

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Yakima orchardist finds new career, conservation efforts “very rewarding”

When she was a little girl, Erica Garcia dreamed of working in an air-conditioned office in a big city. Having toiled in the orchards of her family’s farm since she was old enough to help clear brush or move irrigation lines, a career in agriculture was the last thing from her mind.

Her mother and father own and operate G&G Orchards in Yakima – the only Hispanic-owned packing house in Washington. Today, that operation includes some 800 acres of orchards, a packing house, and a controlled atmosphere, cold storage facility. It’s a successful family operation, but one with humble beginnings.

As a family operation, Ms. Garcia (now Garcia-Thomas), her brother Damen, her mother Carmen and her father Rene, all worked in the orchards her family acquired and farmed over the years. Compared to the hard, manual labor of the orchards, the big city offered more excitement and comfort.

After graduating from Central Washington University with a degree in international business, Ms. Garcia-Thomas found herself working in an office she had dreamed of as a



Though she admits she didn’t especially enjoy working in the orchards as a child, Erica Garcia-Thomas (seen here with her dog “Pebbles”) is now the owner-operator of her own orchards near Yakima.

child. But she soon discovered something about her personality and her temperament that altered with that dream.

“I found out that I can’t be locked in an office from nine to five,” she says. “I can’t do it. I really can’t do it.”

It was an important lesson, and one that eventually led Ms. Garcia-Thomas back to her agricultural roots.

“I did plan on pursuing a different career,” she says, “but farming was always in the back of my mind – it’s all I really knew.” Ms. Garcia-Thomas admits that she didn’t especially enjoy working in the orchards, but the lure of working with – and in – the

family business turned out to be both powerful and persuasive.

Shortly after graduation, she purchased a small, local orchard for investment purposes. “But I got more involved with managing the operation, and it turned out that it was something I really enjoyed doing,” Ms.

Garcia-Thomas says. “I didn’t plan on doing it, but it just kind of happened. Everything,” she says, “just fell into place.”

Her first orchard was 36 acres of red and golden apples. Ms. Garcia-Thomas says that she had already picked up the skills and expertise for growing apples – a function of “on the job training” from her years working along side her family. “I grew up in the orchard, basically,” she says “We learned how to do all of the things associated with growing apples.”

Today Ms. Garcia-Thomas manages and oversees EGT Orchards’ overall operation, which, includes, she says, doing some of the things she wasn’t that excited about doing as a child. “To be honest, I really don’t like working in the orchards,” she says. “But I do it. I do it because I have to do it.”

Still she’s delighted with her career back on the farm. “It turned out great because I’m more involved with mom and dad and we’re partners in certain orchards,” she says. “This career gives me so many different options. I can work in the orchard if I want to. I can work in the office if

I want to or need to. It’s nice, because I’m always working, but I’m always switching tasks,” she says. “I’m glad that it turned out the way it has.”

Ms. Garcia-Thomas and her brother are also partners on two different orchards. “We work very well together,” she says.



Erica Garcia-Thomas and NRCS’ Corey Bon-sen examine cherry trees during a recent visit.

Working well together is, she says, the key to the family’s business success – dating back to when her family struggled to establish their business.

“We’ve had lots of ups and lots of downs along the way,” she says. “And the downs were very, very bad for us at times. A couple of years were horrible – not knowing whether we were going to eat the next day,” she says.

“It was that bad,” Ms. Garcia-Thomas says. “We barely had enough money to survive. Thank God for family.”

It was the Garcia’s extended family members who provided much of the labor in the business’ early, critical years – the time when most start-ups fail. “A lot of our workers were my mom’s brothers and sisters,” she says. “They had their own jobs but they would come help us work in the afternoons and on weekends. We couldn’t pay them. When we got the money months down the road, we finally paid them back, but still you go down such a hard road that all you can do is look ahead,” Ms. Garcia-Thomas says.

To this day, close family ties, cooperation and love form the centerpiece of the operation. It was, in fact, a family

Continued page 3

member who introduced her to a new USDA land stewardship program, called the Conservation Security Program (CSP).

“Dad said he thought I should take a look at applying for this program,” she said, “so



I did – I thought it was awesome.”

Corey Bensen, a soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Yakima says CSP is a perfect fit for Ms. Garcia-Thomas and other local growers because the program rewards existing stewardship activities and encourages additional environmental enhancements.

“Because there’s little or no tilling of the soil and cover crops between tree rows, Erica’s increasing organic matter in the soil and reducing chance of erosion in her orchard,” NRCS’ Bensen says. Additional practices like irrigation water management, equipment oil recycling, nitrogen application by using split application according to crop needs rather than applying all nitrogen at one time; and managing agricultural fugitive dust emissions by utilizing herbaceous wind barriers, “allowed Erica’s 61-acre orchard to qualify for the program’s highest level – Tier III,” he says.

According to NRCS’ Bensen, Ms. Garcia-Thomas will receive future enhancement payments for implementing additional conservation practices including managing the timing and application of nutrients

through plant tissue testing.

“She also plans to manage micro nutrients and pH by applying annual results of complete soil test,” he says. “And she will improve pesticide use through the use of an integrated pest management plan.”

“The incentives will also help us with our health and safety compliance recordkeeping – which may soon include where the crop is grown,” Ms. Garcia-Thomas says. “So it’s really beneficial,” she says. “Plus, you can look back at your records and get a good picture of what’s been going on.”

These benefits and others lead Ms. Garcia-Thomas to believe that CSP will provide significant incentives for other producers, as well. “We’re already doing a lot of conservation, but I think it’ll motivate people in a good way. It’s a very rewarding program that benefits everyone,” she says.

Ms. Garcia-Thomas is eager to encourage other producers to take advantage of the program. CSP, she says, can both help individual growers and improve the health of the industry. “The more you involve other people and share the benefits and opportunity, the better off the industry will be,” she says.

By offering that encouragement, she’s looking out for the broader, industry family – the same way she and her family have looked out for each other through the years.

“With luck and family we built a good business,” Ms. Garcia-Thomas says. “And that’s what I feel is the most rewarding thing – to have the payoff in the end. To look back and to know what we’ve done,” she says. “It was mostly mom and dad – but I was part of it. And that makes me proud,” she says.

“We’re already doing a lot of conservation, but I think it’ll motivate people in a good way.”

Erica Garcia-Thomas

*Written by Ron Nichols, NRCS
November 2006*