Market Re-Opens for its 48th Season with Second Annual Nettle Festival

by Kirstin Clauson, Market Manager

Wow, 48 years! Congratulations and thanks to everyone who has been involved in South Whidbey Tilth, for creating and supporting this organization that serves such a valuable purpose here on our island that we call home. Tilth is the salt of the earth — the people who value, revere and want to steward the land in healthful ways, and who work to help educate and create a community-oriented space for this purpose. The market is a wonderful extension of these values and a beautiful community event and space to have. I am very thankful for the land that Tilth sits upon.

We are excited to reopen another year of the Farmers’ Market with the second annual Nettle Festival, Sunday, April 28th from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. By honoring that powerful, wild, edible green plant that emerges in late winter/early spring, providing medicine and nourishment, this market event connects us with both food and nature. The event includes all things nettle: food, demos, hot tea and more. Crow’s Daughter, Julie Charette Nunn, will be teaching an herbalism class, Nettle Is Mother Earth’s Milk, from 12 to 1 p.m. Brynn McAfee returns to demonstrate weaving with nettle fiber around 12:30, and Danny Ward will provide relaxing tunes. Brunch and lunch will be served from the pavilion.

We are excited for other market events that are in the works for the year. We plan to have produce baskets to raffle at every market. While musicians take a break from 12 to 12:30, Tilth Talks will cover various topics pertaining to food, farming and sustainability. If you have anything to teach or talk about, please let us know! You can send email to market@southwhidbeytilth.org. There will be kids’ activities, such as making a fairy garden, story time, and coloring. May 5 will be the annual Maypole winding and dance accompanied by Island Strings. Other fun things planned so far are worm bin composting and construction classes, beeswax cloth food-wrap-making class, and T’ai Chi at the Market with Lynne Donnelly sometime in June or July. Check the calendar of events on the website or Facebook page for more listings.

The Community Produce and Craft booth returns, so if you have any excess produce from your garden (pesticide-free) you can sell it if you so desire. Deliver goods on Saturday or Sunday before the market, email comm.produce@southwhidbeytilth.org.

We so look forward to another beautiful year of farmers’ market at the Tilth campus. If you want to help, contribute or volunteer in any way, please let us know at market@southwhidbeytilth.org. We look forward to seeing you there!
President’s Message: Why We Promote Sustainable Agriculture

by Prescott, president

It’s the “why,” not the “what” we do that energizes any undertaking. The survey developed by the Tilth council of trustees was intended to review and refresh what we’ve always done and examine why we do what we do. The feedback from 31 responders validated the mission statement we’ve used for the last 19 years and gave us fresh ideas to modernize and still keep ourselves grounded to our environment in the most basic human ways.

Leah Claire, our incoming council secretary, wrote a fine essay for this newsletter about the workshop held in December. The workshop was four hours of intensive work to formulate actions for the coming years based on the survey results. Here are some things I took away from the workshop:

• When we hold work parties, they will have an educational component so participants go away with new information or a skill.
• The website will be redesigned to include more resources, such as how-to videos, a catalog of the library and a calendar of classes and events.
• Sharing activities with other organizations is also an intention. We want to provide more services to the community.
• We also hope to build in a networking system so members can easily contact each other. We used to publish a roster annually for members to keep by their telephones. Shall we do that and/or shall we do an online chat-room type of thing? Facebook users, we are on Facebook both as South Whidbey Tilth and as the Farmers’ Market, so please “friend” those pages.
• Additionally we intend to build a robust fundraising committee to ensure that there is money so all the resources of our organization can be developed and shared.

We had a wonderful annual meeting on January 27 and all eight positions were filled on the council of trustees. All these council members attended the planning workshop held in December.

Finally, I want to welcome Janet Richards, who volunteered to be our newsletter editor. She is a keen observer of how things work and what can be improved. She intends to publish our newsletter quarterly. The council of trustees will email news updates to you more frequently.

The snows of February and early March provided an insulating layer to protect overwintering plants. Lots of planned activities were canceled or rescheduled. It also insulated me and restored my energy, so that I am more aware of how and why the mission of this organization inspires me. Join me as the year unfolds.

