

3 GENERATIONS GOING STRONG: LAZY J TREE FARM

DEBORAH SCHUMACHER, Staff Writer

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You can find something to eat from Lazy J Tree Farm at The Food Co-op almost year round. The farm produces garlic and potatoes, apples and Asian pears on about 80 acres located between Sequim and Port Angeles. When I arrived at the farm in early September they had just harvested about 1,500 pounds of garlic that farm hands were preparing for market.

Lazy J Tree Farm is currently operated by Steve Johnson and his son, 2nd and 3rd generation farmers. The farm was started by Steve's dad George in the 1950s and has grown to its current 80 to 85 acres that includes, in addition to 60 acres in Christmas trees, 8 acres in apples and Asian pears, 2 acres in potatoes, and about half an acre in garlic. I asked Steve if he'd planted any nut trees and he promptly replied, "No, I'm the only nut on the farm."

The farm, which is certified organic, has that feel of being part of a landscape that has successfully integrated cultivation with its natural neighborhood for a long time. There's a big weathered barn at the end of the gravel road approach, equipment sheds, a small chicken tractor that looked interesting to me. Large trees shade house and barn. The farm is home to a small flock of chickens—only one lone rooster showed himself—and a dog named Riley. And then, of course, there are orchards.

Most of the orchard trees were planted in the mid-80s and include (not in order of ripening) Gravenstein, King, Akane, Burgundy, Prima (a cider and cooking apple), Jonagold, Mutsu, Melrose, Golden Delicious, Chehalis and Wagner. We spent a little time in a small orchard of Akane apples, a mid-season apple on semi-dwarf trees, talking about fruit trees and cultivation methods. Gravensteins, for example, are an early October apple that not so much falls from the tree as "tends to push themselves off the tree." Apples are maturing late this year, Steve informed me, because of our cold spring. But that could be in our favor as fruit that's harvested when it's later in the season and getting cool will tend to store better.

Steve also explained that he doesn't mow in his mature orchards but lets the grasses grow. He used to use a certified organic spray for disease control but stopped spraying entirely in the last few years. He uses mulch and compost in the spring to keep his trees healthy and stays out of the orchards when it's wet and warm to avoid spreading apple scab. Steve's been fortunate: he hasn't had any major disease problems in his orchards.

Most of the farm is planted in Christmas trees that are sold in local communities by the Cub Scouts and at Hadlock Building Supply in Port Hadlock, Henery's in Port Townsend, and the Port Townsend, Sequim and Port Angeles Swain's stores. A shearing machine is used to prune Christmas trees to the "conical hedge" shape we all like for our Christmas trees. All other trees are hand-pruned. Cultivars include Noble Fir, Douglas Fir, Grand Fir, Nordman, Sequoia, and Engleman Spruce. You can also come out to the farm between Thanksgiving and Christmas to cut your own tree—Lazy J provides the handsaws. The cost for a u-pick tree last year was \$5.50/foot. Steve expects that cost to go up a bit this year.

Across the road from the small orchard is a fish pond stocked with 200 steelhead trout. Steve has been working in conjunction with Valhalla Trout Farm, a commercial hatchery that stocks ponds and lakes, to improve the genetics of the fish. The fish will be harvested for eggs this year and then be returned to the pond for another year's growth. Steve has harvested and smoked some and found them good tasting. Feeding fish, I learned, is a lot like feeding scratch to chickens—throw out a handful and they come running, or in the case of fish, come rising to the surface. Some of the fish have names: one hardy specimen has survived two eagle attacks and so has earned the moniker "Almost." Other farm projects

include fish habitat restoration, a collaboration between Lazy J Tree Farm and the Lower Elwha tribe as well as other U.S. governmental agencies. The farm also takes in local yard waste for its composting facility, a plus for the community.

There's also the house that Steve says he's lived in since he was 4 years old and that is currently without water because a water main on the property broke about 5 months ago. Down a gravel road there's the log cabin Steve started building when he was 18 years old and that he's just getting around to completing. "One thing or another," he explained, has kept him from finishing the job sooner. The cabin sits in a clearing surrounded by woods and includes a hand-constructed stone fireplace built from beach rock and an open sleeping loft good for cold nights and star-gazing.

I asked Steve where he came up with the name "Lazy J Tree Farm" and he said it was something he came across in his dad's farm records and other writings. The name, he said, just stuck. His son Graeme, a brand new dad of twin sons, works on the farm with Steve. Steve also has a daughter, Haley, who doesn't work on the farm at this time. His girlfriend Vicki is also, Steve says, a great help on the farm. Lazy J Tree Farm has the potential to become a 4th generation farm should these new young sprouts—his "Farmer Boys," Steve calls them—grow up to take the farm over from their father one day.