

Extension 'Cord

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Connecting People, Resources, & Knowledge

"Welcome to the Extension 'Cord, a monthly briefing paper from WSU Snohomish County Extension. Even though we have existed for over 100 years, we have realized that too many people are unaware of the diversity and impact of our programs. Each issue will highlight the purpose, activities and results of one particular program. The 'Cord will showcase the work of our 1,000 volunteers and 25 staff. Please do not hesitate to contact any of our staff for more information."

Curt Moulton, Extension Director



Dr. Stephen Jones discussing wheat variety trials in Western Washington

Small Scale Grain Production in Western Washington

Up until the mid-twentieth century, grains such as wheat and barley used to be common crops on many Western Washington farms. During that time, farmers often included small grains in their rotation to feed themselves and their livestock. However, with the emergence of cheap oil, it became more cost effective to buy grain products from mid-west farmers than to grow them locally. As a result, most of the varieties and techniques yesterday's farmers utilized to bring in a crop have been lost and forgotten.

Currently, growers of soft white winter wheat in Western Washington are exporting production to Asia through the



New wheat variety trials in Marysville

international commodity markets. Unfortunately, inputs are expensive and prices are very low. However, this appears to be changing. Consumers are demanding sustainably raised, locally produced food and grains.

Local buyers for feed and flour are captivated by the prospect of developing this new market, substantiated by a recent exchange of ideas organized by Washington State University Snohomish County Extension.

The exchange came during a recent discussion with Dr. Stephen Jones, renowned wheat breeder and director of the WSU Mount Vernon Northwest Research and Extension Center. Focus was on what's possible, practical, and profitable for regional small grain producers.

Jones addressed a crowd ranging from small 'backyard bread' growers to one of the largest poultry feed buyers in the state. Audience members were not there for a lecture, but rather for a dialog, as they queried Jones on an array of topics from heirloom grains, harvesting techniques, and seed distribution to organic poultry feed, barley for beer, and distillery grains. Since grain production experience among the group varied from novice to expert, Jones fielded questions such as first time planting, soil preparation, fertility, protein content, and disease concerns.

The infrastructure necessary to bring local small grains from "field to flour" was a topic of interest to everyone. "Growing wheat is the easy part," Jones remarked. "What you do with it after harvest is where it gets complicated."

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Mature wheat with companion cover crop of red clover

For successful grain production in Western Washington, challenges to be met include cleaning, drying, storage, transportation, and milling—all infrastructure resources that haven't been available in the region since the 1970s. In addition, growers will need to organize to insure adequate production of a consistent quality and sufficient quantities to meet growing market demand.

Local millers are currently importing organic grains from Canada to meet their needs. Western Washington producers have the talent and the means to produce a quality organic product to meet this demand for local breads and flour. However, it will be up to the region's growers to re-develop the infrastructure lost.

This was a revelation for most discussion participants who, based on program evaluations, seemed up to the challenge. More than three quarters of the information presented during the exchange was new to participants and 94% of the group indicated they would recommend attending a similar discussion to their colleagues. "[Dr. Jones] made an effort to understand what the audience wanted and explained from the ground up..." commented one grower. This sentiment echoed throughout the group, both during the session and in the evaluations.

Growers appear to be ready for the next step—bridging the gap between local production and product. Almost half of those responding offered to participate in future focus groups designed to explore the issues surrounding infrastructure redevelopment and to help find solutions for the identified challenges.

In the meantime, Extension is working with Snohomish County to expand the number of crops and varieties that can make use of the county's seed drier at Cathcart and help expand cropping and market options for Snohomish County farmers.

Andrew Corbin,
WSU Snohomish County Agriculture



Snohomish County's seed dryer and storage facility at Cathcart

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