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Walter Wells & Sons has been growing fruit for 125 years

By BRENNA WIEGAND

For the Capital Press

Walter Wells & Sons has been growing orchard fruit in Oregon's Hood River Valley for 125 years.

The 600 acres on which they operate today includes the 160-acre purchase made by Jerome Wells in 1902.

Today, Devon Wells, fifth generation, runs the operation. Two of his children are full-time on the farm and another two help when school's out.

Devon Wells came back to the farm eight years ago after 18 years as a firefighter/paramedic for the City of Hood River, retiring as fire chief. He's in his 34th year as a volunteer firefighter.

"I taught at fire service conferences all over the world and learned a lot about leadership, laws, networking and other things I wouldn't have learned staying on the farm," he said. "Now I get to pursue my birth passion, which is farming."

In addition to 350 acres of pears, they grow 100 acres of apples and lesser amounts of cherries and peaches.

They're picking something from late June through October, with U-pickers continuing to come long as apples still hang on the trees.

Highly diversified and vertically integrated, everything they do ties directly back to agriculture.

They took the packing house, instituted in the 1950s, in a new direction.

"We have so many large packing plants in the area that it makes sense to have them pack the bulk of our fruit," Wells said. "We run a specialty packing line here and do special orders and programs."

Wells' great uncle started the "Portland Program" that continues to thrive.

"We're going once a week right now, but July through January we're taking a full semi of fruit to Portland twice a week, delivering it to stores and other distribution points."

They operate a trucking operation that hauls fruit for area growers and run an in-demand cold storage operation.

Near and dear to the family and Hood River County at large is their



[ABOVE] Devon Wells is fifth generation on the family farm. Walter Wells & Sons has been growing orchard fruit in Oregon's Hood River Valley for 125 years.

[LEFT] Devon and Tia Wells in the packing house. Walter Wells & Sons has been growing orchard fruit in Oregon's Hood River Valley for 125 years.

in-house fruit stand and store, Pearl's Place.

Managed by Devon's wife Tia and daughter Kelsey, Pearl's Place has become a County favorite and a refreshing surprise for tourists.

They want visitors to spend an afternoon enjoying the farm, U-picking in-season crops and enjoying an array of fruit-centered goodies.

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Polehn Farms traces heritage to Oregon homesteaders

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**
For the Capital Press

Polehn Farms, a third-generation orchard in North-Central Oregon, traces its history back to an early homesteading ancestor.

Today, siblings Deede Anderson and Ken Polehn manage the farm, focusing on dark sweet cherries grown on approximately 350 acres near The Dalles, yielding about 2,000 tons of fruit each year.

In 1989, they built a packing facility and started shipping their fruit nationwide and internationally. While they've recently implemented advanced optical and electrical sorting systems with AI-powered defect detection, such farms still face unpredictable challenges.

Giving up is out of the question for Ken Polehn.

"I must have cherry juice running through my veins that's why I do what I do — I just love it," Ken Polehn said. "I enjoy just being out there doing it and my relationships with all the people involved in making the whole thing happen."

Getting there is fraught with challenges, starting with weather that reaches greater extremes than it used to. One November a deep freeze killed the cherries before they could even break bud; just a few years ago, a week of 118-degree heat cooked them in the trees.

"When I was a kid, I don't remember leaving cherries on the trees for



Ken Polehn and his wife Liz were crowned "King Bing and Queen Ann" at the 2024 Northwest Cherry Festival in The Dalles, Oregon. Polehn Farms produces about 2,000 tons of dark sweet cherries a year on 350 acres in North-Central Oregon.

any reason and we have left more crops hanging in the last 25 years, and the supply and demand situation has gotten really bad in the last few years," Polehn said. "A lot of times you don't know what you're being paid for your cherries until you get a check in the mail months after harvest."

As a steady flow of regulations come from the capital, the media, without the benefit of balanced information, can paint an inaccurate picture of farming in general.

That's why Ken started writing "Thoughts from the Tractor Seat" a year ago. Through articles and blogs, he's challenging the "bad guy" image of farmers and provide a deeper understanding of agriculture to an urban audience.

"I understand why people care about how their food is grown, but I also think we need to ask a bigger question," he said. "What happens if the system that produces that food starts to break down?"

"Out here, we think about both."



Brooke Rollins, U.S. agriculture secretary, speaks during the closing session of the American Farm Bureau Convention. PHOTO BY AFBF

USDA to buy almonds, pistachios, grape juice, raisins

By KYLE ODEGARD
Capital Press

The USDA recently announced purchases of up to \$80 million in specialty crops — \$20 million each for almonds, pistachios, grape juice and raisins.

