I remember my surprise a year ago when Brandon Wagner of Quail Flats Farm in Independence told me he was dry-farming some tomatoes. My curiosity jumped up and I started asking questions. He briefly explained the process before we were interrupted by his many customers at the Independence Farmers Market. He takes delight in their questions.

“What I find exciting about dry farming, especially tomatoes, is that people don’t think it is possible. Not only is it possible, but you often end up with tomatoes with better flavor. People can taste the difference.”

Dry farming was explained, and the quality of dry-farmed vegetables was highlighted, at a workshop co-sponsored by the Luckiamute Watershed Council, Oregon State University (OSU) Extension, and Marion and Polk Soil & Water Conservation Districts. Fifty-two attendees listened, learned about and tasted the bounty at Darlene and Vernor Gowen’s farm in Independence on a sun-drenched September afternoon.

Farmers finding success with dry farming have recently made headlines in drought-stricken California, and this ages-old technique is rapidly gaining interest in Washington and Oregon. In addition to conserving an ever-scarcer water supply, farmers are considering dry farming to meet growing customer demand for the better tasting vegetables. Its increase among commercial and small farmers is also driven by consumers’ values held about natural resource conservation and organic farming, especially due to increasing concerns about a changing climate.
Dry Farming, continued from page 1

While some may be tempted to just rip out their drip irrigation to give dry farming a try, OSU Small Farms instructor Amy Garrett cautions that there is a suite of techniques and variables that have to be managed and tested before applying this technique on your own farm or garden. The good news, Amy says, is that much of the Willamette Valley is well-suited to crop production without irrigation, since our region typically receives well above the minimum 20 inches required during fall through spring. This moisture is stored in the soil and is what keeps the plants’ moisture requirements sustained throughout the dry summer months.

Because of a dry-farmed plant’s reliance on stored moisture, soil water-holding capacity is one of the most important variables that has to be tested before trying to adapt this technique to your own farm or garden. You can contact your local OSU Extension Office (https://extension.oregonstate.edu) for more information on soil testing and how to choose the right lab to perform the analysis. Other important variables that need to be monitored and adapted to are local climate and weather, management of weeds and pests, spacing, cover crops, and suitable crop varieties.

Once these conditions are met, the variety of crops that can be grown without a drop of added water is astounding. OSU field trials across the region have resulted in an impressive list of crop varieties well-suited to dry farming - including tomatoes, peppers, garlic, pumpkins, watermelons, cantaloupes, winter squash, corn, beans, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and more.

Darlene Gowen has been participating in OSU’s Dry Farm Trials for the past four years with help from Garrett, and has been adapting dry farming techniques to her land. “I can grow almost anything and it all tastes better than irrigated. It’s an efficient and effective way to garden,” she says.

When I asked about dry farmer’s lower crop yields when compared to growers who irrigate and fertilize, she contends that “you probably come out ahead with dry farming when you take into account the longer season, and less work and expense once you get it all started.” Her advice to someone wanting to try this? “Plants know how to care for themselves as living things. They will send roots down to find the water. So, just follow the rules and use the right seeds, and you’ll be successful.”

Suzanne Teller, LWC Outreach Coordinator, notes that “with temperatures warming and growing concerns about water quantity, dry farming is one action you can take to conserve our water resources and help protect the overall health of our watershed.”

If you are interested in learning more about dry farming, the resources listed below can help get you started!

Dry Farming Resources

An overview of the techniques and benefits of dry farming in the Willamette Valley is documented in this YouTube video by OSU Extension: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrjDf7x9Tro

For a great place to get started with dry farming and connect with the Dry Farming Collaborative, head to https://agsci.oregonstate.edu/smallfarms/dry-farming

Dry farming research results, articles, reports and an excellent list of resources and can be found here: https://centerforsmallfarms.oregonstate.edu/dryfarm

For a great source of seeds adapted to dry farming and organic techniques, you can head to https://seedalliance.org/profiles/seed-revolution-now
Join us for Council Monthly Meetings, typically held the second Thursday of each month from 6:30—8:30 p.m. Please note that the schedule for our upcoming meetings is different from our typical second Thursday routine. Our meetings are always open to the public and discussion topics include local watershed issues and actions. For details, please visit LuckiamuteLWC.org.

**Upcoming Council Meetings**

- Oct. 8, 2019: Monmouth Volunteer Hall
- Nov. 21, 2019: Check out website for venue info!
**No December meeting**

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