

Growing New Farms

The People Inside Food To Bank On

Shonie Schlotzhauer, Sustainable Connections

"How do you really know when crops will be ready for market?" "What exactly is a bunch of carrots?" "What do you think about permamulch in this climate?" "What techniques do you use to thin carrots, prepare beds, spread cover crop seeds, cut salad mix, or market?"

These are a few of the questions that Food To Bank On farmers Walter Haugen (F.A. Farm) and Gretchen Norman (Holistic Homestead) might be asking their program mentor, Brent Harrison of The Growing Garden, this season. These three farms comprise a 2006 Food To Bank On team. They'll be visiting each other's farms sharing resources and advice throughout the season, to the great benefit of Walter and Gretchen, both relatively new to farming.

"Getting input from a farmer who knows the vagaries of this place and its weather and soils will be huge," says Walter, who joins Food To Bank On this year. He and his wife Toni Hammarlund are busy this spring, turning their five acres on Barr Road in Ferndale into a thriving market garden. They heard about the Food To Bank On program last



Gretchen Norman works at one of farming's never-ending tasks.

year, but the program was already full for the season so they had to wait until 2006 to join. That didn't stop them from carving a half acre for vegetables out of their field of thistles, operating a roadside stand, selling at the Bellingham Farmers Market, planting 25 fruit trees, and re-roofing their barn, however.

This year F.A. Farm will double the size of their row-crop area, continue the produce stand, and explore markets in Birch Bay and Maple Falls. They'll use Food To Bank On as a training ground for bigger contracts. "It'll help us get into a scheme of putting together consistent orders and keeping a regular delivery schedule—and it's a great market that's doing something positive." Besides developing wholesale capacity, Walter will use this season to prepare for starting a Community

Supported Agriculture (CSA) program next year. The record-keeping that Food To Bank On requires will be an invaluable baseline for the complexity of CSA planning.

In her second year of Food To Bank On, Gretchen Norman holds fast to the underlying focus of Holistic Homestead: "to restore the health of the soil to sustain the health of the

plants, animals, and therefore humans."

Quickly becoming a seasoned farmer with a degree from Fairhaven College in Holistic Homesteading and Sustainable Agriculture, three years of CSA experience at Cedarville Farm, and her current production based at Broadleaf Farm, Gretchen has benefited from several formal and informal mentoring relationships already. This year she requested to be paired with Brent, hoping for a new source of advice, inspiration, and especially some time-efficient techniques of cultivating and harvesting crops.

With her range of practical and academic experience, Gretchen is well prepared to launch the CSA program that she hopes will become an integral part of her marketing portfolio. She also sells to several restaurants and markets, and will deliver to the Nooksack-Everson food bank for her Food To Bank On contract.

Both F.A. Farm and Holistic Homestead are listed in the 2006 Farm Map & Guide, as Walter and Gretchen explore every marketing avenue available.



Experienced farmer and mentor Brent Harrison (above left), Aspiring FTBO farmer Walter Haugen (holding post, above) works with FTBO farmer David Peterson to build an inexpensive greenhouse.

Completing this exemplary Food To Bank On team is Brent Harrison: long-time organic farmer, Co-op supplier and Farm Fund Committee chairman, Bellingham Farmers Market vendor, and purveyor of fine herbs to many local groceries. And an effective, generous mentor, evidenced by successful new farmer Simone Rogers of Paradise Farm. Through Food To Bank On, Simone received consultation from Brent over the course of her three years in the program, and is now a Food To Bank On mentor herself. Several other local farms have gotten their start at The Growing Garden under Brent's careful eye.

Watch for stories on other Food To Bank On farmers in future newsletters.

Photos by Joanne Plucy & Shonie Schlotzhauer