

Buying Locally Produced Food – It's ALL Good!

By Karen Bishop, Whidbey Island Conservation District

An abundance of sunshine bringing an early spring to Whidbey Island is providing our local farmers with perfect conditions to grow a plentiful supply of nutritious, fresh, healthy food grown right in our backyard. There are a myriad of reasons not to look past our island to purchase much of the produce and fruit that we consume during the growing season. Even though the island feels quite rural with farms speckling the landscape, a very small percentage of the food consumed on the island is actually grown on here. We as consumers have the power to change that pattern particularly at a time when our farmers are figuring out how to extend the growing season and, as a result, are producing a wider variety of locally grown products.

In the United States as well as in many parts of the developed world, if we have the financial resources, we as consumers and “eaters” expect to find whatever food desired at the nearest grocer. Eating what is locally produced in a particular season is no longer necessary because if it is not produced locally, we will get it from somewhere in the world. I challenge you this summer to tune into the food that is produced on Whidbey Island's local farms during our growing season and then step out of the “convenience first” model and buy local first. There are a number of good reasons to take on this challenge for you, for your local rural economy, and for the environment.

Local farmers tend to practice under high integrity, environmentally sustainable production practices. A source of pride, farmers are happy to share with you about how your food is grown. If you have questions and you are buying directly from a farmer, you can ask. However, be ready for what could be a lengthy conversation because farmers are passionate about this. Soil fertility, crop rotation, water conservation, produce varieties, and low impact pest control are all given careful consideration. Some local farmers have jumped through the hoops to achieve organic certification but other local growers bring you very healthy food without being organically certified and feel the locally grown status assures the consumer good, safe food.

People flock to Whidbey Island in droves throughout the year to enjoy and recreate in the beautiful open space. Farms help to create the rural landscape that includes a patchwork of crops in various stages of production. In order to insure the long term economic sustainability of these farms, increasing demand for the products they grow and purchasing as direct as possible will support farmers in their efforts.

The National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service estimates that on average, produce travels between 1300 and 2000 miles. Think about that. Whidbey Island is about 50 highway miles long and so if you buy from a local farmer, the distance your food will travel is less than 4% of the average distance your food would travel if you purchase through a conventional source. This is a way for you to help do your part in reducing fossil fuel use and related greenhouse gas emissions used in the food system.

There is much in the news about the drought in California and how the food system as we know it will be affected. Acres of produce, small fruits and fruit trees are being pulled out of production because they rely

solely on an artificial system for their water. Because of our lower temperatures and rains that are generally come at intervals throughout the summer months, local Whidbey farmer's reliance on irrigation is minimal.

Admittedly, it takes more effort to source your food locally so here are a few tips to help you in this endeavor.

Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between farmers and consumers where the "subscriber" receives a weekly share of produce. CSA's are gaining in popularity due to their convenience for both the farmer and the consumer. Customers support local farms directly by pre-paying growers for shares of the seasonal harvest, receiving a box of fresh, seasonal produce each week. Benefits include high quality produce for the consumer, enhanced financial stability for farms, and a reduction of impacts from shipping food long distances. Some CSA's deliver shares to a location nearby homes for pick-up, and some CSA's are picked up at the farm. Over the past couple of years, a group of farmers are collaboratively marketing produce through a CSA to the Oak Harbor area. See www.northwhidbeycsa.com to sign up. A website search may bring you to others in your neighborhood. CSA's are convenient and they will lock in your produce cost for the season. Langley resident, Rob Hallbauer, subscribes to the Deep Harvest Farm CSA and recently picked up his first week of produce. Rob said, "The greens are so fresh, tasty and tender. It feels great to support a local farmer and I like knowing that the produce was grown within 5 miles of my house. The CSA box included some vegetables that were new to me and I enjoy broadening my gastronomical horizons."

There is an increase in local product sales through roadside stands because of the convenience for the farmer to market fresh products right from the farm and restock as needed throughout the day. Consumers can often find a stand or farm store not far off their daily commuting route. Goosefoot Foundation recently published "The Whidbey Island Roadside Farm Stand Farm Store & Farmers Market Directory." www.goosefoot.org/pdf/farmstands.pdf When you buy from a roadside stand or farm store, 100% of the purchase price more than likely goes directly to the farmer. Local grocers are stepping up their interest in purchasing direct from farmers and you can encourage them to continue that trend.

Whidbey Island has a number of thriving Farmer and Public Markets that provide a social and recreational experience as well as a place to gather your food and other products for the week. Saturday's Coupeville Farmers market is the third oldest farmers market in the state, starting in 1979 and happens to be located in the second oldest town in the state. Thursday's Oak Harbor Public market began in 1994 and offers a variety of processed foods and crafts as well as fabulous produce. The Bayview Market at Bayview Corner is open Saturday morning, providing fresh produce, great food, and a good time. Clinton, Langley and South Whidbey Tilth also have open air public markets.

