

The Road Back Home to Port Townsend

by Carol Anne Modena, Co-op Staff

Originally published in The Co-op Commons, Sept./Oct. 2006

Ten years ago Peter and Mary Kay Burgess packed up all their worldly possessions and left Port Townsend. They left behind their friends of 13 years and their comrades at the Shipwrights' Coop and the Artful Dodger. They were bound for Tonasket, in the Okanogan country east of the mountains, to grow organic apples. Now They've found a way to return—to bring us the fruits of their labor: Lapin cherries, Arctic Jay white nectarines and their premier Crimson Gala apples.

Peter looked tan and tired as we talked in July. He'd just delivered 30 boxes of Lapin cherries to the Coop. He'd left home at 5 a.m. that morning, headed out on the weekly delivery route to the Bellingham and Mount Vernon Coops, the Star Store in Langley and onto the 3:30 ferry to Port Townsend. The day before, he and Mary Kay had been sorting cherries on the porch in Tonasket as the thermometer said 106 degrees.

What drew these two sailors and marine trades artisans to land-locked Tonasket? They sailed into Port Townsend and put down roots here for a while, but they couldn't sail into (or out of) Tonasket. Well, maybe they did in a round-about way. Ten years ago, on a sailing trip to Mexico, a conversation with a couple of Canadians ended up changing their lives. Those B.C. sailors told Peter and Mary Kay about their orchard in Penicton where they worked like crazy in the growing season and were able to spend time in the winter in the Mexican sun.

Farming was remote from either Peter or Mary Kay's experience, but something about the idea resonated deeply with an evolving feeling that it was time for a change. They asked more and more questions of their new friends; they learned that land prices were still reasonable in the Okanogan. During Port Townsend's mild summers, they'd found themselves drawn to Eastern Washington, to the sun and the heat. They started calling real estate offices and ended up finding a 40-year old, 12-acre orchard in Tonasket, "a really neat place," said Peter. "We scraped up enough dough to make a down payment and pulled it off. We've never regretted it once." (I didn't ask him if that included when the alarm went off that morning.)

They set about the 3-year process of using sustainable, organic practices necessary to have the land certified organic. Peter said it's not just to have organic food and a way to make a living, but also to have food and habitat for other animals. The couple also set about dramatically changing the orchard and now have 3 acres in production, with 3 different tree fruit crops. They've planned it out pretty carefully, so that the harvest schedule allows them to focus on each crop in turn. First the cherries in July, then a three-week break, then the white nectarines in August, and finally the Crimson Galas in September and October.

Peter and Mary Kay were looking for a crop to "fit" between the harvesting of cherries and apples. Peter had tasted non-organic white nectarines grown by a neighbor and thought they tasted "absolutely tropical." He talked with Dave Wilson Nursery, a family-run operation in Modesto, California specializing in fruit and nut trees. He found that Arctic Jay white nectarines

fit neatly into the harvest window and had won the nursery's renowned taste trials as the best taste of *any* fruit tree.

The Burgesses also totally revamped the apple orchard. The 40-year old Golden and Red Delicious apple trees were old and tall, needing very labor-intensive harvesting from ladders. The Rome apple trees were younger and smaller, more manageable trees, but not a stand-out eating variety. So they focused on the Romes and actually changed them into Crimson Galas—not quite a sex-change operation, but equally dramatic for the trees. They accomplished this by removing the Rome's branches and grafting young Crimson Gala branches, called scion wood, onto the Rome trees. The Galas are wonderful apples—crisp, sweet, juicy—and they look like perfect red apples are supposed to look.

And in the winter, when the orchard is frozen asleep, Peter and Mary Kay can usually find a way to spend some time on their boat somewhere sunny and warm. Their life as small organic orchardists is possible, Peter says, because of their direct relationships with the 4 stores to which they deliver their harvest each week in summer. They can't afford a middleman. And we get fruit picked at the peak of flavor and ripeness by people we know. Our coop is their biggest customer, even though the Bellingham store is larger. Maybe it's that original Port Townsend connection. Or maybe it's Brendon O'Shea, our produce buyer. "Brendon's actually come to visit our orchard!" Peter says with amazement. "Nobody else drives all the way out to do that!" We think that kind of direct link with growers makes a whole lot of sense for our Coop fruit eaters. And it gives Peter and Mary the best excuse to keep on coming home to Port Townsend.