

Healthy soils, healthy crops, healthy food: The Uhlorn family way

Julia McCarthy for Ag Proud – Idaho

AT A GLANCE

With soil health a priority, Uhlorn Family Farms is known for experimenting with novel crops and conservation practices. Their most recent endeavor is developing a farm-branded food line.

For some farms, innovation means introducing conservation practices ahead of the curve. For others, it may look like growing crops outside the “normal” local rotation. Elsewhere, it may mean introducing cutting-edge technology.

At Uhlorn Family Farms of Ferdinand, all three are at play.

“We try to have one experimental crop each year,” says Brentley Uhlorn of the operation he runs with his dad, Darrel. Common crops on north-central Idaho’s Camas Prairie include small grains, hay, canola, peas and lentils. The Uhlorns include all of these in their rotation as well as sunflowers, soybeans and three types of grass seed. They have experimented with millet, radish and spinach seeds and quinoa. They even operate a small vineyard and plan to try rice next year.

Experimentation is not new for Uhlorn Family Farms. “My dad started doing farm experiments in the ‘80s,” says Uhlorn. A third-generation farmer on the Camas Prairie, Darrel was the first in the area – maybe the region – to grow canola, now a staple crop for many of his neighbors. Then too, Uhlorn says, “He was one of the first to start experimenting with direct-seeding and no-till.”

Uhlorn himself pursued a dual degree in agriculture and viticulture at Walla Walla Community College. “When I came back, I wanted to experiment



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with sustainable practices,” he says. “I’m interested in regenerative agriculture and soil health.”

This has led the farm down a new line of experimentation. They now employ a full-time regenerative ag specialist, Dave Dahlsrud, and are introducing some cattle grazing onto their farmed acres. Their interest has also led to a focus on soil biology and use of biostimulants to improve soil health and replace or reduce nitrogen fertilizers.

The farm has been entirely under direct seeding since the late ‘90s and, says Uhlorn, “We don’t want to bring in a lot of tillage.” With 50 acres in transition to certified organic status and an interest in spreading – or perhaps rotating – that status further across the farm, the Uhlorns are considering their weed control options.

Putting the hammer down on weed seed spread

Although non-herbicide weed control measures are improving in some crops, Uhlorn says, “It becomes more difficult when you’re not doing row crops.” Products like robotic weeders are not

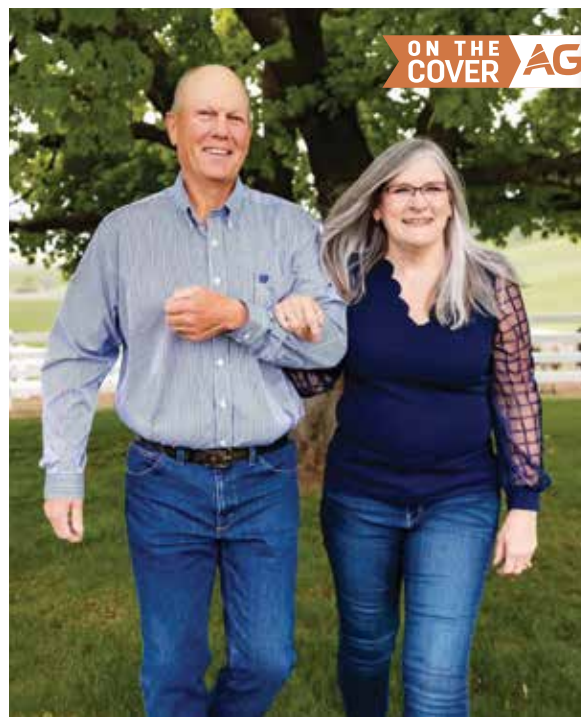


Photo provided by Brentley Uhlorn.

Darrel and Mary Uhlorn were the first farmers in their area to grow canola.

designed for broad-acre agriculture.

One tool now in the experimental stage at Uhlorn Family Farms is the Seed Terminator, a harvest weed seed control unit. This is a hammer mill which attaches to the rear of a combine and, as Uhlorn says, “pulverizes everything but the straw.” The idea is to prevent viable weed seeds from returning to the soil with the chaff.

