



The home of Greg and Terry Willis is tucked along the tree-lined Satsop River in Grays Harbor County. They farm about 1,000 acres including some winter wheat.

WINTER WHEAT

Is A Winner For The Willis Family Farm

BY **GAIL GREENWOOD AYRES**

Planted in October 2010, the wheat was harvested from mid-August to the first week in September.

A BOUQUET OF WHEAT DISPLAYED AT THE RECEPTION DESK SURPRISES THE MANY FARMERS WHO COME THROUGH THE WASHINGTON FARM BUREAU OFFICE IN LACEY.

The large heads of grain cause most people to guess that the wheat came from somewhere on the Palouse in southeastern Washington – wheat country.

In fact, the wheat is from Greg and Terry Willis’s farm in Brady.

Technically, it could be considered dryland wheat

because it wasn’t irrigated – no need in rainy Grays Harbor County, which lies west of Olympia and borders the Pacific Ocean.

For longtime farmer, Greg Willis, 60, and his wife, Terry, 57, growing wheat is a fairly new venture. In fact, the name of their business is the Olympic View Dairy LLC. For years they grew crops and milked hundreds of cows. But they stopped milking in February of 2007.

Now the farm concentrates

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on custom raising heifers for other dairies and raising various crops including sweet corn, peas and hay.

For the past two years they have also grown soft white winter wheat – the Yamhill and Tubbs varieties.

Adding wheat was a bit of a fluke.

They often use cereal rye as a cover crop, but three years ago it was hard to get, so they used winter wheat and were surprised by how well it survived the winter in the wet and flood-prone valley.

“It was a year that the input costs for other crops was high and the price going to be paid for wheat was good,” explained Terry.

And that got them thinking.

So they planted wheat for a crop the past two years. This year their

farm included 130 acres of wheat, 106 acres of sweet corn, 660 acres of peas and 80 acres of grass, in addition to hundreds of heifers. (They own 425 acres and farm 1,000.)

The couple laughed that it might appear that they betted against themselves with peas, sweet corn and wheat needing different weather conditions. But this year the variety worked to their advantage with the rain and the sun coming just when each crop needed it.

“First we were desperate for rain in the summer for the peas. And just when I thought I was going to have to irrigate them, which is time-consuming and less than ideal for peas, that weekend we got 2 inches of rain,” Greg said.

“I called it the million dollar rain,” Terry said. “Greg figured it was worth \$167,000. I guess I was figuring in all the farmers in the valley.”

Then as the summer continued, “I wouldn’t have given you 50 cents for the corn,” Greg said. Thankfully along came a hot, dry couple of weeks that gave the corn all the heat units it needed. “It’s going to be a great crop.”

As for the wheat, they harvested 2.5 tons to the acre. “Three tons would have been optimal but we were pleased,” Terry said.

“In fact, we’ll probably increase the acreage planted in wheat next year by planting less sweet corn,” said Terry, explaining that the price is good for wheat, especially because the input costs are lower.

Wheat takes less fertilizer than the other crops they grow, she said.

“However, we do suffer from striped rust (a typical wheat fungus). The rust was prominent. We had to spray three times to keep it under control and even with that we lost some of the yield,” she said.

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Terry, who was elected as one of three county commissioners in Grays Harbor County, began serving her term in 2009, just as economic problems were hitting government entities hard.

She credits her farmer’s mentality as helping her at her new post.

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“However, I would credit most of the imagination on the farm to my husband Greg. It’s his creative ideas that morph us from one phase to the next. His great-grandfather moved into the valley in the 1920s and his family has been farming every since.”

“He knows this valley like you know your house,” she said.

“Way back in the ‘30s and ‘40s, lots of grains were grown here,” Greg recalled. “And, as a kid I remember neighbors bundling



Geoff Willis illustrates how tall the farm’s corn can grow.

wheat into burlap bags and taking them to what seemed to me like a huge thresher.”

The couple has four children – Lisa, Lynn, Geoff and Gary, who all have homes on or near the family farm. The sons often work for them, but also have their own ventures.

“I think farming makes a wonderful family business,” Terry said.

So, what’s changed in farming over the years?

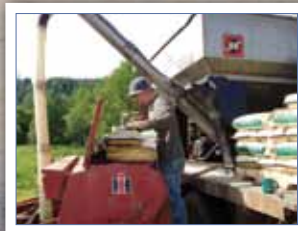
Greg laughs at the question.

“What hasn’t changed in farming? Just about everything has changed, the costs, the demands, the time, the techniques, the regulations...”

Speaking of regulations, the Willises, who won a Department of Ecology Award in 2001 as dairy farmers for their contribution to clean water in the Lower Chehalis Watershed, say they’ve always had practices to keep the environment healthy and the rivers clean.

Unfortunately, the Satsop and Chehalis Rivers haven’t particularly shown their thanks. The Satsop River has eaten away acres of their land – for which they still pay taxes. In fact, some of their land that used to be all on the west side of the river is now on the east side of the river – and unusable for farming.

About 10 years ago, their home itself, which is located near where the Satsop River empties into the Chehalis River, was threatened. When the river got within a stone’s throw from their home, they obtained a rare series of permits to allow them to encourage the river back to an older overflow channel. The plan worked and their home is no longer at risk.



Farming near the Satsop and Chehalis Rivers means contending with extra water from time to time for Terry Willis, right, and Greg Willis, below.



Greg says he’s glad that risk is behind them, but generally likes it that as a farmer every day brings a different challenge.

“People don’t understand what it takes to produce the foodstuffs that we do – the complexity and the costs.”

“It’s not an easy business,” he said, looking out across his verdant backyard with the tree-lined river in the distance. But, it’s clearly one that he’s well suited for. ■