The Whidbey Island Conservation District hosts a list of CSA's, Farmers Market information, roadside stores and stands, and more on the District's local agriculture website page <http://www.whidbeycd.org/local-agriculture.html>. This information is updated as it is received by the District.

Enjoy the challenge of eating local while meeting Whidbey Island's amazing group of hardworking farmers.

What's Growing On Our Farms - A Look At Trends in Agriculture in Island County

By Karen Bishop, Whidbey Island Conservation District

A drive down SR 525 through Whidbey Island gives a true sense that farming is an important part of the Whidbey's economy and scenic landscape. Farms provide an ever changing picturesque vista that is highly valued by those who live here and by people who come to visit. Other than a few areas such as Ebey's Prairie where some of the crops have signs revealing what is being grown in the fields, visitors and residents often inquire about what agricultural products are actually produced on the land, whether livestock or crops. There is also interest in trends with regard to size of farms and economic sustainability of agriculture.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducts a Census of Agriculture once every five years. Any "farmer" across the United States defined as one who produces and sells more than \$1,000 in agricultural products, including livestock, produce, grains, fruit, hay, etc..., may be included in the Census. Participation is voluntarily and the information from each individual farm is confidential. The Census provides data that is impartial and uniform, with the same data collected year after year which allows extrapolation of trends. Questions on land ownership, land use, farm size, operator age and characteristics, production practices, revenues and expenses are asked. The data for Whidbey Island is expressed together Camano Island to represent all of Island County. The USDA is serious about obtaining data which is solicited by mail, phone, and even on site interviews. Farmer's report receiving calls early in the morning or late in the evening by statisticians eager to include them in the Census.

The most recent USDA Census was completed for the 2012 year. In the 2012 Census, about 11% of the land in Island County or 15,249 acres is reported as being in agricultural production. This is a slight increase from the 2002 Census where 15,018 acres were reported but a decrease from the 2007 Census where 17,699 acres were reported. The 377 farms report an average 40 acres in size. Nationally, the average farm size is 434 acres which shows the absence of very large commodity production operations in Island County. In looking at statistics over the past 15 years, since the 1997 census, very small farms, from 1 to 9 acres in size, have increased from 51 farms to 122 farms. The same trend is true over the past 15 years for farms 10 – 49 acres in size, increasing from 126 to 182. However, farms 50 to 488 acres have decreased. There are 3 farms in the county that report between 500 and 999 acres of production.

Many of the small farms in the 1 to 9 acre size raise vegetables and small fruits. The 2012 Census indicates that about 8.7% or \$1,011,000 of the revenue for agriculture is generated on these 60 farms that report growing vegetables for sale. Unfortunately, data on total acres of vegetables in production is not available nor is information about the number of acres of specific types of vegetables. Not included in the Census data is the variety of vegetable seed, forage seed and other crops raised specifically for seed production in Island County. These crops are grown on an estimated 200 or less acres, are high value crops and very important to the agricultural economy. The seed crops are generally grown under contract with companies that export these seeds all over the world. Seed varieties may need to be isolated from crops with which they might cross pollinate. Island County farms can often provide that isolation.

The average value of sales per farm including farms of all sizes is \$30,416. Nearly \$11.6 million in value of agricultural products were sold in 2012. 65% of the principal operators are men and 35% are women. Nationally, only 14% of principal operators of farms are women. The average age of the farmer or principal operator is reported to be 59 years old, in line with the national average age of 58.3 years. It appears that 12% of farmers nationwide are over 75 years old, and on the younger end of the spectrum only 5.2% of young farmers are between the ages of 25 and 34. One might think that this is reason for concern and also a good reason to support farmer training and mentoring programs!

Whidbey Weekly
July 2015

The 2012 Census reported 640 acres of barley, and 408 acres of corn which is grown for silage for cattle feed. Historically, grains produced for livestock feed have been a popular crop in the county. Very few acres of grain are grown for human consumption. However, it is no surprise that the predominant agricultural land use in Island County is forage production. Forage includes grass and alfalfa used for hay, haylage, grass silage and green chop – all which are fed to livestock. 4,967 acres or 32.3% of the cropland in the county is in forage production. If fields are fenced and grazed by animals, it is generally counted in the Census as pasture. Approximately 3,644 acres or 23.9% of land in farms is in pasture. A growing number of horses are found in pastures on farms on Whidbey Island that are not included in the Census unless they are grown and sold for breeding stock. However, they do play an important role in the rural landscape and rural economy. The livestock numbers for cattle have dropped from 6,918 animals on 144 farms to 6,032 on 130 farms between 2007 and 2012. Hogs and pigs remained about the same but sheep and lambs increased substantially from 14 farms with 158 sheep to 38 farms with 655 sheep. Meat chickens or “broilers” and other meat type chickens were reported at 676. Between 2007 and 2012, there was an increase in laying chickens from 1242 produced on 98 farms to 2822 on 95 farms.

