

This week I took a field trip to the Best Family Farm to meet Brandon Best. If you've been reading my posts you'll remember that I first made contact with Brandon during my initial survey to find out if farmers would be interested in agroforestry consultation services. He said he wasn't, but because he took the E4E class and knew I was taking it, he's been keeping in contact with me and giving me advice here and there. So, putting the face to the voice, I drove out to Chehalis to see his farm.

Surprisingly Brandon runs a aquaponics operation out of his garage. He uses it as a grow room for his starts, the same way a greenhouse is where farmers germinate their seedlings. Only these starts are irrigated with tilapia by-products. I tried one of their celery stalks and they were very salty, a result of the nutrient uptake by the plant. This aquaponics system is extensive, ingenious, and expensive. On the negative side, just for the hardware a farmer would have to sell \$1200 worth of produce. There are also nutrient problems associated with such a sensitive system (fish are sensitive organisms), as Brandon and his father point out, the micronutrients missing in a water based system cannot be effectively augmented back into the system. Instead the plants in this system are living on fish waste which have the nutrients of whatever the fish ate and excreted. This has lead to problems with the system, specifically when dealing with pests. A plant becomes a target for a pest when it is weakened, when the environment is favorable to the pest, and when the pest is around. Now with the plants already malnourished, and water plentiful around them, pests have been able to run amuck. The obvious answer is "bring in some beneficial insects to eat the pests." Smart enough, however the very expensive insects seem to want to live outside of the grow-room, and take all of their services with them. So, while Brandon and his dad have managed a brilliant science experiment, with the way things look now, they're probably never going to pay it off.

From here we went out to his greenhouses. Brandon is not the typical farmer, or maybe in his a-typical-ness he is typical. Brandon has greenhouses which aren't propped up with metal frames, because he lives under power lines. He uses wooden frames for majority of the structure. This made the greenhouses cheaper to assemble, but more high-maintenance. As he said, during the super bowl snow storm, he was out pushing snow off of his greenhouses every two hours of the night. He didn't mention much on the next part, but as an observation, Brandon has a rounded greenhouse with stationary skirts. Meaning the sides of the greenhouses cannot be raised to allow for airflow. The curved top promotes dripping and a mildewy environment. He's using this greenhouse at the moment to store his rotting squash. I really do wonder how susceptible that greenhouse is to molds now that the environment is so heavily inoculated and favorable to such biotics.

Brandon then took me to the field he was growing berries on. He use to pay \$2000 annually to use this field. The field belongs to a neighbor whose father used it when he was farming. If I may get a little judgemental, leave it to the farmer's kids to "know best". Due to the kid "knowing best", they've upped the land price to \$6000 annually, and have prohibited anybody but Brandon and his father from working on the field due to a lack of property insurance. The farmer's kid doesn't want to get sued if Brandon throws a work party and someone stubs a toe. I've read about situations like these where land price is the factor that stops farmers from farming and allows Ed McMansions to move their one cow onto the 100 acres of prairie. This issue goes into legislation and zoning laws. The government does offer means to make these lands cheaper and protect them from Ed McMansions. They usually have a stronger effect the further away from a city you go because the land gets cheaper. However, the further away from a city you go, the more it costs to bring the products to market.

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We ended the field trip talking smack about the market, about his Trump supporting neighbors, about advertising and farm animals and said goodbye. He's given me a lot to think about in these departments and makes me glad that I don't have any debt, children, or pets. I'm reminded how lucky I am to have Ann and Zahid as financial backers. Hopefully, with any luck and skill, I won't screw up this opportunity.

Until next time!

Shani A