The commodities will be bought under the agency’s authority through Section 32 of the Agriculture Act of 1935, and are intended to support agricultural producers while assisting communities in need.

“These purchases will deliver important benefits to our growers, consumers and local communities,” said Zachary Fraser, American Pistachio Growers president and CEO, in a news release.

The Section 32 purchases help growers by stabilizing prices, easing surplus pressure and creating a reliable market for pistachios, said Cadée Condit, APG

vice president of government relations.

“At the same time, it gets nutritious food into food banks and communities that need it most. For pistachio farmers, the program supports long-term sustainability and recognizes the important role growers play in feeding Americans,” Condit added, in the news release.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins announced the purchases Jan. 12 during the 107th American Farm Bureau Federation Convention in Anaheim, Calif.

Other recent Section 32 purchases impacting the Pacific Northwest and California were: \$50 million in dry beans, \$35 million of apples and \$25 million in dried cranberries, announced in August; and \$16 million of pink shrimp, \$14 million of canned pears and \$3 million of dried sweet cherries, announced in May.



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Women want wine from women winemakers

By KYLE ODEGARD
Capital Press

Women are more likely to choose wine from women winemakers and leveraging that inclination with label messaging and artwork can boost sales, according to a new study.

The research, from Washington State University and Auburn University, is noteworthy because females are the largest group of U.S. wine consumers.

Women make roughly 59% of U.S. wine purchases, said Christina Chi, co-author of the study and a professor of hospitality business management at WSU's Carson College of Business.

"Our findings suggest that women winemakers and winery owners can benefit by being more visible," Chi added.

Research showed that messages like "proudly made by a woman winemaker" increased women's intentions of purchasing wines, particularly when label artwork reinforced the point with feminine gender cues such as flowers.

Women also were willing to pay higher prices for those wines.

"They appreciate women's success in an industry that is hard for them," Chi said.

Identity shapes brand image

Wine is considered a cultural product where the winemaker's



COURTESY WSU

Findings from a Washington State University study indicate that women winemakers and winery owners can benefit by being more visible.

identity plays a role in shaping the brand's image.

Women winemakers, however, are less likely than males to include their names on bottle labels or draw attention to their gender.

Their reluctance may stem from concerns about prejudice toward their wines in the male-dominated industry.

About 18% of U.S. winemakers are women, and Chi said they

face greater barriers to success.

"The research shows they can disclose their ownership with confidence and leverage it as a marketing strategy," Chi said.

Possibilities include putting "women-made wine" statements on labels or packaging, and retail store displays featuring women-made wine.

Building on previous research

Demi Deng, an assistant professor at Auburn who earned her

doctorate at WSU, co-authored the research. Ruiying Cai, an assistant professor at WSU, also contributed.

The new research builds on earlier studies that found women are more likely to buy wine with feminine cues on labels.

That research found feminine label design even changed women's taste of wine.

"As researchers, we want our work not only to have societal

impact, but to have practical significance for the wine industry," Chi said.

She added that women winemakers were eager for additional studies about women wine consumers," she added.

Deng said she hoped to draw attention to women's contributions to the industry.

Perhaps counterintuitively, women were less likely to buy feminine-label wines when female winemakers were featured in photographs.

Researchers said purchase decisions may have been influenced by whether participants related to the pictures of individuals.

The importance of storytelling

Chi said the research could apply to other food and beverage segments because women in general are more conscious about health and the environment.

The new study also speaks to the importance of storytelling for marketing.

"Today's consumers place more emphasis on experience than the product itself. This requires marketers to create memorable and emotional consumer engagements using storytelling," Chi said.

"Women respond particularly well to storytelling marketing. Brands that excel in storytelling will win women consumers' hearts and purses," she added.

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U.S. hop stocks continue to decrease

By **KYLE ODEGARD**
Capital Press

The U.S. hops inventory held by growers, dealers and brewers on March 1 was 147 million pounds, down 13% from the 169,000 pounds the previous year, according to a new USDA report.

Two years ago, hop stocks stood at 184 million pounds.

This spring, dealers and growers held approximately 127,000 pounds of hops while brewers had 20 million pounds.

The Pacific Northwest grows nearly all of the country's hops and farmers have tried to shed inventory with acreage reductions in recent seasons.

