



In the Spotlight

14 PASTURE CROPPING

by Courtney White

Australian farmer employs successful method for marrying pasture and crop systems.

Features

20 WHAT YOU SHOULD BE SAYING ABOUT ORGANIC FARMING

by Joe Pedretti

MOSES Organic Education Specialist Joe Pedretti discusses the personalized, descriptive message of your organic farm.

24 PERENNIAL PRAIRIE

by Oliver Lazenby

Researchers at The Land Institute in Kansas breed grains to create productive perennials.

28 LEADING THE WAY

by Francesca Camillo

Corvallis, Oregon farmers Tyler and Alicia Jones follow Joel Salatin's example on their Afton Field Farm.

36 THE END OF FERTILIZERS?

by Joe King

Consider microbes for increased soil health without toxic results.

40 PLANNING FOR HOLISTIC HIGH DENSITY GRAZING

by Brian Reaser

Success in the pasture starts with proper planning and attention to management strategy.

42 MATERIAL ISSUE

by Kerry King

Fabric offers opportunities for farmers seeking alternative building materials.

45 THE FRUITFUL SEARCH

by Steven G. Herbert

Learn the historical roots of dowsing and how this ancient art can provide practical applications today.

49 DIVERSITY FUELS DYNAMIC GROWTH

by Lauren Turner

Nash's Organic Produce embraces diversity for continued expansion and new ways to reach customers.



Interview

58 WISER WAYS WITH WATER

Charles Fishman

Author Charles Fishman shares observations on conservation, purification and why the "global water crisis" is mislabeled.

Columns

4 OPINION

5 VIEW FROM THE COUNTRY

6 ACRES U.S.A. ZIPS

8 ECO-UPDATE

12 ORGANIC NEWS

13 TRANSITIONS

68 THE HARVEST TABLE

74 THE NATURAL VET

78 ECO-GARDENER

82 HEALTH & HEALING

86 ACRES U.S.A. BOOKSTORE

90 BOOKS & INFORMATION

92 ECO-RESOURCES

95 CLASSIFIEDS

96 ECO-MEETINGS

98 THE LAST WORD

Diversity Fuels Dynamic Growth

Organic Farm Embraces Opportunities



Nash's Organic Produce is located in scenic Sequim, Washington with Mt. Baker in the distance.



Customers choose from a wide array of farm fresh products at the Nash's Farm Store.

by Lauren Turner

From a farmers market stand in the back of a pick-up truck, to a produce stand, to a full-service organic grocery and community center, Nash's Organic Produce in Sequim, Washington, exemplifies the growth in local food systems that continues to expand across the nation. For over 30 years, Nash Huber has devoted his career to sustainable, holistic farming, training the next generation of farmers, preserving farmland and wildlife habitat, and building community. His legacy is an example of a growing trend toward small to mid-sized farms that sell locally and are working hard to produce food sustainably.

Nash grew up in an area of small farms in Illinois. His life has followed changes in agriculture, from clusters of close-knit farming "extended families" to the industrial culture pervasive today.

Farm life was stable during the Great Depression; farmers were self-sufficient, raising most of what they needed. Post-World War II brought pressure to leave farming for college and a profession. The Midwest gradually exchanged its close-knit communities for a cash economy.

At 18, Nash went to Eastern Illinois University for bachelor's and master's degrees in chemistry. He worked for the chemical company, A.E. Staley, which later became Archer Daniels Midland.

Nash disliked food industry life, and left and went west in 1968. He'd always wanted to see the Pacific Ocean, and when traveling on the Olympic Peninsula he discovered and fell in love with Sequim. He worked various jobs there during spring, summer and fall, occasionally earning enough to travel to Mexico in winter.

He kept returning to Sequim. He missed growing his own vegetables. In the early 1970s he planted gardens on some vacant lots in Dungeness. He collaborated with local organic gardeners to start the Port Angeles Farmers Market, and sold produce there. He gradually acquired more land leases. In 1979 he started Dungeness Organic Produce and became the fourth Washington farmer to obtain organic certification. Through the 1980s Nash sold his produce at local farmers markets and wholesale in Seattle. He had no infrastructure. He grew, harvested and sold, and what he couldn't sell he gave to friends and local food banks or composted, practices he continues today. He donates produce that doesn't sell promptly, or that is slightly blemished, to local non-profits.