This is a new technology that, although gaining traction, can be found on only a small handful of farms in the Northwest. “We bought the second Seed Terminators in the U.S.,” says Uhlorn of the model they use.

These units have been on the farm for three years, but 2024 was the second year in which Uhlorns collected data. “The first year, 80 percent of the farm got wiped out by a really severe hailstorm,” Uhlorn says.

So far, the units appear to be a valuable addition to their weed control program but insufficient as a standalone measure. “On its own, we’re going backwards,” says Uhlorn, “but with herbicides and

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“We try to have one experimental crop each year,” says Brentley Uhlorn, whose farm has experimented with millet, radish, spinach seeds, and even plans to try rice next year.

The Uhlorns' small vineyard is an uncommon sight in this small-grains-dominated area.

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the harvest weed control unit working together, we are seeing weed populations starting to decline."

Crop trials and alternate markets

While the Uhlorns' interest in novel agronomic practices keeps the farm on the cutting edge, they are well-known in the area for their crop trials. These vary in size: Spinach and turnip seed trials were each 2 to 3 acres in size, millet and quinoa around 10 acres and this year's soybean trial, 20 acres.

"We want to get a truckload to justify hauling it," says Uhlorn of the latter. "With this being the first year, we're learning about the type of soybean we're growing."

As for the destinations of these crops, says Uhlorn, "We look for markets once we decide what we'll grow."

Sometimes this means trucking commodities as far as Spokane, as in the case of sunflower seeds for the birdseed market.

That's a long haul, but worth it to Uhlorn for the benefits the plants provide. "I like what they do to the soil," he says. "They break up compaction layers really well. They have deep taproots that go deep to find nutrients that may have leached down from other crops." He just has to be careful about location: Since sunflowers are harvested late, after fall precipitation has made hillsides treacherous for combines,

he avoids planting them in steep fields. Other crops are harder to place locally. "I thought there would be a good market," says Uhlorn of quinoa. "But it seemed

like everywhere wanted an organic certification." The quinoa, like other market misfits over the years, was sold for cattle feed to the neighbor who rents the Uhlorns' pasture.



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Sunflowers' deep taproots are good for improving soil structure and picking up leached nutrients – and they're also striking in appearance.



Photos provided by Brentley Uhlorn.



Brentley and Tanis Uhlorn are pictured with kids Tristan, 12, Baker, 4, and Rayna, 2.

A local flour line

But Uhlorn Farms are out to create new markets for their grains. “My 4-year-old son loves to come out for harvest, and he wants to know what we are growing and what it is used for,” he says. One such conversation made Uhlorn reflect on the lack of connection between food eaten and grown locally. What’s more, he is confident that the superior-quality grains grown on Uhlorn Family Farms are worth a premium, if a direct market can be found.

“We’re growing high-quality, nutrient-dense food products,” he says. “The



consumers are there, but the retailers are not sure what to do with it.”

“We’re in the process now of launching our own farm-branded food line,” says Uhlorn. They’re working with an Idaho mill to grind three types of wheat flours, two types of rolled oats, a gluten-free oat flour and a high-protein, gluten-free chickpea flour. “There are no additives, no preservatives – just whole-grain flour in the package,” he says.

The process has taken about four years from concept to projected completion this fall. “I keep saying 30 to 60 days [to launch], but 30 to 60 days comes and goes really quickly,” he laughs.

Packaging was one factor that took a surprising amount of time, including everything from brand design to nutrition labels. But Uhlorn is excited about the

final product and grateful for the help they’ve received since they began to pursue the idea. “We’ve been introduced to lots of awesome people who have helped us along the way,” he says. “These are people who believe in what we’re doing – in healthy food and regenerative agriculture.”

After a soft launch, he is hoping to sell ingredients to regional businesses and restaurants who specialize in locally grown food. The farm will also offer wholesale orders from an online store. “Ideally, we’d like to get into local and regional grocery stores,” says Uhlorn.

It’s a bold step, but perfectly in character for Uhlorn Family Farms. And whatever changes this new venture brings for the operation, it seems a given that they will keep experimenting with new crops and improving the way they grow food. **AG**

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