

Conservation Showcase

Farm, forest thrive thanks to new generation of land stewards

Despite growing up in the urban environs of San Diego, Jim Wilder always wanted to be a farmer. As a professional landscaper for 20 years, he understood the value of hard work—but nothing prepared him for just how hard that work—as a farmer—would be.

“Farming is like landscaping on steroids,” Wilder says. “Everything’s bigger – more work. I just had no idea how much bigger and how much more work.”

As a child, Wilder visited his aunt’s farm in Clark County, Washington during summers where he spent his carefree days exploring a boy’s adventure paradise. “I always loved the farm, with its 100 year-old timbers. It was an exceptional place,” he says reflecting on his childhood memories.

His mother inherited the farm from her sister and bequeathed it to Jim, her hope being that her grandchildren could grow up in the country as she had. So in 1997, Jim and his wife Denise decided it was time to “live the dream.”

“We had two choices,” Wilder says. “We were either going to come up here and live on it, or sell it. And we didn’t want to sell it.”

Growing tired of an increasingly congested, polluted urban lifestyle, the Wilders sold their landscaping business, packed their belongings, moved and set up residence with their five



Denise, at left holding their dog “Sammy,” and Jim Wilder own and operate a Christmas tree farm in Clark County Washington.

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children in a 100-year-old house on the 180-acre farm. But in the years preceding their move, the farm had been clear cut—a move necessitated to pay off taxes and the other heirs to the estate.

“When I got here, it was a stump farm,” he says. “It was a lot different than I had remembered as a child.”

But at 39 years old, Wilder was in good shape—used to working hard. So he poured his labor and love into transforming the landscape back into his childhood vision. Using bulldozers and track hoes, Wilder began the long and labor-intensive process of restoration—removing the stumps on 30 acres of land that he would eventually plant with Christmas trees. Two subsequent land purchases increased the size of the farm to more than 230 acres.

Looking back over the last 13 years, he says it’s gratifying to see the results of all that work. But now at 52, Wilder says he wouldn’t want to repeat those Herculean feats today. “The first four or five years were absolutely brutal,” he says.

Despite his utopian childhood memories, Wilder was under no illusions about farming as a way of life. He knew his farm had to first be a “working farm,” generating income for his family. So before he even moved to Washington, Wilder joined the Pacific Northwest

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Christmas Tree Association – to begin learning the horticultural, marketing and financial aspects of tree farming. Then he found a mentor in the business – a neighbor – for whom he worked, initially, for free. The next year, Wilder was hired as an assistant. In the intervening years, he “learned the ropes” as an unofficial tree apprentice.

Wilder says he poured \$100,000 into the family-run, Wilder Wintergreen Christmas Tree Farm in the first five years—and “without making a dime.” Seven years ago, the farm produced its first crop of U-Cut and wholesale trees.

With a historic barn, a variety of farm animals and gift shop on the premises, a visit to the farm has now become a holiday tradition for many families in the area for the past six years. The Wilders say they have a large number of repeat customers, attributing that loyalty to the children who enjoy the whole farm experience along with the hot cocoa and candy canes they provide to their customers

In addition to being a successful financial operation, Wilder also wants his farm to be a living one – replete with diverse plants and wildlife. “The farm was a gift, so I want to do things that honor my aunt’s memory,” he says.

But in farming, Wilder says, “There are things you need to do and things you should do. What you need to do is make money,” he says. “What you should do is plan for the future.”

To help him with some of those things he “should do,” and to bring the entire farm back to the way it used to be, Wilder enlisted the assistance of USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – focusing on the forest production portion of his operation.

“A neighbor told me about NRCS’ financial and technical assistance with pre-commercial thinning,” he says. “I’d considered doing some of this work for some time, but this year with the downturn in the economy and with my Christmas tree production down, the extra income was an incentive.”

Wilder says he already likes what he sees regarding the results of his pre-commercial thinning in his forested acreage. “You can see the sunlight coming through the trees – and now it looks more like a forest,” he says.

In addition to thinning his forest, Wilder has created snags and downed logs to promote habitat for a wide variety of animal species.

Rachel Maggi, a biologist with the NRCS in Washington says the value of those physical habitat features is extraordinary. “More than 100 forest wildlife species in Washington depend on decaying wood for cavity nesting, insect foraging, roosting, and denning,” she says.

“The Wilder’s forest is likely home to brown creepers, bats, flying squirrels, and woodpeckers. The downed logs they have provided across their forest will provide a cool, moist environment for forest amphibians such as the western red-backed salamander for the next 20-60 years,” Maggi says. “That’s a pretty good return for Jim’s labor to place the logs.”

Selling the notion of improving forest wildlife habitat wasn’t a hard one for NRCS’ Maggi. “Jim does not hesitate to call the field office with questions, which shows his commitment to getting it right the first time,” she says. “Landowners that are thorough and enthusiastic about implementing conservation practices are a joy to work with.”

Making a place for wildlife on his farm is compatible with Wilder’s business and lifestyle goals. “I’ve always loved wildlife,” he says. “After all, it’s not a living farm if you don’t have wildlife.”



On the Wilder’s farm, much effort has been put into developing wildlife and pollinator habitat.



Much of the Wilder’s 230-acre farm is forested land that, with the help of the NRCS, is undergoing forest health and wildlife habitat restoration.