GARDEN

A new generation of farmers

By Penny Nakamura
For The Bulletin

Under a rain-threatening sky, Dustin Tombleson and Anna Schulz pull weeds out of the rows of lettuce they planted in late summer.

Dressed in work clothes and sturdy boots, these two young farmers may be the cream of the crop, as they look toward a career on the farm. They don't own Good Earth Organic Farm in Bend where they're working, but they are learning what it takes to make it in the farming business.

They're also part of a small but growing back-to-the-land movement among young college graduates who would rather hoe a field than wheel and deal in the halls of corporate America.

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Farmers

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They value sustainable family farming and want to eat organically and locally as much as possible. And make no mistake about it, they do think it is possible.

While these two college graduates could've easily picked several lucrative career paths with their degrees, their journey to become future farmers was intentional and purposeful.

This is good news to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the latest national census figures of which show that the fastest growing group of farmers and ranchers is those older than 65, and there doesn't seem to be a ready supply of new farmers to take over these farms.

Tombleson and Schulz are part of a bigger movement. Author Kristy Athens will talk about the benefits and pitfalls of her own back-to-the-land experience with farming in the Columbia Gorge during an event at the Downtown Bend Public Library Sunday (see "If you go").



Dustin Tombleson and Anna Schulz weed a crop of young kale growing inside a greenhouse at the Good Earth Organic Farm in Bend.



Photos by **Andy Tullis** / The Bulletin

Aliza Rosenstein walks between the Jerusalem artichokes in her Bend garden.

If you go

What: "Get Your Pitchfork On! The Real Dirt on Country Living" author Kristy Athens will be speaking and answering questions about her new book and aspects of country living

When: 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Downtown Bend Public Library

Cost: Free

Contact: 541-312-1032

Hopeful future farmers

As a Harvard graduate, Schulz says she couldn't have imagined when she left Boston that she would find herself in Central Oregon working on a farm.

As a native Vermonter who knows her way around her great grandparents' 100-acre family farm, she wasn't always interested in this way of life, but she sees the value now more than ever.

"I really found I love working outside; it makes me feel connected to where I grew up," explained Schulz, 25, who also works as a nordic coach for Mt. Bachelor Sports Education Foundation. "Growing food is something that seems worthwhile, because you always have access to good food on a farm, and I love eating good food. At the end of the day, everyone has to eat, and it's good to know how to grow it and where it came from."

Introducing good and local food to others has also been an important mission for Schulz, who worked for Americorp after college, connecting produce from Vermont farmers to under-served schools in the state.

She speaks thoughtfully as she recalls how thousands of small family dairy farms in her native Vermont are no longer part of the landscape, but she says she's hopeful, as more consumers are demanding organic milk from their local farmers.

Snacking on a lettuce leaf she's just picked, Schulz says she can now imagine going back to the family farm someday — it's not something she's fleeing from any more.

According to the Agriculture Department statistics, for every farmer and rancher younger than 25, there are five who are 75 or older.

"I have a degree in government from Harvard, not exactly related to farming or ski coaching, but in all seriousness, I am very interested in agricultural policy, so maybe I'll put it to work someday," explained Schulz.

The passionate farmer

Tombleson speaks rapidly and with passionate gusto when he talks about farming and how to keep family farming in America alive. His journey to Good Earth Organic Farm was serendipitous. He previously served with the military in Iraq and dabbled in the computer technology world.

"My father, if he were still alive, would be saying, 'What are you doing?'" quipped Tombleson, 31, as he looked over at the pigs running through the fenced field. "I also worked on a farm in Costa Rica, and we used to say, 'strong back, weak mind,'" he laughed. He becomes serious when he talks about having the utmost respect for the American farmer. "Farmers have to be so smart and intelligent: They have to manage their farm, and know what to plant, when to plant, where to plant and they have to be good business managers, and it's really, really hard physical work, too."

Being on the farm is clearly what Tombleson loves. Though it was early in the day, he had already harvested and washed 100 pounds of lettuce and other produce to deliver later that afternoon to about 20 local restaurants — and he's clearly proud that he can get these vegetables from dirt to plate within five hours.

"I just picked this spinach two hours ago, and after we're done here I'll deliver it to the restaurants," said Tombleson, who earned a degree in agriculture systems from Washington State University.

Tombleson walked through another row of lettuce and pointed out where freezing overnight temperatures had burned the leaves. He says every burned leaf must be pruned by hand, and though it's often tedious work, he says that at the end of the day he feels proud of what they've accomplished in the fields.

Tombleson laments the fact that small family farmland is being sold off all over America.

"This farm was originally supposed to built as a big Catholic retreat, but Good Earth was able to work out a deal to lease and farm four or five of the 10 acres here," explained Tombleson as he points to a small farmhouse, where a handful of nuns still reside. He sighs with relief. He says he's glad the Catholic Church didn't go through with its original plans to build over the rich land, because once it's asphalted and built on, the farming land never comes back.