Hops stock decreases are viewed as a positive sign as the industry continues to right size due to a decline in drinking and other trends.

The September hops inventory fell to 116,000 pounds in 2025, down 15% from the prior year.



The U.S. hops inventory dropped again in March as growers reduce acreage to right size in the face of a decline in beer drinking and other trends. COURTESY WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



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Oregon wine industry's economic impact growing

By KYLE ODEGARD
Capital Press

The Oregon wine industry's economic impact keeps growing, though at a slower pace due to headwinds, according to a new Oregon Wine Board analysis.

The 2024 Oregon Wine Economic Impact Report also detailed the industry's substantial contribution to tourism.

The report showed Oregon wine and grape industries generated an estimated \$8.49 billion economic impact in 2024, a 3.8% increase from the previous report in 2022.

However, from 2019 to 2022 the industry's economic impact increased nearly 13%.

"From the jobs it provides Oregonians across vineyards, wineries and related businesses, to the tourism dollars flowing into communities statewide, the industry touches every corner

of Oregon," said Gina Bianco, Oregon Wine Board executive director.

"Even as the challenges faced by the global wine market continue to impact our growers and producers, the contributions of Oregon wine to the state are tangible, growing and distinctly positive," Bianco added, in a news release.

Industry challenges include a decline in demand and uncertainty about tariffs and immigration enforcement, which have increased costs for business and households.

The pandemic and wildfires also have cast a lingering shadow on the industry, and travel has shifted to lower frequency and spending levels.

Despite those issues, wine grapes were Oregon's most valuable fruit in 2024 with a value of \$329 million.

Wine-supported wages and salaries increased 2.8% to \$1.75 billion in 2024, but the number of jobs supported by the industry dropped 3.4% to roughly 38,100.



COURTESY CAROLYN WELLS-KRAMER, OREGON WINE BOARD

Despite industry problems, wine grapes were Oregon's most valuable fruit in 2024 with a value of \$329 million. Pinot noir, Chardonnay and Pinot gris were the most harvested wine grapes in the state.



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'Lagerstedt' hazelnut cultivar relies on new disease-resistant gene

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI

Capital Press

Oregon farmers will soon be able to plant hazelnut trees with a new genetic source of Eastern Filbert Blight resistance than they've traditionally relied on.

Oregon State University recently obtained a plant patent for "Lagerstedt," a new cultivar that can withstand the fungal pathogen based on a gene inherited from "Ratoli," a Spanish hazelnut variety.

"It's an option for the growers that we didn't have," said Gaurab Bhattarai, OSU's new hazelnut breeder.

Up until now, more than 20 hazelnut cultivars released by OSU have relied on a gene from another variety, "Gasaway," but several years ago, it was discovered the disease had mutated to overcome that source of resistance.

The new "Lagerstedt" trees will likely hold up better against the mutant form of EFB than existing varieties, as other cultivars with the "Ratoli" gene have proven more resistant to different strains of the disease during studies in New Jersey, where the pathogen is endemic, he said.

The new OSU hazelnut variety will be available to growers from two propagators in Oregon: North American Plants near McMinnville, which plans to sell trees for spring planting, and Microplant



Gaurab Bhattarai, hazelnut breeder with Oregon State University, holds a bowl of Lagerstedt hazelnuts next to an explanatory poster about the new variety at the recent Nut Growers Society winter meeting in Albany, Ore. Lagerstedt relies on a new source of genetic resistance to Eastern Filbert Blight than existing varieties.

Nurseries near Gervais, which can grow the trees for farmers on contract.

The cultivar is named after Harry Lagerstedt, a retired OSU horticulture professor and USDA researcher, who died in 2023 at the age of 97.

As the "Lagerstedt" cultivar has a common ancestor with "Jef-

ferson," a popular variety released by OSU in 2009, it shares a similar upright growth structure, meaning it doesn't require as much pruning as some other trees, Bhattarai said.

Like Jefferson, the new variety's nuts are suitable for both the kernel or in-shell markets, he said. Though the per-acre yield efficiency is slightly lower, its kernels

fill a larger percentage of the shell and they're less prone to problems such as mold, brown stain and black tips.

"The Lagerstedt doesn't have that many defects," Bhattarai said.

The variety's nuts become ready for harvest roughly a week earlier than Jefferson's, and the trees can be pollinated by several

existing cultivars, including Yamhill, York, McDonald and Webster. However, they're incompatible with the Jefferson and PollyO varieties.

