

VASHON-MAURY ISLAND
BEACHCOMBER

COMMENTARY: You can grow grains here

- Wed Oct 26th, 2016 8:30am



I grew up on a 40-acre farm in New York State where my family grew 20 different crops for fresh market. It was a love-hate relationship for me. I loved being outside and watching the plants grow from tiny seedlings to sturdy plants that produced bushels of food. Waking up to the sounds of the Johnny Popper tractor and the steel wheels of the antique potato digger churning was where the hate came in.

I probably didn't think much about a lot of things back then, but I can say with certainty I didn't think anything about grains. There are a lot grown in New York, but I honestly never noticed. Grains in Western Washington are like that too. They go unnoticed and don't cause traffic accidents from people haphazardly pulling their cars over to admire and photograph. With over 80 crops grown in the Western Washington region, most people don't realize that wheat and barley are even on the list.

I often wonder about Eastern Washington, where over 2 million acres of wheat are grown, and it dominates the landscape. Does it, too, go unnoticed simply because there is so much of it? Does anyone wonder where all that wheat goes and what becomes of it? Which leads to the question, why do we even bother growing grains here when there are 2 million acres of it on the east side, not to mention the other 50 million acres grown in other parts of the country? The answer is because we can.

Western Washington is actually an ideal place to grow grains. We've just let the commodity market lead us to believe otherwise. We average three times the yield of other areas that are known for grain, and the flavors are tremendous due to our soils and maritime climate. Not to say that grains will ever replace the more lucrative crops, such as specialty potatoes, tulips or heirloom tomatoes, but they can work together in a rotation system to help rebuild the soil and break pest and disease cycles. We can't compete with Eastern Washington. Why would we want to? What we can do is grow unique grains that fit into a unique system.

The Washington State University Bread Lab program in Burlington contributes to this type of thinking by using classical plant breeding techniques to develop grain varieties that are suitable for our climate, more nutritious and more flavorful. These improved varieties provide benefits to the farmer, the processor and the consumer by not only being profitable, but also being accessible, nutritious and affordable.

The fact that grains can also add to our local economy is a bonus, one we are only now beginning to realize. Barley becomes malt, which is made into beer. Wheat becomes flour, which is made into bread, pizza, noodles and pastries. Keeping these things here adds value; it adds jobs.

Growing grains isn't complicated, and it needn't be limited to half-million acre swaths. Anyone can grow them. Farmers of any size, home gardeners, schools, even small grass patches next to sidewalks can be converted to wheat or barley. Grain can easily be planted on a small scale by hand, or with a broadcast spreader in October for winter varieties or April for spring varieties. You can plant grain as a cover crop to protect and improve soil quality, or if you really want some fun, harvest the seed and mill it yourself. (Be careful if you choose this option. Once you discover fresh milling you could very well become a different person that your friends and family may find annoying. Not that I am speaking from experience). Grains and pseudograins such as buckwheat are incredibly beautiful. Once you grow one plant, one row or one field, you will find it calls to you to stop and admire.

I go back to New York every summer to visit my parents, who are still farming at the age of 74. I drive by many fields of wheat. They seem to be everywhere and always have been. I make a point to stop on the side of the road for a moment to admire and take a picture. Maybe someone driving by will wonder why I am pulled over, then will notice the grains. After that, the possibilities are endless.

— Kim Binczewski is the Managing Director at the WSU Bread Lab. This column is part of a series by Vashon Island Growers Association (VIGA) members and supporters. VIGA represents local farmers and those who eat and use their products.