



TRANSITIONING WHIDBEY'S NEXT FARMING GENERATION – ONE CONNECTION AT A TIME

Living on Whidbey Island is, well, for lack of a more eloquent word – distinct. In our own way, every day, we take a step further to cultivate a relationship to this place. More than just a name or a point on the map, Whidbey Island's appeal assumes many forms. Perhaps Whidbey is where you grew up or the place you now call home – carried here by career or retirement or family. Or, perchance, this island is an escape for you; a seasonal refuge while home resides elsewhere.

Each of us – we have a story to tell, and we are our own writer, publisher, narrator, and archivist. Our story is tied ultimately to the land. What is "a person" without "a place"? Our relationship to place – does it change? Of course. From apathy to awe, rooted to enraged, our emotions fuel the complex bond we have with "our" version of this island. Yet, as our connections ebb and flow, just like the tides that surround us, Whidbey still remains – a geographic thread that unites us and grounds us.

Whether you plan to live here a lifetime or stay here a short time, I'd venture a guess that when you step foot on Whidbey, a shift happens in you. Maybe it's an insignificant sigh or deep breath, a heightened awareness or fine-tuned feeling. Or perhaps I've missed the mark entirely. Whatever that shift inside you may be, this island's geography makes where we live unique – with appeals, challenges, and opportunities exclusive to this place.

The geography of Whidbey provides us with a diverse array of landscapes in a very small area. With nearly 150 miles of shoreline serving as a terrestrial boundary, our island is painted with a host of ecosystem variety – from forested uplands in the south to fertile prairies and open woodlands in the north. In this mosaic of landscapes, one of Whidbey's most defining remains that of the "farm." Agricultural practices date far back beyond the non-native pioneers who settled here nearly two centuries ago. Ancestors of today's Coast Salish tribes burned glacial outwash prairies to promote the growth of prized plants like Camas, Bracken Fern, and Nettle. People have been telling their story on Whidbey as far back as people existed here,

managing the land in small and big ways, fueled by emotion and an innate desire to write their own stories in the land.

Today, Whidbey's farmland is still prominent in the landscape, contributing along with forests, saltwater marshes, wetlands, and prairies, to the rural and less developed feel that draws so many to visit and ultimately, to stay. Yet, while we sit here and romanticize on the visual aesthetics of the working family farm, the reality is that the average age of the Island County farmer is climbing. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture in 2012, Island County's average farmer is 59, a full year older than the national average of 58. Nationally, "beginning farmers" – those considered having farmed for 10 years or less – account for only 22% of the national farming workforce. Several years ago, Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD) conducted a survey with island farmers that asked similar questions. Of those responding, 82 percent of respondents indicated they were over 50 years old, and over 50 percent identified as "beginning farmers."

On Whidbey, these numbers tell us a clear story. On the one hand, we have significantly more first-time farmers trying to "make it" here on Whidbey, yet, we simultaneously have an increasing age gap in agricultural ownership. Throughout the nation, a shift is taking place in agriculture. Unlike past generations, who'd pass their land on to other members of their own flock, many of today's young people are finding themselves seeking work in urban areas, often saying "bye-bye" to their rural hometowns for good. Farms once stewarded by a single family over generations and artisan skills once learned over a lifetime now represent the exception more than the example. Yet, Whidbey's farmland still remains – and the number of prospective farmers are, in fact, growing here – but a vital link on this island is missing. What used to come naturally from one family generation to the next is now more challenging when both ends of the farm generational spectrum are often strangers to one another. What does this mean for the future of the island's agriculture? Right now, that story is being shaped by a collaborative effort underway. An effort led by a partnership of organizations whose mission is serve as the missing link and to provide resources, relationships, and tools for both the transitioning and beginning Whidbey farmer.

Last year, the Organic Farm School (OFS) – formerly known as the Greenbank Farm School – as well as WSU Extension San Juan County (WSU San Juan), Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD), Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC), and the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild (AG), were awarded funding by the USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program – a three-year grant with a focus on developing a comprehensive and integrated resource program for beginning farmers and ranchers (BFRs). Living on an island tasks both the new and experienced farmer with challenges and opportunities not experienced by their mainland counterparts. That's where the creativity of this island-style project comes in.

The long term goal of the islands BFR program is to assist BFRs with establishing, growing, and improving farm enterprises in the neighboring island communities of Whidbey and the San Juans through:

- Training opportunities manifested in a BFR workshop series
- Expansion of the OFS curriculum and training capacity
- Offering of farm incubator opportunities to new island farmers
- Facilitation of BFR access to local farmland
- Providing of business planning, financial management, and marketing
- Developing a mentoring program which links transitioning farmers to local BFRs

The project's six strategies above are designed to work together to address key barriers to BFRs on the islands:

- the need for production training, education, and mentoring
- the access to affordable land and start-up infrastructure

- the development of financial and marketing skills imperative to any successful farm business

And the project goal is to find real solutions to the unique challenges faced by our island farmers – geographic isolation that limits access to regional markets and support services, and high real estate values that make it challenging to transition farmland from one owner to the next.

Pieces of the project are already underway, while some are still in the design process. Two full time OFS instructors are leading the 2017 farm training course where historically only one had, making it possible to take on more students each year. Several public training workshops have occurred, including a haymaking workshop on September 21st here on Whidbey led by WSU Extension San Juan. WICD and the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, have been making one-on-one connections with prospective farmers, linking them with insider islands knowledge and resources, and fostering connections with elder farmers. Yet, more is still to come with two more years to go – and the project partners remain focused on networking and increasing visibility of the project so that more island farmers find out, reach out, and know they don't have to go it alone.

If you're a prospective farmer interested in learning what resources are available to you, are a farmer nearing retirement and looking for someone to transition your farm business to, or know of someone who would benefit knowing about this project, we encourage you to contact Karen Bishop at the Whidbey Island Conservation District at (888) 678-4922 or karen@whidbeycd.org to learn more. A comprehensive website is in progress and will be launched in the coming months, so stay tuned for more updates regarding the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program island-style.



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