

# THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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## **Everson's Cloud Mountain Farm to go nonprofit, give hands-on training**

DEAN KAHN - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

EVERSON - Cloud Mountain Farm is going through big changes, but they're not yet visible to passers-by.

Owners Tom and Cheryl Thornton plan to sell their popular business to a yet-to-be-determined entity that will convert their 20-acre farm into a nonprofit center to provide education and hands-on training to new and experienced farmers and gardeners.

The couple, who started Cloud Mountain as a commercial orchard in 1978, will continue to work and live at the farm, and Cheryl Thornton will sit on the center's new board of directors.



KATIE GREENE | THE BELLINGHAM HERALD - Brendan Burkhart, left, and Chris Testa, right, look at the spacing between poles that will become a high tunnel, which blocks out wind, for tomatoes, melons, peppers and various other crops at Cloud Mountain Farm Tuesday afternoon, April 26, 2011 in Everson. The farm, which has become a nonprofit, offers a variety of plants, fruits and vegetables.

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They're already well-known for offering workshops and other educational programs, and for experimenting with crops and growing techniques, all while diversifying their farm nestled against the western flank of Sumas Mountain.

"It's a continuation and expansion of what we're already doing," Cheryl Thornton said. "The center brings it full circle."

The transaction is being handled by Whatcom Community Foundation, which manages numerous funds, including at least two geared to helping local agriculture - the Sustainable Whatcom Fund and the Whatcom Farm Incubator Fund.

Activities supported by the Sustainable Whatcom Fund include helping farmers grow and market their goods, and working with schools to serve students more local food. One goal of the Farm Incubator Fund is to provide access to affordable farmland, possibly by acquiring and leasing acreage.

People working on those projects saw the need for a center where people could learn farming and where crops and techniques could be tested.

"Everybody was saying, 'Look what Cloud Mountain does,'" said Sue Webber, who does staff work for the Sustainable Whatcom Fund and will be on the Cloud Mountain Farm Center board of directors.

Instead of duplicating what the Thorntons do, organizers approached them last October about selling their farm and converting it to a nonprofit operation.

"It's been an easy fit for us," Tom Thornton said. "We've been doing that sort of thing all along."

Paperwork on the deal is nearly done, said Webber, who declined to name the purchase price.

Cloud Mountain will continue to grow and sell berry plants, fruit and nut trees, fruits and vegetables, ornamental plants and grape rootstock - to keep it a working farm and to raise money for the nonprofit center.

The farm's annual fruit festival also will continue, but Cloud Mountain will phase out its landscape installation work.

"The landscape business doesn't really fit into this kind of concept," Tom Thornton said.

As a nonprofit program, the center will be better able to coordinate with other agencies and programs, to seek grants and to work with students and interns. An advisory committee will develop programs for the center, with some possibly starting later this year.

The goal is to help "market farmers," those who grow diverse fresh produce for local and regional sales, by helping them diversify and market their crops, and by growing produce more months of the year, Tom Thornton said.

Land was much cheaper when the Thorntons started Cloud Mountain more than three decades ago. They've had to refine and vary their operation through the years, so they

know programs at the new center will have to be well-grounded to be of value to farmers, gardeners and students.

"It's got to make economic sense," Cheryl Thornton said, "because land is expensive and labor is expensive."

Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2011/05/02/1990385/cloud-mountain-farm-to-become.html#ixzz1NOfHLxHy>