

Local farm cultivates food and friendship



story and photos by Jennifer Veneklasen | PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

Hanging out with the volunteer harvest crew at Salt Creek Farm, you can feel a sense of community lingering in the air as they divvy up vegetables for their neighbors.

By partaking in the farm's labor, they learn to nurture the land and one another. The Friday morning crew begins by sorting the Thursday crew's vegetable loot, including the labor-intensive salad greens.

Each bunch of hand-picked greens are triple washed and bagged, usually taking up to 4 hours on Thursdays. There are 75 or so crates being filled — one for each family or individual who purchased a farm share.

While a few people remain near the crates sorting potatoes, squash and salad, another handful of them head out to the nearby fields.

Farm owner Doug Hendrickson's instructions to the harvest crew are simply, "pick anything you would eat."

Though it's a little late in the season for green beans, that's how things go at the farm. The harvesters are on Mother Nature's time clock.

Today it's a time for enjoying the sunshine

and near perfect temperatures as they pluck green beans and anxiously anticipate the tomatoes. Conversation flows between the pickers.

"It's about the food," says Mike Owens. "But it's also therapy."

Mike lives just steps from the farm and has been part of crew from its beginning more than 15 years ago.

He affectionately refers his friend and neighbor as "farmer Doug" and his eyes glow as he calls the farm as a godsend.

Julie Calabria, a mental health professional, is in her eighth year with Salt Creek.

Julie says that as she picks food from the fields, she is making mental notes of what she'll cook in the coming week.

She is the mother of a 10-year-old and 18-year-old, both of whom have spent time in the fields at Salt Creek harvesting.

Children in particular can benefit from visits to the farm and begin to understand that not all food comes from the grocery store.

"Kids especially love digging potatoes," Julie says.

Her older son was overweight as a child and ate a lot of junk food, she says, but today he is a healthy young man who exercises and is cognisant of what he eats.

Julie believes his healthy habits are a direct result of spending year after year at Salt Creek Farm, learning.

Barbara Lott tries not to miss a Friday morning at Salt Creek. She comes for the harvest, but mostly she comes for the wonderful conversation, she says.

Although Barbara lives alone, she gets a full share of the farm's bounty each week and is creative when it comes to sharing her vegetables and herbs.

She hosts garden parties, trades with friends and gives some away to the foster

mom and kids who live next door.

"Every weekend I'm thinking of ways to share it," she says. "It's more fun that way."

Barbara, Mike and Julie squat amongst the rows, sorting through green beans and sharing their lives.

Periodically Barbara will rise to arch her back in the sun as Mike says a few friendly words to his dog — also there for the harvest.

Julie seems focused on the task at hand, completely grounded and at peace.

"The community of this is what really keeps people coming back," she says.

The amount of food produced on the small farm is remarkable — enough to feed 75 area families for six months out of the year — and nothing at Salt Creek goes to waste.

They pick a separate crate of scraps for the goats and if a family can't pick up their vegetables one week, they get taken to the Port Angeles Serenity House.

Lee Norton, Doug's wife and farm mother, is described by the harvest crew as kind and loving. She serves as the farm's banker, accountant, writer, goat herder, milker, cheese maker and overall spirit-lifter.

And because farmers lives aren't easy or predictable, she also works part-time as a Registered Nurse at Olympic Medical Center for the stability and

a little thing called health insurance.

Doug was a ranger at Olympic National Park before the farming bug got too big that he just had to itch it. Surprisingly, he took the leap into "full-time farmer" without a lot of fear.

"I knew the park wasn't going anywhere," Doug says, speculating on what he'd do if the farm didn't prosper. But prosper it has.

On just four acres, they have more than 50 healthy, viable crops.

"Diversity is part of the fun," Doug says. "And it keeps the farm strong."

The other thing that keeps this farm strong is their Community Supported Agriculture — or CSA — program which is the reason the harvest crew is here in the first place.

How it began

Somewhere around 1993 Doug and Lee had a simple idea.

They wanted to grow food locally and sell it to local people.

Doesn't sound too complicated, but because our nation's food consumption has become increasingly complex and farming has never been a sure thing, the couple's simple idea

required some faith.

When food is bought locally, no fuel is needlessly wasted trucking potatoes across the country, no chemicals are added to increase the life and look of a raspberry, and your money stays firmly planted on the North Olympic Peninsula, not shipped off to some far-away food company.

Most local food is certified organic which means that you can rest assured that your produce is free from synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

But with all the benefits to consumer health, the environment and our local economy, for small farms like Salt Creek to survive, community support is crucial.

Doug and Lee knew this, and they were the first people on the Peninsula to implement Community Supported Agriculture.

CSA begins with the fundamental idea that farmers and consumers ought to know each another. A novel idea since most Americans are completely removed from the food production process.

In Barbara Kingsolver's new book, "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle," she estimates that most people of her grandparents' generation had an intuitive sense of agriculture basics.

She says they knew what fruits and vegetables came into season when, which ones keep through winter, how to preserve others, when the first frost will be and how that effects the harvest. Most importantly, they knew what animals and vegetables thrived in one's immediate region and how to live well on those.

She writes, "Few people of my generation, and approximately none of our children could answer any of those questions, let alone all. This knowledge has vanished from our culture."

Kingsolver goes on to point out that in just two generations we have transformed ourselves from a rural to an urban nation.

"North American children begin their school year around Labor Day and finish at the beginning of June with no idea that this arrangement was devised to free up children's labor when it was needed on the farm," she writes.

Most of us know little of the dance Mother Nature performs each season to bring us her bounty, nor do we know about the massive amounts of work that goes into a small farm.

CSA programs connect consumers and farmers in a direct seasonal-long relationship. In return for an initial subscription fee, members get a variety of fresh organically grown vegetables and herbs directly from the farm on a weekly basis.

This provides consumers with affordable, fresh food while giving farmers the support they need to sustain their farms.

With CSA, you will know who grew your



Two full green houses at Salt Creek Farm are devoted to tomato cultivation. Jeane Skow, a member of the harvest crew, says her favorite part of coming to the farm are tomato tastings, a time when Doug slices samples from his many varieties and distributes them to the crew.

food and where it came from.

Salt Creek also offers something that not all other CSA programs do — the opportunity to become a working member.

Doug wasn't raised on a farm, but says he has the "farming gene" all the same and passes his enthusiasm on to the members who decide to be part of the harvest crew.

His first real project was when he and Lee



Doug Hendrickson brings salad greens up from the farm's below ground cooler. No electricity needed, this storage system relies on nature to keep the veggies at a cool temperature.

lived in Olympia.

They didn't have much of a yard, but the landlord and Doug made an agreement that if Doug cleared out a mess of scotch broom, then he could have privilege of planting there.

"He went berserk," Lee says.

Doug never lost the desire to farm, and after moving to Port Angeles and working for Olympic National Park, the couple eventually bought acreage west of Port Angeles where the land was less expensive compared to the supposedly more fertile fields towards Sequim.

They began quietly advocating, getting people they knew interested in local food and sustainability.

See salt creek Page 14 >



Mike Owens is the farm's "right hand man" and has been part of the harvest crew for 15 years.



Barbara Lott and Julie Calabria enjoy a perfectly beautiful summer day in the fields at Salt Creek Farm. However, temperatures are not always so pleasing, and cold and rainy weather doesn't grant the crew a day pass. During those times, they're still out harvesting crops, but even then Julie says it's not so bad. "Lee makes us tea," she says with a smile.