardening, he ticks off several reasons — the physicality of working hard, the mental challenge of learning to grow things, and the intangibles.

“You’re among plants and nature and it’s a little bit spiritual,” he said. “It just feels peaceful to be out here.”

Hodge enjoys fresh salads made of his own home-grown ingredients at least once a day. He admits that before becoming a gardener, he didn’t eat nearly as many vegetables. His bedroom windowsill is now filled



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian  
Master gardener Joe Hodge harvests kale on March 15, 2021, at the Hermiston Community Garden.

with pots of herbs, kale and arugula.

Hodge readily shares his knowledge and bounty with others. He offers produce to neighbors and Agape House. He gives away seeds gleaned from his garden at the dentist or the barbershop, or wherever he happens to be. Once during the Umatilla County Fair Parade, he walked alongside a Walmart Distribution Center float/semitruck and, as his fellow employees distributed candy, he gave away green beans in little sacks. Most of the kids looked at him quizzically, he said, though some sampled the beans straight away.

Hodge, who works two of the 80 total plots at the community garden, said gardeners can borrow hoes, shovels, watering cans and other tools from the gardening shed, and use bark and compost piled near the plots for free. Watering happens automatically through a drip irrigation system. Plots cost \$10 per year.

“All you have to do is plant and harvest,” Hodge said.

## Bringing in the bounty

Weeding and seeking and destroying squash bugs are also on the to-do list. In his pair of 12-square-foot spaces, he plants tomatoes, green beans, squash and leafy greens, such as chard, arugula and collard greens. He delights in slightly exotic produce, such as the Armenian cucumber, which is long, light-skinned and has the texture of a kiwi.

Some plants are easier to grow than others. Arugula usually germinates readily from seed and can be planted early. Green beans need warmer soil, but grow easily and produce a long time.

“I’ve seen them start producing in early July and go all the way through the end of September,” Hodge said.

“It’s a fun plant.”

Chelle Hankinson, garden facilitator at the Hermiston Community Garden, calls Hodge “the kale master” and relies on him when a master gardener is needed.

“Any time we do a program, he is there,” Hankinson said. “He’s our Joe. He’s got a wealth of knowledge.”

Hodge recently designed a demonstration garden with fellow master gardener Norah Pratton to display a variety of herbs. Eventually recipes will be available for each herb.

## ‘You can’t be afraid to fail’

Fellow master gardener Jeannette Byrnes watched Hodge’s transformation from novice to gardening expert with fascination. The two now help teach Seed to Supper classes (when they aren’t canceled because of COVID) and she marvels at Hodge’s easy and encouraging style.

“I’m amazed at his presence and how much he knows,” Byrnes said. “He’s a very unassuming person and you don’t expect all that comes out of him.”

Diana Romero, formerly OSU Extension’s master gardener program coordinator, called Hodge a “huge asset” to the program.

“He was always available to provide his gardening expertise by answering the calls from the community and he volunteered on numerous community events where he worked with children on gardening art projects,” she said. “I cannot think of a community event in Hermiston where he did not volunteer, he loves giving back to his community.”

Hodge just wants new gardeners to find their confidence.

“You can’t be afraid to fail,” he said. “Have patience. Sometimes you think something isn’t growing and a few days later it takes off.”



Melissa Lindsay/Contributed Photo

A grain bin lies on its side, partially blocking Kilkenny Road in the middle of Morrow County, in the aftermath of the windstorm that took place on Sunday, March 28, 2021.

# Windstorm damage limited

By JADE MCDOWELL  
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Strong winds whipped through the Pacific Northwest on Sunday, March 28, causing damage in Eastern Oregon.

Wind speeds of 74 miles per hour were recorded at the Pendleton Airport, according to the National Weather Service, and hit 68 miles per hour at the Hermiston Municipal Airport. The highest reported location in the area was in Mission, where wind gusts reached 85 miles per hour.

The wind caused a few small power outages in the area. Tom Gauntt, a spokesperson for Pacific Power, said in the Pendleton area, eight different reported outages added up to about 150 total customers who lost power, with 11 customers yet to be restored as of 10:30 a.m. on Monday, March 29.

“Those are from trees on lines and that sort of thing,” he said.

Gauntt said Pacific Power didn’t see any outages that covered more than 200 customers in northeastern Oregon. The company’s largest reported outages for the weekend were in the Bend area, where about 6,000 customers lost



Liam Hughes/Contributed Photo

A large tree toppled over in Rice Park in Pendleton during the Sunday, March 28, 2021, windstorm.

power. But for areas where high winds are common, Gauntt said, the infrastructure proved resilient.

Umatilla Electric Cooperative spokesperson Steve Meyers said the cooperative received reports of a “few scattered outages” and broken poles, causing three members to lose power in the Homestead area and about 40 members to lose power in the Poverty Flats Road area about 8:20 p.m. on Sunday.

In Morrow County, Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said she had heard some reports trees that had toppled over, and there was a large sheet metal grain bin that had fallen over into part of Kilkenny Road in the central part of the county. Overall, however, she said the damage didn’t seem to be nearly as severe

as the May 2020 windstorm that caused extensive damage to the Wilson Road Mobile Home Park in Boardman.

“I made some phone calls, did some double checking, and I think Morrow County did OK,” she said.

The wind blew dust across Interstate 84 and Interstate 82 in the region, at times obscuring drivers’ view. The Sherman County Sheriff’s Office posted warnings to Facebook about dust shrouding Interstate 84 along the Columbia Gorge. And according to a traffic alert from Washington State Patrol’s public information officer, a “minor injury” crash involving seven vehicles temporarily blocked the westbound lanes of I-82 outside Richland, Washington.

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