In 1986, Nash and some western Washington farmers started the Farmers Own cooperative to wholesale their produce to Seattle stores. After six years they sold the brand to Charlie's distributing and trucking company.

Puget Consumer's Co-op (PCC), today the largest consumer-owned natural food



Nash's Organic has developed a variety of Nantes carrot, branded by Nash as Nash's Best!

retail co-operative in the United States, was starting up at that time, and bought Nash's produce. Nash still sells produce to PCC Natural Markets and at two Seattle farmers markets and farmers markets in four other Washington locations.

The farm partners with Olympic Medical Center to offer a weekly farmers market inside their building. In addition, Nash's sales manager, Kia Armstrong, works with local schools to improve school lunch programs, encouraging



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The farm has developed a variety of Nantes carrot, branded by Nash as Nash's Best! that has become known throughout the Northwest for its sweetness and tenderness.

food service providers at local institutions to incorporate organic food.

Today Nash's food is also sold to local restaurants and retailers, and via their community supported agriculture (CSA) Farm Share Program, which sells to customers who pay in advance of each growing season for a weekly box of seasonal fresh produce. Customers can also purchase Nash Bucks for a savings, redeemable at the Farm Store or any of Nash's markets. Three major wholesalers also distribute Nash's produce throughout the Northwest and British Columbia.

Nash's grows the full gamut of organic vegetables, and many varieties of berries and apples. The farm has developed a variety of Nantes carrot, branded by Nash as Nash's Best! that has become known throughout the Northwest for its sweetness and tenderness.

Nash's Farm Store also sells some produce grown by other regional family farms, as well as locally produced handicrafts. While devoted to promoting locally grown products, they purchase a very small amount of warm-season crops from a distributor, Organically Grown Company, that are imported from California, South America, and Mexico.

Nash met his wife, Patty, in Sequim in the mid-'80s and they married in 1994. Patty, who works as the farm's promotion coordinator, shares Nash's passion for organic farming. She helps coordinate several annual events, including a Farm Day Celebration that provides tours to area small farms, and culminates in a barn dance at Nash's packing shed. Other outreach events include booths at local festivals and presentations at the Farm Store on health, agriculture, and the environment.

Patty maintains the farm's online promotions, including a Facebook page and an extensive website that includes an archive of newsletters packed with information about the farm's operations.

In 1995 10 prime acres that Nash had been leasing became available. Nash and Patty purchased the land, and built a packing shed and greenhouses. The packing shed provided refrigeration and

space for washing, sorting and packaging produce. Nash designed and built a conveyer belt to process vegetables. With this new infrastructure, the business started to grow.

About a decade ago, Nash opened a farm stand adjacent to his 10-acre farm. The rented building, with an attached tented section, totaled about 600-square feet. In 2006 Nash purchased a nearby historic building. After extensive renovations the farm moved the store to the new site in 2011.

The new Farm Store has become a full-service organic grocery, totaling over 2,000 square feet. The store has a children's corner, educational displays, and a lending library with videos, books, and magazines that can be checked out for free, or read in the library space. Nash and Patty's vision is for the building to serve as a community center, hosting classes, workshops, film showings, and eventually a large demonstration and healing garden.

In the late 1990s the 100-acre Delta Farm where Nash had been growing his



In 2011 Nash and his team constructed a new grain dryer and a structure to house it in to ensure viability of their grain seed crop over the damp winter months.

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Nash's Organic Farm has 8 acres of composting.

carrots, went up for sale. Organic carrots require a lot of land for rotation to prevent pest infestation, so Nash needed the Delta Farm land to grow his carrots. Fearing the land would be purchased by developers and not able to buy it himself, Nash turned to PCC Natural Markets. PCC saw the need to protect this valuable farmland, and formed the PCC Farmland Trust. The Trust purchased the Delta Farm and placed a conservation easement on the land. The farm will never be developed for other than agricultural purposes. Eighty of the 100 acres are leased to Nash; the other 20 were sold to the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife for wetlands restoration.