Though Good Earth is a relatively small farm, it harvests upward of a 100 pounds of lettuce daily in the summer, along with a lot of other produce, Tombleson says. He says the 85 chickens on the farm can collectively lay about 100 eggs per day. All the products are delivered the same day to local restaurants, where consumers have been proven to be voracious eaters of local foods.

"My point is you don't need a super large farm to produce a lot of food. Think about World War II, when almost every home had a Victory Garden to help feed their families," said Tombleson, who dreams of his own farm, but knows the start-up costs may be out of reach.

In testimony given in March before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsak acknowledged these concerns.

"Access to land is a major challenge," said Vilsak. "The agriculture cost of farmland has doubled nationally over the last decade."

Though farmland is expensive, Tombleson is not giving up. He says he knows there are empty plots on church and school grounds, just waiting for his farming knowledge. In his offseason from Central Oregon farming, he's putting his energy and passion into teaching the next generation by helping students in Bend's Highland Magnet School with their school gardens. He wants these young students to fully understand the enormity or what eating locally means, and he wants to preserve the knowledge he's gained and pass it along to the next generation.

Starting small

Aliza Rosenstein has taken up that call of small farming right in the heart of Bend, where she found an empty weed-filled lot behind her boyfriend's Columbia Street bakery.

As a Brown University graduate with a degree in public policy, Rosenstein moved out to Alfalfa to work on a family farm. She says she realized she would never make a lot of money but always felt grateful that she feels rich because she's living the lifestyle that makes her feel a connection to the earth.

"I come from a family of physicians, but I like to say I'm doing preventative care, producing and eating food that has no herbicides, pesticides or insecticides, which can carry problems in people's health," said Rosenstein, sitting outside in her garden. She had just harvested some vegetables and herbs that would be used in some savory pastry at Baked, the bakery her boyfriend Gordon Benzer owns. "We should start healthy living and eating before we need medicine."

The eggs that Baked uses come from Good Earth Organic Farm. Rosenstein loves the connection that most of the ingredients at the bakery are locally sourced.

"This plot was a grassy, weedy mess, and I was really scared to start this garden," confessed Rosenstein, who considered herself a novice despite her years working on the Alfalfa farm. "I planted as many perennials as possible to make my job easier, and they self-sow and the volunteers want to be here. You have to know what to plant and what will thrive. I have Jerusalem artichokes, also known as sun chokes. They're a hardy plant, and as you can see they've done very well."

There's also rhubarb, carrots, mustard greens, arugula, and a host of herbs growing in a terraced circle surrounded by lava rocks.

"People should have a relationship with the farmer and their food because food is the thing that sustains us; this seems so fundamental to me. We call this garden 'the company health plan' because it's a nice green space and a great place to get your hands in the dirt," said Rosenstein, 25, who also encourages people to grow their own food, even if they have a small garden.

Taking on the challenge

Oregon author Kristy Athens and her husband took on the challenge of creating their own farm. The couple ditched Portland and bought a 7-acre farm on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge. They were both excited and interested in growing their own food.

In her recent book, "Get Your Pitchfork On! The Real Dirt on Country Living," Athens describes in humorous detail the mistakes she and her husband made while trying to live off the land.

Athens will be speaking in Bend Sunday about her six years of trying to make it on the farm.

In a phone interview, she spoke candidly about the difficulties and challenges she encountered during those years of learning on the job.

"I wish we had had a book like this when we started," said Athens, 43, who described the book as a comprehensive guide to surviving all aspects of rural living. "There's so much we didn't know, like all the pests we'd encounter. In Portland we had a garden, and we'd have aphids. But when you're out on the farm, the pests and critters are everywhere, and we had to fight off gophers. I never thought I'd want to kill a gopher. I'm normally a peace-loving person."

Athens' dry humor comes through over the phone, as she spoke about everything from learning to use a chainsaw and fix a tractor to dealing with a small farming town where everyone seemingly knows everyone else's business.

Athens and her husband eventually sold their farm after six years, in 2007. While her descriptions and memories of farm life aren't all bucolic, she admires and even envies these young farmers who hope to make a go of it.

"I'd tell them they need to have twice the amount of money and three times the time, and yes, they should own a tractor and know how to fix it," cautioned Athens.

Though she said her family never came close to being able to feed themselves from their farm, there was great satisfaction in the foods they did produce.

"I remember running down to the basement in the middle of winter to grab a jar of peaches we had canned in August, and it was so satisfying. And it went way beyond just the food content; it was everything that went into that jar of peaches," recalled Athens. She wishes people would eat more locally and doesn't think people should be eating grapes grown in Argentina in January and February. "It's a huge carbon footprint, to bring in grapes that far. We've all gotten too used to that."

It's evident she still misses being part of the land, despite the back-breaking work, and Athens stressed that though her family is back in the city they are planning on buying another small family farm in the not-so-distant future.

"Oh absolutely we'll go back, but the next time, we'll be more like grown adults and know what to expect; we'll be prepared," said Athens. She hopes her book inspires and resonates with those who hope to be part of the new wave of back-to-the-land farmers.

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