Meat processing has been a barrier between farmers and the marketplace with increasing food safety rules that must be followed in order for product to be sold direct to the consumer. Recently, the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (www.agbizcenter.org) completed a mobile poultry processing truck that is available for use in Island County that takes live birds and processes them through to a packaged, licensed product that can be sold directly to the public. A new custom meat facility, 7 Generations Artisan Meats (www.7generations-artisan-meats.com) in Clinton opened in the fall of 2014 bringing back custom meat specialty processing on Whidbey. In addition, regional meat processing is available for producers. A new fiber mill, Abundant Earth Fiber (www.abundantearthfiber.com) recently opened in Clinton adding a processing option on Whidbey for fiber from the increasing number of sheep, and also fiber goats and alpacas.

In addition to the USDA Census conducted every 5 years, the WA State Dept. of Agriculture maps crops in Island County about every other year. The Whidbey Island Conservation District assists with this work. Crops are classified by crop group such as berries and cereal grains, by crop type such as blueberries or barley, and whether the crop is grown with supplemental irrigation. Data is entered into a GIS data base.

Agricultural statistics are interesting to analyze and they are vitally important in monitoring the trends in local, state, national and global production of food and fiber. For further data, visit www.agcensus.usda.gov.

Preparing for Drought and Fire Danger

by Sandy Welch

Whidbey Island Conservation District

On May 21, amidst unprecedented dry conditions, Governor Inslee declared a drought emergency for all of Washington State. Our Whidbey soils, which typically remain relatively moist via occasional summer rains and moderate temperatures, are unusually dry. It's no surprise that locals are breaking out water hoses, sprinklers, and a variety of irrigation techniques in defense against the encroaching golden brown. How are our water resources being affected by this increase in demand? And what about the elevated risk for fire danger these drought conditions create?

Whidbey Island has two main sources for water – most of the island depends on rain to keep underground aquifers filled and wells pumping, and Oak Harbor residents receive their supply under an agreement with the City of Anacortes who draws from the Skagit River. Recently, Anacortes agreed to divert nearly 5 million gallons a day from the river to send to nearby Skagit farmers struggling to irrigate in these dry conditions. This new diversion, added to a low snow pack level and an increase in drought-induced demand, is putting pressure on the system. The City of Oak Harbor recently implemented Stage 1 Water Conservation Measures requesting preemptive voluntary reductions in anticipation of deepening drought conditions. For more information visit the City of Oak Harbor web page at www.oakharbor.org. A similar scenario is playing out for our aquifers. A cycle of decreased rainfall may take 100 years to affect the level of our aquifers, but a significant increase in demand as we attempt to counteract the drought will reduce levels noticeably right away. Lower aquifer levels may leave some shallow wells dry and increase the risk of salt water intrusion for others. The bottom line: Drought conditions make water conservation crucial. Here are some tips and suggestions to reduce your water usage:

Water Conservation Outside

- Forego irrigating the lawn. It's natural for turf grass to go dormant and golden brown. Apply about one inch of water during each dry month to prevent permanent damage. Mow high, 2 ½ inches or more, using a mulching blade. Taller grass shades the soil, helping to preserve moisture. A mulching blade will leave the finely chopped clippings to insulate the soil and add water-holding organic matter.
- Convert some lawn into a less water-demanding landscape using drought-tolerant groundcovers, shrubs, and perennials. Go to www.whidbeycd.org/drought-planting.html for a list of drought tolerant plants. Consider adding deck areas, patios and pathways in areas where grass struggles in dry conditions.
- Prioritize irrigation needs for what is essential for survival rather than striving for optimum growth. Most well established plants should be able to survive without any irrigation and many others will get by with a good soaking just once per month.

- Mulch around perennials, trees and shrubs to retain soil moisture levels and moderate soil temperatures. Plus, mulch inhibits weeds that compete with desirable plants for moisture and nutrients.
- Collect rainwater using barrels or tanks for use around the yard. Visit www.whidbeycd.org/use-it.html for a set of instructions to build your own. Consider installing larger tanks to get you through our dry summer months.

Water Conservation Inside

- Save up to 1,000 gallons per month by keeping your shower to less than 5 minutes. Replace showerheads that have a flow rate greater than 2.5 gallons per minute - the current National Energy Policy Act standard. Flow rate can be checked by catching the water in a 1-gallon bucket. If it takes less than 24 seconds to fill up, the showerhead flow rate is more than 2.5 gallons per minute.
- While waiting for tap or shower water to warm up, capture the cold water in a bucket to use for outdoor watering. Turn off the water while you brush your teeth, lather your hands, or shave.
- Replace toilets installed before 1994 with a High Efficiency Toilet (HET). Check toilets to verify they are working properly. Make sure the water level is not too high, the fill valve is working properly, and the flapper is not leaking.
- When doing laundry, always wash full loads. Conventional washers built before 2011 typically use about 40 gallons per load. Newer resource-efficient washers may use as little as 15 gallons per load. Adjust the water level in the washer to the amount needed for the load.
- Find and fix leaky faucets and hose spigots. A faucet leaking 30 drops per minute will waste 96 gallons per month or 1,152 gallons per year.
- Install an efficient dishwasher. Dishwashers use less water than washing by hand, particularly if you limit pre-rinsing. Only wash full loads. If washing dishes by hand, don't continually run the tap.
- Wash vehicles at a carwash that recycles its water. If washing at home, park your car on a permeable surface (grass or gravel), and make sure the hose has a shut-off nozzle.
- Use a broom to sweep outdoor surfaces instead of using a hose.