The Farmer’s Shadow

The best fertilizer is the farmer’s shadow. Your key to success in the garden is to be present, observe, learn and react. And share your observations and questions with others.

South Whidbey Tilth continues its monthly garden discussion meetings this year, led by Anza Muenchow, whose shadow has been cast in her farm for many an hour. Anza leads off every session with a topic of the month. Topics include smart irrigation, timing your sowing and knowing your insects and weeds. The format allows time for questions and open discussion.

Join us on the First Tuesdays of every month from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Bayview Sears House, 2812 E. Meinhold Road, Langley. It will inspire you to go out into a garden, no matter how small. For more information, contact education@southwhidbeytilth.org.

Annual Membership Renewal Coming in June

In 2018, South Whidbey Tilth switched membership renewals to one annual renewal date for all members. While we have been fine-tuning along the way, this move has been a success and greatly reduced volunteer time monitoring memberships this past year. In June 2019 we will be asking for your renewal again. We will send the membership a mailing. Renewals and new memberships can also be done through our website, www.southwhidbeytilth.org. South Whidbey Tilth has an exciting season of classes, Farmers’ Market and special events. Please support us and join in!
The snow is melted and the nettle sprouts are unbending and pushing skyward. Recently I got curious about the history of nettles, and didn’t have to look far to find a spread of information. Turns out nettles have wide roots, both culturally and in the soil. Native to Europe, Asia, North America, and parts of Africa, they are now found worldwide.

Lore on many continents tells us that nettles have been used as medicine, food, and fiber for centuries. In Europe, nettle fiber has shown up in fabrics woven as far back as the Bronze Age.

Nettles are survivors. The sting comes from thin, hollow hairs covering the stems and undersides of the leaves that contain formic acid, histamines and other chemicals. For this reason herbivores leave them alone, but small organisms aren’t bothered and make nettles a sanctuary (including aphids. Ever think of using nettles as an aphid trap?). Nettles support the larvae of many species of butterflies and moths, and are the exclusive host for three species common in the Pacific Northwest: Red Admiral (Vanessa atalanta), Milbert’s Tortoiseshell (Aglais milberti) and Satyr Anglewing (Polygonia satyrus).

As well as the role they play in the ecosystem, nettles can be beneficial in your garden, and not just for attracting insects. The nutrients that render nettles a super food also improve the soil. Permaculture circles use the term dynamic accumulator — those long roots search far and wide to bring in nutrients. Fermented nettle tea is rich in nitrogen and other nutrients, and can be used as fertilizer and compost starter. Last year, I tried some nettle compost tea on my garden and the plants did very well for a first-year garden. Was it the nettle fertilizer? Don’t know, but I’m happy enough to try it again this year. I stopped by Pickles Deli and asked them to save me out some five-gallon, food-grade plastic tubs with lids - the very tubs that the pickles come in. Pickle mixed with fermenting nettle has an amazing, fertile smell.

Setting aside its usefulness in small gardens, I ran across research into larger uses for these nutritious weeds. Nettles are being considered in aquaculture to enhance growth and stimulate the immune systems in farmed fish. Some European fabric designers use nettle fiber in new sustainable textiles. One nice thing about nettle fabric, it’s soft as silk.

Could it be that nettles are a crop to cultivate? Well known is the extent to which the Northwest Coast peoples used nettle to make cordage and nets, as well as medicine. Evidence shows that they fertilized nettle fields with the waste product from processing candlefish. There are also records of selectively harvesting nettles, pruning them in late summer so they would come back stronger the next year. Nettles were traded and transplanted. Sounds like cultivation to me.

In my garden planning this year, I have set aside patches for the cultivation of nettles because they grow in temperate climates where it is wet. Is this a curse, or are we lucky?

Our native nettles flourish. Flowering, deciduous, perennial plants with wide-ranging rhizomes, they also reproduce by seed. An individual plant will usually produce either all male or all female flowers (thus the Latin name Urtica dioica: Urtica=burning, and dioica=dioecious). Flowers bloom mid-summer and are adapted for wind pollination.