The large barn on Delta Farm has allowed Nash to further expand. The barn provides storage for grain, hen houses, freezers, an egg house, equipment protection, and a mechanic's shed.

In 2011 Nash and his team constructed a new grain dryer and a structure to house it in on the Delta Farm to ensure viability of their grain seed crop over the damp winter months. Materials included a used propane drying unit and a 5-hp, triple-phase fan. Four bins with bases

made of a series of screens are placed over a long, airtight box called a plenum box. Air is forced through the plenum box and travels upward through the screens and out the top of the bins to dry the grain.

Over time the farm has gradually purchased more equipment, now a substantial fleet. Nash shops around for good used equipment, relying on his local field agent and classified ads in the *Capital Press* to locate deals. The majority of the farm's cultivation and seeding is done by a small fleet of older, used tractors, such as the Farmall A, C or M and Allis Chalmers G.

The farm has raised pigs for about 10 years. After weaning from their mothers, the animals are fed the farm's barley, freshly ground and soaked in whey from a local creamery. They also enjoy vegetable culls and have access to pasture. When mature, they are USDA-slaughtered and cut-and-wrapped for sale at the Farm Store or farmers markets, or custom-slaughtered for individuals by the whole or half hog.

The Delta Farm is home to 300 free-range laying hens. Organic eggs are sold in the store. Chicks are fed grain and

The large barn on Delta Farm has allowed Nash to further expand. The barn provides storage for grain, hen houses, freezers, an egg house, equipment protection and a mechanic's shed.



Nash's uses boom irrigation with water being supplied from the Dungeness River.



Nash's compost is arranged in long pyramid-shaped windrow piles. A compost turner is used to form the windrows, add water and dairy manure, and aerate the piles.

peas from the farm, and whey from the local creamery. Their feed is supplemented with kelp, bone meal, and other proteins for a few weeks, then they eat grain and bugs in the pastures.

Nash grows an annual rye grain as a seed source for cover crops which are planted, along with a vetch, in all his fields during crop rotations. Cover crop

seed is applied at about 100 pounds per acre, over approximately 200 acres per year. Vetch, a legume, fixes nitrogen in the soil through its roots. The rye holds nitrogen that it captures from the air, until it is tilled into the soil when it is about a foot tall, then releases the stored nitrogen. Soil fertility is built and maintained and erosion prevented using the

cover crops and composting; Nash applies no other fertilizer.

Farmers have long known that the three main nutrients essential for plant growth and vigor are nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). Conventional farmers apply synthetic forms of NPK to crops to force growth and increase yield, but good soil requires other

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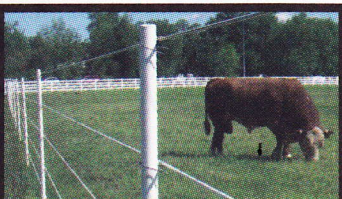
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minerals and lots of organic matter for optimum growth.

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soil with the full complement of nutrients needed for plant growth and vigor.

Nash's compost is arranged in long pyramid-shaped windrow piles. The piles start with about 50 truckloads of wood chips from a local supplier,

dumped in continuous rows. Vegetable waste is added, as well as green chop (grass and clover clippings), manure from an adjacent dairy farm's winter lagoon waste, and fish waste parts from a local processing plant. Whey from a local cheese-making operation may be added to the compost to feed beneficial bacteria and accelerate decomposition.

Bacterial action heats the piles from the inside, and they are turned and watered to maintain proper temperatures throughout the piles. A compost turner is used to form the windrows, add water and the dairy manure, and aerate the piles. See details about the machine Nash uses at www.compostturners.com.

Organic standards require that compost piles maintain certain temperatures for 15 days, turning them a minimum of five times during that period, to kill harmful bacteria and weed seeds. Nash's operation exceeds these standards. He composts for 18+ months to develop the highest quality compost. Before spring planting, as soon as the fields are dry enough to handle large equipment, cover crops are plowed under and compost is spread on the fields that need it.