Wildfire Danger

As recent Whidbey wildfires have demonstrated, drought conditions often lead to elevated fire danger. Wildfire behavior is influenced by three main factors: topography (lie of the land), weather (wind speed, relative humidity, and ambient temperature), and fuel (vegetation and man-made structures). Of these three factors, fuel is the one we can influence. Debris like dead leaves and pine needles on decks, in gutters, and strewn across lawns can ignite from flying embers. Fire moving along the ground's surface can "ladder" into shrubs and low hanging tree limbs to create longer flames and more heat. If your home has flammable features or vulnerable openings, it can serve as fuel and become part of a chain of ignitions to surrounding homes and structures. Here are some tips for preparing your property for wildfire danger:

- Prune low hanging limbs to reduce ladder fuels. Use low-growing, well pruned, fire-resistive plants around buildings. Visit www.whidbeycd.org/fire.html for a guide to fire resistant planting. Keep flammable plants and mulches at least 5 feet away from your home.
- Clean roofs and gutters of pine needles and dead leaves. Sweep decks and porches clear of fallen leaves. Screen or box-in areas below patios and decks with wire screening no larger than 1/8-inch mesh.
- Keep fire tools available: shovel, rake, ladder, and 100 feet of garden hose attached to a spigot.
- Make sure woodpiles are located at least 30 feet from any structure, especially during non-winter months.
- Consult an arborist, forester, or your local Conservation District to learn more about the health of your landscape. Removing or thinning out some trees may actually be beneficial to the health and safety of the rest.
- Consider including concrete or stone pathways, creating natural firebreaks on your property.

If you are interested in receiving help to prepare your property for drought and fire danger, your local Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD) offers a free outdoor site evaluation. Conservation districts are non-regulatory agencies that do not enforce compliance or impose penalties, but instead offer recommendations and advice. WICD staff are your neighbors - people with a combination of technical, professional expertise, and local knowledge. WICD offers many programs and free services to help residents conserve natural resources on private property, whether the property is a working agricultural operation, a small farm or a home in town. Contact WICD at 360-678-4708 or wicd@whidbeycd.org. Visit their website at www.whidbeycd.org.

Whidbey's Abundance of Fall Season Local Farm Products

Karen Bishop, Manager – Whidbey Island Conservation District

A visit to many of our farms on Whidbey Island in the fall months will leave you with the feeling that you would like to hunker down in front of the wood stove with a glass of homemade apple cider and a slice of pumpkin pie. The colorful abundance of squash, pumpkins, greens such as swiss chard, kale and a cabbage of varying sizes and colors, brussel sprouts, tomatoes grown in hoop houses, and more are impressive. In this article, I will give you some ideas of places to go look for this fall bounty so that you can continue to support your local farmers.

In the fall, we see the last days of our farmer's markets throughout Whidbey Island but that certainly does not mean the end of our local produce season. Farmer's Markets either end for the season or go under a roof after October because, as consumers, we just really are not drawn to shopping outdoors on cold, rainy, windy days! Peg Tennant, Market Manager for both the Coupeville and Oak Harbor Farmer's Markets reports that even though weather during the growing season affected timing and availability of crops, both markets had very successful seasons that are consistent with previous year's sales. These two markets are closed for the season. The Bayview Farmer's Market last outdoor market day will be October 31.

Farms that offer Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions where the consumer purchases a subscription at the beginning of the growing season and picks up their share or box of fresh, local produce from a farm on a weekly basis – are finishing for the season and some are offering fall alternatives.

The Whidbey Island Conservation District recently asked local farms to send us information on what products they have available this fall. Following is the information that we received to help you in your search for fresh, local farm products:

Whidbey Green Goods – Michael Nichols – Mike runs a home delivery service for locally grown produce and a variety of other products to residents on Whidbey Island. Mike is unique in that he congregates product from many different farms and sources and then delivers them to your neighborhood. Mike has a great website that explains his business.

www.whidbeygreengoods.com

3 Sisters Market - 770 Holbrook Road, along Hwy. 20 between Coupeville and Oak Harbor – (360)678-5445 – 3-Sisters carry a variety of produce from local farms after the farmer's market season ends. 9 a.m. to 6 a.m. daily.

www.3sistersfamilyfarms.com

Bell's Farm – 892 West Beach Road, Coupeville – Honesty produce stand. You will find a variety of fresh produce from their farm at their farm stand. Open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. www.bells-farm.com you can also sign up for their Facebook posts for the latest on product availability.

