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AGRICULTURE

Whatcom County growers survive on sweat and pride

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Maria Guzman shrugged and managed to smile as she displayed the ripening winter squash in the field she had cultivated. Big chunks had been bitten out of many of the big butter-yellow globes.

"Venado," she said in Spanish. Deer. Hoof prints poked the dark wet earth around the sprawling vines.

"We don't have money for a fence," she said. "I wish they would leave a little more for us."

Deer are just one of the problems that Whatcom County's small farmers must face, as they look for profitable ways to serve a growing appetite for fresh local foods.

Guzman is part of Cooperativa Jacal, a vegetable-growing cooperative at 3599 Loomis Trail Road that was launched by the Community to Community Development farmworker advocacy group in Bellingham. This is the cooperative's first full year of operation, and progress has been slow and hard.

"It was a pretty hard year getting the soil ready, and the weather didn't really cooperate," said Roberto Bermudez, another member.

The cooperative has still managed to produce a wide variety of beans, peppers, eggplant, tomato, garlic, lettuce, cucumber, kale, kohlrabi and other vegetables. Some is sold at the Bellingham Farmers Market. Some is being served at local restaurants.

"We've had very good luck using your products," Bellingham Golf & Country Club chef Michael Hannah told Bermudez. "The product has always been beautiful and very well-received."

Hannah was part of a group of local restaurant and grocery buyers who toured four local food producers Friday, Aug. 29, as part of an event organized by Sustainable Connections in advance of that group's Sept. 7-14 "Eat Local Week" promoting local foods. (More information on Eat Local Week is available online at www.sustainableconnections.org/foodfarming/eatlocalweek/.)

At another tour stop, visitors heard about Tim Lukens' struggles establishing his goat milk-based business at Grace Harbor Farms, 2347 Birch Bay-Lynden Road.

Lukens is a former commercial fisherman. He and his wife, Grace, bought a couple of goats in 1999, envisioning their milk as potential emergency rations. Like many people, they worried that computers confused by the turn to the year 2000 could disrupt the world's food supply system.

That didn't happen, but the Lukens discovered they really enjoyed their goats. They started out making goat milk soap, selling it at the Bellingham Farmers Market and eventually in a kiosk at Bellis Fair mall.

"People buying soap said, 'Do you make cheese?' and I said no for about a year," Lukens said.

Now the answer is yes. The output from his 39 milking goats is turned into a variety of cheeses, including a traditional French-style chevre that sells briskly at \$8.99 for a half-pound.

Besides offering the output in local markets, Lukens also sells bottled milk, cheeses, soaps and lotions from a farm store. A small sandwich board is enough to pull in passing motorists. Lukens believes high gas prices are keeping a lot of Northwesterners closer to home, and that has been good for him.

"We've had a lot of people from Seattle, vacationing in Birch Bay, whom we've never seen before," he said.

Goat's milk has an image problem, Lukens said. He believes that's partly because mass-produced goat's milk on supermarket shelves has an off-putting taste. His own product, pasteurized and chilled in small batches, is hard to tell from cow's milk.

The other part of the image problem is the bad smell given off by male goats during the breeding season, which extends from about now through February.

"They're nice creatures and they want to love you, but they stink," Lukens said. "The does (females) seem to like it. It works for them."

Lukens has been selling his products as far south as Seattle, but at this point he's retrenching, focusing on Whatcom County.

"The goal is a smaller goat herd, more efficiency, because the feed costs have literally doubled and tripled," he said. "I've had to forgo the concept of 'more is better, more volume is more profit.' Every time I try to crack that ceiling of production, I lose money."

At Silver Springs Creamery, 256 E. Hemmi Road, owner Eric Sundstrom is still working to get his business back on its feet after a February 2007 arson fire that destroyed barns, cows and farm equipment.

He's making cheese and ice cream, and a farm store is operating. Soon, he expects to have things set up so his retail customers can watch milking and cheese-making in progress. Some of the milk he uses for cheese comes from the Lukens' goats.

At Bellewood Acres, 231 Ten Mile Road, apple growers John and Dorie Belisle offered the first few early varieties of fruit for sale at

the farm store beginning Friday, Aug. 29, including a newer variety called Zestar and a traditional baking favorite, Gravenstein.

But it has been a rough year for Jonagolds, the most cold-sensitive variety. An April cold snap, accompanied by a breeze, was too much for the orchard's \$35,000 fan system for frost protection. About 15 acres of the trees hang heavy with ripening apples that will taste just fine in a few more weeks, but the frost left them misshapen. Some have brown grooves running from stem to bottom.

"I can't sell this to anybody because nobody wants ugly fruit," John Belisle said, brandishing one of the apples.

But he knows that nature doesn't make him any guarantees.

"We truly believe it's an honor to coax food from dirt," he said. "It makes everything else I've ever done in my life pale in comparison."

Local restaurateurs appreciate their efforts.

"We have some of the best produce in the country in peak season," said Josh Silverman, co-owner of Bellingham's Nimbus restaurant.

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