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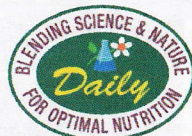
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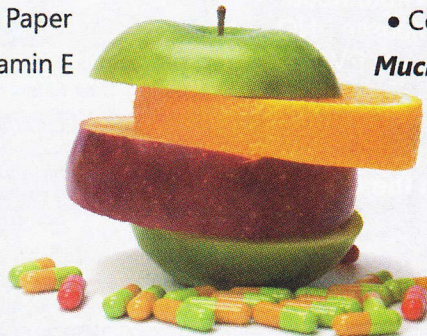
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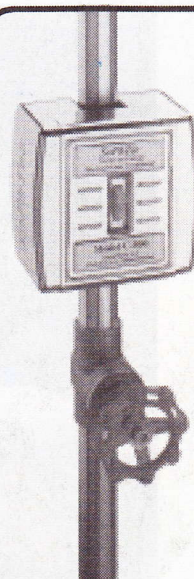
Organic standards require that compost piles maintain certain temperatures for 15 days. Nash's operation exceeds these standards. He composts for 18+ months to develop the highest quality compost.

At about the same time that Delta Farm was protected by the PCC Farmland Trust, John Willits of Port Angeles helped found the North Olympic Land Trust. He and his wife Pat owned some land in Sequim that they wanted to protect for waterfowl habitat, with a conservation easement. The Willits are avid and knowledgeable birders who have worked to provide a wildlife corridor and wintering habitat for migrating waterfowl in Dungeness. Part of their land is in wetlands. They wanted a buffer from development, other than wetlands, and approached Nash with the idea that he could farm some of their land organically to provide the buffer.

John Willits formed the Lower Dungeness Basin Wetland Protection Project, with the goal of creating the wildlife corridor, a series of wetlands and organic farms covering about 440 acres. Nash leases approximately 200 acres of Willits' land. The Willits' farm and habitat area was named Wildlife Farm of the Year by the Washington Association of Conservation Districts and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in 1999.

Nash also has earned recognition for his land stewardship activities. Between 2002 and 2011 he received eight awards, including the distinction of being the first Washington state farmer and first ever organic farmer to receive the Steward of the Land award from the American Farmland Trust.

Besides the 10 acres Nash and Patty own, they lease lands on 10 other farms throughout the Dungeness Valley, totaling about 425 acres. Leasing farmland is



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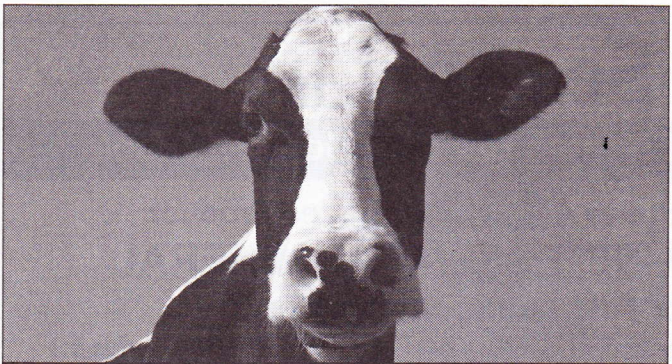




an option for future small farmers as so much farmland is prohibitively priced fewer farms are being passed down through generations, and farmland is rapidly being lost to development.

The farm grows over 100 different varieties: grain, hay, berries, seed crops and vegetable row crops. Forage plants planted throughout the farm, provide habitat for pollinating insects.

Crop rotation is Nash's primary means of controlling pests. When necessary, he uses only carefully applied certified organic soap-based pest controls.



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Though located in rainy Washington, the Dungeness Valley lies in the rain shadow of the Olympic Mountains, receiving only about 16 inches of rain per year. Farming here would be impossible if not for an extensive irrigation ditch system.

Irrigation water comes from the Dungeness River, a major salmon fishery. Nash works hard to promote efficient water use, exemplified by his farm being one of a few in the valley certified by the Pacific Rivers Council as a "Salmon-Safe Farm." Nash's organic farming practices protect water quality by using water efficiently and by preventing water contamination.