Ebb Tide Produce – Bayview – We've heard that farmer Blake Mennella may be offering a fall CSA from their farm near Bayview. Contact Blake at ebbtideproduce@gmail.com.

Deep Harvest Farm – Annie Jespersen and Nathaniel Talbot – Freeland – Fall CSA is being offered. See their website for more information about their farm and how to sign up for the fall CSA. www.deepharvestfarm.com

Lesedi Farm – Dorcas Young – 2812 Thompson Road, Langley – Dorcas's farm and greenhouse is located at the South Whidbey Tilth site off of SR 525 near Bayview. Contact her through the Farm tab on her website

www.lesediafricanfoods.com

Glendale Shepherd – Lynn Swanson and family – 7616 Glendale Heights Road, Clinton – Award winning cheeses, yogurt, and USDA lamb cuts and whey fed pork cuts, bacon and sausages are available now. Their farm store is open year around on Sundays only, 11 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. www.glendaleshepherd.com

Another great way to keep up on local products available as well as events and information related to agriculture is to sign up for the excellent, free Grange Food News. This newsletter is all about food and farming on Whidbey Island. Subscribe to this newsletter by contacting Chris Williams by E mail cwilliam@whidbey.com Chris puts this newsletter together on a voluntary basis and many of us have come to rely on it as a great source of up to date information.

Many people say that they would like to support their local farmers but they don't know how to contact them. The list above is far from inclusive but it will get you started on your search for local food. Currently there is not one single place to go to figure out how to find farmers that direct market in your area. Many farms that direct market their produce have extensive E mail lists and they send out messages periodically, updating their customers on when they are open and what products they have available. Facebook is becoming an increasingly popular way for farmers to get their word out. Remember, farmers are super busy growing your food and so they are looking for streamlined ways to message and market to consumers. Websites tend to get stale because of the time they take to maintain and so dynamic, social media avenues and E mail tend to be most effective. Many farmers are as close as the cell phone in their pocket and so once you establish a relationship with them, often you can just make a quick call to find out if they have a particular item available.

Our culture has become reliant on the supermarket model where we have pretty good food always available. You figure out what meal you would like to prepare and then you go to the nearest grocery store and find the ingredients. It is a fun challenge to reverse this process. Seek out your nearest local farmer first and buy what they have in season and then figure out how to cook it. The internet is full of fabulous ideas.

That being said, we do appreciate our grocery stores that provide us with a consistent supply of pretty much everything we need. The newest grocery store on Whidbey located in Oak harbor, Haggen, is committed to buying as much food as they can from local farmers. On their website, you will find an extensive list of the farms that they buy from in the region. www.haggen.com

Finding locally grown food takes a little more work on the part of the consumer. The benefit is the relationship you establish with your farmer and the land while getting the freshest produce available. Food rarely spoils in your refrigerator because it is picked only hours from the time it is harvested to the time it is in your hands. Your extra effort reduces the miles that food travels, helps support the rural landscape that residents on Whidbey Island love, and provides you with good, fresh, healthy food. Remember, buy local first and enjoy the magical fall season.

The Peas are Up! The Spring Season of Local Food is Underway.

By Sarah Cassatt, Whidbey Island Conservation District

Have you had your first taste of the year of fresh-from-the-farm food? We are experiencing another warm spring with sunny weather providing our local farmers the perfect conditions to grow a bountiful supply of nutritious, fresh, healthy food right in our backyard. There are a myriad of reasons to look right here on Whidbey Island to find much of the produce and fruit that we consume during the growing season.

Even though the island feels quite rural with farms speckling the landscape, a very small percentage of the food consumed on the island is actually grown here. We as consumers have the power to change that pattern, particularly as more residents are turning to farming as a passion and for income. Here at the Whidbey Island Conservation District, we receive calls throughout the year from people who want to expand or revitalize an existing farm or to start a new farming business. As a result, there is an increasing supply of both volume and variety of foods available very close to home.

In the modern world, we as consumers and “eaters” expect to find whatever food we desire at the nearest grocer at any time of the year. Eating what is locally produced in a particular season is no longer necessary because even if it is not produced locally, we can likely still get it from somewhere else in the world.

Recently, people are challenging themselves and others to “eat local”. One of the more recognized definitions of “local food” is based on marketing arrangements under which farmers sell directly to consumers from within a local region, such as Whidbey Island^[1]. The reasons behind this movement are many, including creating more resilient and self-reliant food networks, providing more consistent support for local farmers to reduce development pressures on farmland, and reducing the distance food travels from farm to table, which in turn results in food being fresher and potentially more nutritious and flavorful.