Sensory analysis conducted by OSU's Food Innovation Center also found that consumers considered Lagerstedt nuts to have an enjoyable flavor profile, he said.

Though Lagerstedt is the first OSU variety to gain resistance from a source other than Gasaway, it's unlikely to be the last, Bhattarai said.

The university is currently studying several "promising selections" from hazelnut crosses that rely on EFB-resistant genes occurring on entirely different chromosomes than either Gasaway or Ratoli, he said.

One such selection is likely to be released as a named OSU cultivar by early 2027, Bhattarai said.

In the future, the university also plans to prioritize "stacking" multiple resistant genes within a single cultivar, or combining them with "quantitative" resistance, he said.

Quantitative resistance generally relies on multiple genetic sources, strengthened over time by breeding trees that appear to withstand disease pressure.

Compared to single-gene resistance, quantitative resistance is often less complete but is tougher for the disease to overcome through mutation.



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Fourth generation joins Kiyokawa Family Orchards

By **BRENNA WIEGAND**

For the Capital Press

Rebecca Kiyokawa stepped into her role as the fourth generation at Kiyokawa Family Orchards after graduating from college last August.

Although new to farming, she quickly became involved in the agricultural community, making lots of connections and joining Oregon Farm Bureau's Promotion and Engagement and Young Farmers & Ranchers committees, as well as serving on the Hood River County Farm Bureau board.

"I'm having a blast taking on these opportunities and becoming more involved in supporting the farming community," she said.

Her great-grandfather Riichi Kiyokawa emigrated from Japan in 1905, eventually establishing roots in Oregon's Hood River Valley, where he and wife Rei raised eight children.

Their son Mamoru met his wife, Michiko, when their families landed in the same internment camp during World War II.

Like many Japanese farming families at the time, the Kiyokawas scrambled to find others to care for their land during their absence. As it turns out, they were one of the fortunate families whose land was returned to them and, 80 years later, the Kiyokawas still hold the Stadelman family in high regard.

The Stadelmans leased the family's land during the war, and returned it when the Kiyokawas returned.

The U.S. government released Mamoru and Michiko from the camp early because he joined the military and she returned to college. Upon their return, the two purchased land near the original family farm in Parkdale, Ore., where they grew pears and raised five children.

When Mamoru's health declined, his son Randy returned to take over the farm in 1989, just as the Alar Scare was collapsing the apple market, including those who didn't use the chemical.

Randy put a couple bins of apples outside his shop and began selling them for 5 cents a pound.

"That was the beginning of our direct



PHOTO BY EMILIE CHEN

Rebecca Kiyokawa recently joined her father Randy at Kiyokawa Family Orchards in Hood River. The 207-acre farm includes 150 varieties of apples, pears, Asian pears, cherries and stone fruit.

marketing, and it led to our fruit stand," Kiyokawa said. The fruit stand offers U-pick, events and their own ciders and jams.

The farm's direct sales program also includes Portland stores, schools, restaurants, and participation in 13 farmers markets there. The red-fleshed Mountain Rose apple is especially popular with restaurants, adding a vibrant color to dishes.

Since Randy took over, the farm has grown from 72 to 207 acres where they grow more than 150 different varieties of apples, pears, peaches, cherries, plums, pluots and blueberries – a plum and cherry cross. Most of their fruit is pears that they send to Diamond Fruit, a co-op packing house and distributor.

Rebecca now works across many areas of the operation, including supporting field crews, assisting with the fruit stand, managing communications, and contributing to business decisions.

"Dad has been teaching me the ropes of it all," she said. "I see how much he has grown it and wonder what more I could do."

"I think it's continuing to create a place where people can connect with farming and their food, while farming in a way that makes my predecessors proud and keeps the business strong for future genera-



Rebecca Kiyokawa recently joined her father Randy at Kiyokawa Family Orchards in Hood River. The 207-acre farm includes 150 varieties of apples, pears, Asian pears, cherries and stone fruit.

tions," she said.

"This work is very meaningful to me," Kiyokawa said. "I get to continue my fam-

ily's legacy, provide opportunities for others, welcome families onto the farm, and offer fresh fruit to our community."

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A photograph of two men standing in a field of white flowers, possibly a vineyard or orchard. The man on the left is wearing a light blue polo shirt, blue jeans, and a grey baseball cap with "ROYAL" on it. He has his arms crossed and is looking towards the other man. The man on the right is wearing a blue jacket and is seen from the side, looking back at the first man. The background is filled with green leaves and white blossoms.

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