

a 'MAJOR' OPPORTUNITY *for* YOUNG FARMERS

The next generation of organic farmers—and local food growers—is learning their craft through a new program at Washington State University.

BY CAROL MILANO
PHOTOS BY BRUCE ANDRE

When his advisor, John Reganold, mentioned that Washington State University was considering a new major in organic agriculture systems, Will Hollingbery replied, “If that happens, I want to get on board.” In May, Hollingbery will graduate as one of the first WSU students to complete a B.S. in the nation’s first major in organic agriculture.

Reganold, Regents Professor of Soil Science in the Department of Crop and Soil Sciences, had been researching organic agriculture since 1985. While developing an introductory course on organic farming, the idea of a major struck him. “I knew we had students who wanted to be involved with [the organic movement] and I wanted to get more students involved with agriculture,” recalls Reganold, well aware that the average age of American farmers is now above 55.



In mid-2002, he mentioned his idea at a departmental faculty meeting. “Go do it, put a curriculum together,” peers encouraged. Over the next 18 months, Reganold met with colleagues in landscape architecture, horticulture, crop and soil sciences, plant pathology, entomology, food science, human nutrition, animal science, integrated pest management and economics. After a national market research survey confirmed adequate interest for an organic agriculture major, Reganold began to meld a multi-department curriculum. He found ample support: over 50 WSU faculty members identify themselves as “working in organic agriculture.”

With existing courses, each professor had to agree to incorporate organic agriculture into at least 10 to 15 percent of the syllabus. “It’s a science-based major—you’re not just outside growing plants,” stresses Reganold, who wove chemistry, biology, math and statistics requirements into the curriculum. He developed two new soil sciences courses: “Organic Agriculture and Farming” and “Practicum in Organic Agriculture.” The new major was approved in mid-2006.

Interest was immediate. On-campus flyers and publicity drew some WSU students who weren’t yet sure of their major but decided to choose organic agriculture. Others, in food science or horticulture, for instance, opted for a double major. National coverage, including the Associated Press, attracted wider attention. “Organic agriculture is popular, and we were the first and only,” Reganold points out. “Some people coming from farms wanted to learn organic agriculture methods.”

After 18 months, the program has 16 majors; Reganold would like to have 40 to 50, eventually. Students include 30-somethings who left jobs because they’d rather work in the organic farming field. Many are younger and from the Northwest. “Some students simply want to be organic farmers. If their family farm is traditional, they want to bring organic methods. Two students want to start CSAs,” Reganold reports. Others want to target the restaurant business, possibly as a buyer purchasing all their food organically and locally. A prospective certifier wants to work with farms, showing them how they can be legally organic. Two double majors in viticulture hope to manage, or eventually own, an organic vineyard.

Hollingbery grew up on a Yakima Valley orchard. “I know a lot about fruit production, but I don’t like conventional farming because of the chemicals and what they do to the environment,” he emphasizes. “Organic farming is



WSU student Julie Sullivan

much more interesting! I’ll have to be more attentive to what’s going on in the orchard. I’m learning integrated practices to manage pests, insects, and weeds without chemical sprays, and figuring out non-synthetic ways of fertilization,” says the senior.

His hands-on learning for two summers was in a credit course at WSU’s three-acre organic farm, which runs a CSA program for 100 local families. “I’d take vegetables back to my parents, who both felt they were the best vegetables they’d ever eaten, especially my dad. By feeding them organic products, I sold them on the concept.”

The program requires an internship. In 2007, one student arranged her own, at an organic grape vineyard in France. For 2008, a Willamette Valley organic farm offers “rustic but comfortable housing, a stipend and all the vegetables you can eat,” plus the chance to “start a seed and follow it all the way to the point of sale.” After graduation, Hollingbery’s internship in Salan, Washington, will afford his first experience at an organic orchard. “I want to learn about the needs and soil management so I can eventually help my dad because he’s now interested in it, too,” he explains.

Don Stuart, AFT’s Pacific Northwest States Director, calls WSU’s program “a great boost to organic agriculture, in Washington and nationally. With over 250 diverse crops of fruits and vegetables that are direct-marketed, it’s logical for this state to take a leadership interest. And if anyone’s doing it, it should be a land grant institution. WSU should be congratulated.

“Organic agriculture is here to stay! It’s a healthy, strong, important direction. We need to support it,” Stuart declares. “I feel that for agriculture to be economically sustainable, it also has to be environmentally and politically sustainable.” He considers organic agriculture a hothouse, helping to show the way toward improved integrated pest management that will help all of agriculture. Convinced that public support will help bring protection for farms, Stuart believes improved knowledge and sustainability anywhere in agriculture can help the entire industry.

“I’m seeing agriculture going in two directions—large conventional corporate farms, and small local organic farms,” observes Hollingbery. “The middle ground is quickly disappearing. It’s a matter of my deciding what I want to be part of. And I totally want to be working on my own farm, seeing people eat my food.”

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