Additionally, our local farmers tend to farm with high levels of integrity, using environmentally sustainable production practices. A source of pride, farmers are happy to share with you about how your food is grown. If you have questions and you are buying directly from a farmer, you can ask. However, be ready for what could be a lengthy conversation because farmers are passionate about what they do. Soil fertility, crop rotation, water conservation, produce varieties, and low impact pest control are all given careful consideration. Some local farmers have jumped through the hoops to achieve organic certification but other local growers provide you very healthy food without being certified.

The National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service estimates that on average, produce travels between 1300 and 2000 miles. Think about this: Whidbey Island is about 50 highway miles long and so if you buy from a local farmer, the distance your food will travel is less than 4% of the average distance your food would travel if you purchase through a conventional source. This is a way for you to help do your part in reducing fossil fuel use and related greenhouse gas emissions used in the food system.

If you are ready to step out of the “convenience first” model and instead “buy local first,” there are a number of ways you can find and access local food from your local farmers. On Whidbey, you can purchase directly from farms from roadside stands, farmers’ markets, and CSA memberships. More and more of our local stores are also carrying local foods, including value-added products, and you can encourage them to continue that trend. If you enjoy getting to know others who are passionate about local food, you might consider joining your local Slow Foods group www.slowfoodwhidbeyisland.org/.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between farmers and consumers where the “subscriber” receives a weekly share of produce. CSAs are gaining in popularity due to their convenience for both the farmer and the consumer. Customers support local farms directly by pre-paying growers for shares of the seasonal harvest, receiving a box of fresh, seasonal produce each week. Benefits include high quality produce for the consumer, enhanced financial stability for farms, and a reduction of impacts from shipping food long distances. We have quite a few CSAs of various sizes all across Whidbey Island, including one CSA that is collaboration between several farms. Some CSAs deliver shares to a location nearby homes for pick-up, and some CSA shares are picked up at the farm.

There are also many opportunities on Whidbey to purchase local product through roadside stands. These are very convenient for the farmer to market fresh products right from the farm and restock as needed throughout the day. Consumers can often find a stand or farm store not far off their daily commuting route. Goosefoot Foundation now publishes annually “The Whidbey Island Roadside Farm Stand Farm Store & Farmers Market Directory. When you buy from a roadside stand or on-farm store, 100% of the purchase price more than likely goes directly to the farmer.

Whidbey Island has a number of thriving Farmers’ and Public Markets that provide a social and recreational experience as well as a place to gather your food and other products for the week. Coupeville Farmers’ Market, open Saturdays, is the third oldest farmers market in the state, starting in 1979 and located in the second oldest town in the state. Oak Harbor Farmers’ Market, open Thursdays, began in 1994 and offers a variety of processed foods and crafts as well as fabulous produce. The Bayview Market at Bayview Corner is open Saturdays, providing fresh produce, great food, and a good time. South Whidbey Tilth Farmers’ Market is open Sundays with many garden activities on site. Langley and Clinton also have open air public markets and are open Fridays and Thursdays, respectively.

WICD hosts lists and brochures of CSAs, Farmers Markets, roadside stores and stands, Whidbey farms open to the public and more on the District’s Local Agriculture website page <http://www.whidbeycd.org/local-agriculture.html>. This information is updated as it is received by the District.

We encourage you to enjoy the experience of eating local while meeting Whidbey Island’s amazing group of hardworking farmers.

[1] Martinez, Steve, et al. Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues. ERR 97, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, May 2010.

Keeping it Green under the Summer Sun

By Sarah Cassatt

Whidbey Island Conservation District

Are you loving this warm, sunny weather? So far, we've had another warmer and drier spring this year with rainfall tapering off much earlier than normal. On the other hand, according to climate guru Cliff Mass, El Nino is transitioning to La Nina (www.CliffMass.blogspot.com) and, go figure, the rain is coming down as I write this. So, do we need to worry about drought conditions this year? Do we need to conserve our water for our household uses or for irrigating gardens and crops? These are great questions to be asking at this time and there are a variety of factors to consider when answering these questions.

The unusual weather patterns of the past few years across the U.S. have generated a new focus on ways to manage impacts of drought on water resources, agriculture production, and other affected resources.

The Whidbey Island Conservation District and two other districts in the state have partnered with the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) to develop pilot Drought Conservation Plans within their districts. The overall goal of each plan is to achieve improvements in natural resource conditions during drought periods that provide for long-term sustainability of Washington lands.

More specifically, we are assessing existing conditions and needs related to natural resources, such as agriculture and forest lands, surface waters and groundwater, and related social and economic elements. Existing programs and resources that can assist in addressing the effects of drought are being identified and we are determining if additional programs and resources need to be developed.

Based on the work completed so far on the Drought Conservation Plan, there are many practices each of us can implement that not only reduce our use of water resources, but can at the same time improve the health and productivity of our landscapes, gardens, farms, and forestlands during non-drought periods and increase their resiliency during drought.