In 2011 Nash received an Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQUIP) grant through the Clallam Soil Conservation District to help purchase a low-pressure boom for irrigation. Water jets from the boom point downward and ejects a gentle mist. It uses much less water and power than the old pipe irrigation, a 5-hp vs. a 40-hp pump, and results in very little water lost to evaporation. The 236-foot long boom folds up and is moved to various locations.

Weed control presents another challenge for the organic farmer. To give the crop a head start, once seeds are planted germination time is estimated and then one or two days before germination weeds are burned.

Other weed removal methods involve tractors that pull different cultivating mechanisms to till soil and undercut weeds, requiring skill and precision on the part of the equipment operator to avoid damaging crops.

SEED SAVING

Nash participates in trials to improve wheat and vegetable crops and grows varieties to preserve and/or develop seed. Vegetable trials, done in cooperation with the Organic Seed Alliance (OSA) of Port Townsend, seek to breed varieties to the local climate and soil, extending the growing season for local organic farmers. Nash sells some seed to independently owned seed companies. He has been doing seed selection with OSA to improve his Nantes carrot variety. It can take 15 to 20 years to select and develop a successful seed, which can be reduced to 10 years with help from these knowledgeable people. Nash's farm gratefully acknowledges the fine work of OSA's staff.

Depending on the soil's needs, rye seed can be harvested and separated from the vetch seeds with seed cleaners. Nash's rye

seeds are sold as grain and cover crop seed; vetch is sold as cover crop seed. The farm also saves seed from its barley crops and raises barley to feed the pigs and chickens. Some of the crop is left in the field as habitat for overwintering waterfowl.

The carrot seed that Nash had come to rely upon became unavailable once; a common occurrence and growing problem in organic farming, as large corporations increasingly buy out small seed companies and phase out many seed varieties and heirloom seeds. Nash had some of the seed left and used it as the basis for growing and saving his own seed. He also saves seed for other crops, mainly open-pollinated varieties that breed true in subsequent generations. Nash also trains his employees in the art of seed saving. Saving open-pollinated seed by farmers and gardeners is critical to preserving seed diversity.

HELPING HANDS

Nash's crew averages 25 employees, who share transplanting, irrigation, equipment operation and maintenance, harvest, packing, delivery and sales duties. As part of their compensation, employees are allowed free produce and discounts on other groceries at the Farm Store.

The farm's staff are more than employees to Nash and Patty; they are extended family. Nash usually doesn't advertise jobs; many of the employees heard about the farm and stopped by looking for a job.

Employees come to Nash's with varying degrees of education about farming. Some grew up on farms, some have advanced degrees in agriculture, others just want to work outdoors. They learn, literally, from the ground up. No matter what their level of education, there is always more to learn. Nash is eager to share his love of the land and organic farming, and his rich lifetime experience. At the age of 70, Nash still helps manage the farm and will likely never fully retire. He exhibits the health and vitality of a much younger man. It is hard to imagine Nash's farm without Nash. Because he has incorporated the training of future farmers into his operation, his legacy will live on.

Nash has a vision of establishing a formal, systematic training program for those who want to be in agriculture, and he is looking into the possibility of forming a nonprofit to help make that happen.



Employees come to Nash's with varying degrees of education about farming. Some grew up on farms, some have advanced degrees in agriculture, others just want to work outdoors. They learn, literally, from the ground up.

His management team, staff who have demonstrated a commitment to the farm and strong work ethic, now handle the day-to-day operations of the farm, and he is working on a long-term plan to eventually transition ownership of the business to these young farmers. That he passes on his values is his greatest gift to us all. Here Nash has planted his most valuable seeds; those of our future farmers.

Lauren Turner is a freelance writer specializing in agricultural, environmental and community topics. She retired from a 30-year career with the U.S. Forest Service, where she worked as a wildlife biologist, ecosystem manager and district ranger. An avid organic gardener, she lives in Sequim, Washington with her husband and two cats.

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