

Conservation Showcase

Farmer connects with her community

April Jones went into farming to grow good food.

What she didn't know when she planted her first seed was that she would also be growing a sense of community — a community of people who appreciate her, her land, and her locally grown vegetables. Cultivating that sense of community has resulted in a following of loyal customers who value both the quality of her produce and the relationship they now have with the local farmer who helps feed their families.

Jones owns and operates a 24-acre, certified-organic farm near Ridgefield, Wash. The farm includes 1.5 acres of mixed vegetables, table grapes and herbs; 4 acres of pasture for her Tamworth heritage hogs; 6 acres of hay; and miscellaneous apple, fig, cherry, pear and plum trees. The rest of the farm consists of riparian and field buffers that she says “provide great habitat for hawks, kestrels and other natural pest predators.”

Her business operation, named Gus and Co., is named after her enormous dog Gus. The Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) membership program—a type of locally grown vegetable subscription program—allows Jones to provide more than 30 local families with 25 weeks of vegetables, fruits and herbs annually.

Thanks to customers generating word-of-mouth promotion, Jones is spending little of her time, money or expertise marketing her produce. The 30 weekly CSA vegetable subscriptions she offered this year sold out months ago.

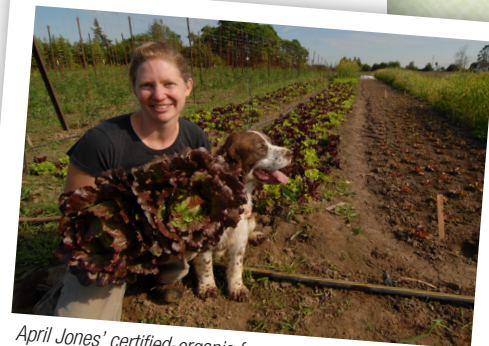
In addition, Jones sells to a natural foods market in Portland, Ore., and various restaurants in the Vancouver, Wash., area. One chef from a popular restaurant scouts Jones' fields about once a month to see what's in season and then creates an entire four- to six-course menu based on the availability of Jones' vegetables. She's been working with that chef for three years.

Listening to 34-year-old Jones talk about her farm and life avocation, it's hard to discern whether her diverse farming operation or the relationships she has with her loyal customers bring her the most joy.

“I have had customers come to me with tears in their eyes and say ‘I’m expecting my first child, and I can’t think of anything better to feed them than your vegetables.’ You have no idea how happy that makes me.” —April Jones

The connection she has developed with her customers and local community is something that she works diligently to maintain. She has a weekly “Nourishing Bites” newsletter she sends to her CSA members to keep them abreast of activities on the farm.

“It would be much easier to say, ‘Here’s your vegetables, have fun,’ but I work hard each week to provide a context for my members. I say, ‘Here are your vegetables, and this is what’s happening on the farm, or this is how the weather is affecting my fields, and this is how I’m feeling about things. And by the way, don’t complain about the rain, it’s part of a natural system,’ ” she says. Jones started her CSA program three years ago with just four subscribers. Last year she had 20, this year more than 30.



April Jones' certified-organic farm produces 1.5 acres of mixed vegetables.

CONSERVATION *SHOWCASE* (CONTINUED)



April Jones (center) credits her mother Pat (left) and father Bob Jones with her land stewardship ethic that is such an important part of her 24-acre, certified organic farming operation today.

The newsletters include recipes for dishes using her produce. “It’s a matter of education,” she explains. “My customers develop an appreciation for seasonal eating; they understand the link between the weather and what’s on their dinner table. “Even more important to me is that they have a tangible connection to my farm, so subsequently they value and want to protect farmland in our community.”

Jones says there has always been a philosophy in her family for respecting and appreciating what you have. So conservation was a primary goal from the outset.

“There really wasn’t any other option. I wasn’t going to do it any other way,” says the Ridgefield, Wash., small-acreage producer.

“For me, with all of the land’s imperfections, it’s miraculously perfect. I feel an inherent responsibility to do what I can to not step on Mother Nature’s toes.”

Jones had read about USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program organic initiative. She was also prompted by her sister, who works with the NRCS on her farm in Montana to see how the agency could assist.

“I was trying to do all of these things that I thought were important on the farm, but I’m only one person, and so I thought it was essential to seek out those resources,” she says.

Qualifying as a “beginning farmer” in the program, Jones received a higher incentive payment rate to seed cover crops for her hog pasture and plant vegetative hedgerows to protect her organic crops from spray drift from surrounding properties. “Getting those hedgerows growing adds a lot of beauty to the farm, but they’re also extremely functional,” she says.

Anitra Gorham, an NRCS resource conservationist in the Brush Prairie, Wash., office, says Jones has worked to incorporate natural resources conservation into all aspects of her farm. “Working with her to see these projects completed one by one has been very rewarding,” she says.

Gorham says seeing young farmers like Jones enter the market, is also satisfying. “April’s a beginning farmer, but her drive and commitment to her projects seem to me to ensure not only her success, but also the success and long-term sustainability of the local-food movement in our area,” she says.

Though she’s pleased with the conservation practices installed, Jones says she finds even more value in having developed a conservation plan for her operation. “I’ve had all of these ideas of things I wanted to do, but having NRCS as a resource to help stage it out, make it a priority, and then get some funding to implement the strategies has been a real blessing,” she says.

Next on her conservation plan is the installation of a composting facility for all of her vegetable scraps. “Compost is such a basic necessity for an organic farmer, so being able to manage, control, understand what’s in it, how it’s made and be very confident of what I’m using is critically important,” Jones says.

In the coming year, NRCS will also assist Jones with a pest management plan. Jones is pleased with the success of her operation to date. But she has a pragmatic vision for the future. “It’s phenomenal to see where we’ve come between three years ago and now.

But for me it’s not necessarily about growing bigger,” she says. “The goal is continuous learning and the refinement of great ideas. It’s about efficiency improvements, less work and higher returns.”



April Jones (left) and NRCS Resource Conservationist Anitra Gorham review Jones’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) plan.