So, the question might become not "Is this going to be another drought summer and therefore do I need to use drought management practices?" but rather, "Why not integrate drought management practices that will protect and enhance these resources in any given year?" Here are examples of practices you might consider for your home, farm, or forest to help protect and improve our island's limited resources.

Water Conservation Inside

- Save up to 1,000 gallons per month by keeping your shower to less than 5 minutes. Replace showerheads that have a flow rate greater than 2.5 gallons per minute - the current National Energy Policy Act standard.

Flow rate can be checked by catching the water in a 1-gallon bucket. If it takes less than 24 seconds to fill up, the showerhead flow rate is more than 2.5 gallons per minute.

- When replacing appliances, consider water and energy efficient models. Replace toilets installed before 1994 with a High Efficiency Toilet (HET). Conventional washers built before 2011 typically use about 40 gallons per load. Newer resource-efficient washers may use as little as 15 gallons per load. Dishwashers use less water than washing by hand, particularly if you limit pre-rinsing.
- Check that appliances are working properly; make sure the water level in the toilet tank is not too high, the fill valve is working properly, and the flapper is not leaking; wash full loads in the dishwasher and clothes washer when possible, otherwise adjust the water level needed for the laundry load; fix leaky faucets and hose spigots.
- Wash vehicles at a carwash that recycles its water or if washing at home, wash your vehicle on a permeable surface (grass or gravel), and use a shut-off nozzle on the hose.
- Use a broom to sweep outdoor surfaces instead of using a hose.

Residential Water Conservation Outside

- Forego irrigating the lawn. It's natural for turf grass to go dormant and golden brown during the summer dry season, saving water, energy, and effort! Apply about one inch of water during each dry month to prevent permanent damage. Mow high, 2½ inches or more, using a mulching blade. Taller grass shades the soil, helping to preserve moisture. A mulching blade will leave the finely chopped clippings to insulate the soil and add water-holding organic matter.
- Convert some lawn into a less water-demanding landscape using drought-tolerant groundcovers, shrubs, and perennials. Go to www.whidbeycd.org/drought-planting.html for a list of drought tolerant plants. Consider adding deck areas, patios and pathways in areas where grass struggles in dry conditions.
- Prioritize irrigation needs for what is essential for survival rather than striving for optimum growth. Most well established plants should be able to survive without any irrigation and many others will get by with a good soaking just once per month.
- Mulch around plants to retain soil moisture levels and moderate soil temperatures. As added bonuses, mulch inhibits weeds that compete with desirable plants for moisture and nutrients and slowly breaks down, providing organic matter and nutrients to the soil, supporting healthier and more resilient plants.
- Collect rainwater using barrels or tanks for use around the yard. Visit www.whidbeycd.org/use-it.html for a set of instructions to build your own. Consider installing larger tanks to get you through our dry summer months.

Firewise Homes and Forests

As recent Whidbey wildfires have demonstrated, drought conditions often lead to elevated fire danger. Wildfire behavior is influenced by three main factors: topography (lie of the land), weather (wind speed, relative humidity, and ambient temperature), and fuel (vegetation and man-made structures). Of these three factors, fuel is the one we can influence. Debris like dead leaves and pine needles on decks, in gutters, and strewn across lawns can ignite from flying embers. Fire moving along the ground's surface can "ladder" into shrubs and low hanging tree limbs to create longer flames and more heat. If your home has flammable features, they can serve as fuel and become part of a chain of ignitions to surrounding homes, structures, and forestlands. Here are some tips for preparing your property for wildfire danger:

- Prune low hanging limbs to reduce ladder fuels. Use low-growing, well pruned, fire-resistive plants around buildings. Visit www.whidbeycd.org/fire.html for a guide to fire resistant planting. Keep flammable plants and mulches at least 5 feet away from your home.
- Clean roofs and gutters of pine needles and dead leaves. Sweep decks and porches clear of fallen leaves. Make sure woodpiles are located at least 30 feet from any structure, especially during non-winter months.
- Consult an arborist, forester, or your local Conservation District to learn more about the health of your landscape and forest. Removing or thinning out some trees may actually be beneficial to the health and safety of the rest.
- Consider including concrete or stone pathways, creating natural firebreaks on your property. Create or maintain an access road around your forest.

Drought Resilient Gardens & Farms

Improving soil health is one of the best ways to improve crop production and increase plant resiliency during drought periods. Increasing organic matter and soil microbes in the soil provides many benefits including increasing the soil's capacity to hold water and adding nutrients. Here are just a few examples of useful practices.

- Using cover crops when soil would normally be bare increases organic matter, improves infiltration during precipitation events, and reduces evaporation, as does applying mulch to bare soils.
- Using reduced tillage or no-till practices improves soil tilth, increases organic matter, reduces erosion and runoff, and more.
- Windbreaks reduce evaporation by reducing wind speed across adjacent fields.

If you are interested in receiving help to prepare your property, farm, or forest for drought and fire danger, your local Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD) offers a free outdoor site evaluation. Conservation districts are non-regulatory agencies that do not enforce compliance or impose penalties, but instead offer recommendations and advice. WICD staff are your neighbors - people with a combination of technical, professional expertise, and local knowledge. WICD offers many programs and free services to help residents conserve natural resources on private property, whether the property is a working agricultural operation, a small farm or a home in town. Contact WICD at 360-678-4708 or wicd@whidbeycd.org. Visit their website at www.whidbeycd.org.

Wildfire Risk on Whidbey – Are We Ready?

By Karen Bishop, Whidbey Island Conservation District

Wildfire is often in the news headlines during the summer dry season. Fires in Washington State were less expansive this year than last year when the tragic fires of 2015 impacted so many home and landowners, mainly in eastern Washington. The people and the land impacted from the 2015 fires will be recovering for years to come. Homes and dreams were lost. Private forest land that was managed for production windows of 50 years or longer became salvage operations. In their lifetime, many of these stewards of the pine forests may never see their “crop” reach maturity as they are forced to start all over. Wildlife and their habitats were lost. Ranchers lost livestock as well as thousands of acres of grazing and hay land, which will take years to recover. Even if their cattle were saved, the limited access to feed forced the sale of cattle that may have been genetically bred and improved for the highest quality meat production over many generations. The land was left barren, vulnerable to soil erosion and damage due to flash flooding.

Conservation Districts throughout the state work with landowners both on fire prevention and on post-fire natural resource land management. As a family of 45 Conservation Districts across the state, we also help each other during times of need. As Whidbey Island Conservation District staff, I had the opportunity to work with the Okanogan Conservation District on post fire assessments for landowners after the 2015 fires.

Our assignment was to visit burned out landowners, photograph and document their losses including fencing (sometimes miles), acres of forest land burned, and structures lost. In the process of collecting data, we learned to be sympathetic listeners as each landowner had a different story. I learned a lot about fire behavior as well as the tenacity of the human spirit.

In the midst of all of this burned landscape, I had the opportunity to see farms and homes that were an oasis in the midst of completely charred areas. A program known as Firewise had been implemented by some landowners and in areas where the program had been fully implemented, structures were completely or partially saved due to fire prevention techniques that they had learned from their Conservation District and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staff who had brought the program to their communities.

The Firewise Communities USA program delivered through Conservation Districts, DNR and other entities teaches homeowners techniques to prepare and protect their property in order to live compatibly in areas with potential wildfire risk. Residents learn how their homes ignite based on physical principles and they learn how to change their surroundings to modify and reduce their risk. Zones around your home are created. In the zone closest to your structures, fuel reduction techniques are recommended such as pruning shrubs and trees next to your home, and creating fuel free areas within 3 – 5 feet of your home. If your winter wood supply is leaning up against your home, you may want to consider moving it to a zone farther from your home. Choosing fire-resistant plants and keeping organic flammable mulch 5 feet from your home is recommended.

In the next zone out from your home, debris should be cleaned up and limbs on trees close to the ground should be removed. Dead and unhealthy trees and debris that is highly flammable should be removed. Healthy trees are less likely to ignite.

Creating a disaster plan for your family and making sure your home is well marked and accessible to large fire-fighting equipment is critical should a fire break out, especially with the long and curvy driveways of some Whidbey Island properties.

Firewise construction is also an opportunity for homeowners who are building new homes or replacing roofs or decks around your home. Fire rated roofing materials might be a good choice. I saw a home after the fires in Okanogan that was the only home saved in an area because sprinklers had been installed to sprinkle the roof and siding in the event of a fire. As the wildfire moved in, the homeowner turned on the water supply and left. When allowed back after the fire was under control, their home was the only structure on their road still standing.

In conversations with our local fire departments and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Whidbey Island is more vulnerable than we might think to the dangers of wildfire. If a wildfire breaks out in the summer months, our local fire districts will need support from DNR and our DNR resources and support are not close by. Whidbey has many areas where the wildland/urban interface exists – wildlands being areas that are forested, vegetated and undeveloped. People move to Whidbey Island to live privately amidst these wildland areas. On the west side of Whidbey Island, along the dry bluff zones with prevailing west winds in the summer, these areas are often extremely dry in the summer. In the July of 2015, a fire broke out in Fort Ebey State park. Had it not been for quick and skilled local firefighters, this fire could have gone out of control and burned many homes tucked in the wildland areas around the Park.

Now, the dry summer months on Whidbey Island are winding to a close and there is a feeling of fall in the air. Recent rains and higher humidity in the atmosphere are a relief to Whidbey Island residents. We made it through another year without a tragic wildfire but we need to be proactive, prepared and educated. Stay tuned as the Whidbey Island Conservation District and partners team up to bring more Firewise education to Whidbey Island residents.