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In my garden planning this year, I have set aside patches for the cultivation of nettles so that I’ll be sure to have plenty now and for future years. Maybe not everywhere, but definitely nettles somewhere.
Welcome to Tilth!

We are excited to be at the beginning stages of a makeover of the Tilth entrance, letting us reimagine how we wish to welcome people to the Tilth campus. We want to involve the community in the planning of this remodel, which will include a native plant and pollinator habitat and hedgerow, and a farm stand, allowing farmers and gardeners to benefit from our excellent location. Please do get in touch with ideas or comments, as we’d like the farm stand to be multifunctional, eco-friendly and accessible to all. Send email to info@southwhidbeytilth.org.

Chickens at Tilth

Thanks to the luxurious coop built by Tom Vincent, Tilth’s chickens were cozy during the winter. In the past the chickens were adopted during the cold months. Unfortunately one of the three died recently. It had suffered attacks from an eagle and a dog and was not feeling well.

The ladies are laying eggs again now that it’s spring. Caretakers get the eggs in exchange for cleaning and feeding the birds. We could use two other helpers on Thursday or Saturday and Sunday or Monday. Thank you to volunteers Kirstin Clauson, Linda and Leonard Good, Phil and Shari Prior, Tom Vincent and Prescott. To take a shift contact Prescott at 360-682-8642 or prscot@whidbey.net.

Thank you to neighbors who come by to open and shut the little coop door in the morning and evening. We plan to reinforce the wire enclosure so this isn’t necessary. If you happen to come by the Tilth campus, please check to see the chickens have been let out.
by Leah Claire

My husband and I moved our two children to my childhood home on Whidbey Island in July 2017. We grow food and soil on a quarter-acre market garden leased on the South Whidbey Tilth Sustainability Campus and live in a multi-generational household on another quarter-acre where we raise children, ducks and chickens. We are cognizant of our privileges; as we grow food and raise children in a climate-insecure world, we are aware of our status as settlers on land stolen from indigenous people and as beneficiaries of the inequitable system in which we live. Food, health and housing security have provided us the means to pursue our goals of regenerative agriculture in our community. We believe in a society that makes this security an absolute and responsible land stewardship a priority.

February 4, 2019 It’s the first week of February, below freezing in the middle of the day and there’s snow on the ground for the first time this year. Another snowstorm is expected at the end of the week. Underneath the crust of hopefully insulating snow lie some cruelly deceived thoughts of spring, encouraged by an especially mild winter season. At the end of January we harvested about 20 heads of cabbage (now fermenting away as sauerkraut and kimchi), half a dozen tiny lettuces and the remaining collard greens. At the home farm we’ve already turfed the chickens and ducks out of the kitchen garden in anticipation of spring planting, and a small plot of overwintered parsley and chard is covered in snow.

It’s spring in our hearts, though! A dozen or so varieties of pepper seeds are sprouting in the greenhouse, alongside tomatillos, salad mixes, alpine strawberries, herbs, brassicas and more. The mushroom growing project David has poured his energy into this winter is cyclically taking over in all the corners of our house and growing space.

February 25, 2019 Late February and spring is springing! Life hack: if you go by the agricultural, druidical, pagan, wiccan or other calendars that end the cycle of the year around November 1, you can celebrate the return of spring at the start of February. It has, and I realize how this sounds, profoundly changed the way I see the dark months of the year. Fortunately, I’ve spent the last couple months saying, “early spring is still very wintry!” So when we had our Imbolc snowstorm I didn’t lose all my credibility. I recently saw this period called “fool’s spring,” but personally I find that to be a fairly human-centered way of looking at it. The life in the soil and the plants and animals around us are unbothered by our crops rotting in the ground, and they’re busily telling us it’s spring right now. Even in the cold places far from salt water, eagles are laying their eggs by mid-February. Here at home the chickens are producing again, even the Mediterranean Minorcas, who ceased laying around November and whose perfectly white eggs have just now been spotted in the nesting box.

Amongst the programs that were canceled around Whidbey while we were all buried in the snow was Tilth’s “Farmer’s Shadow,” which runs on the first Tuesday of the month. “The best fertilizer is the farmer’s shadow, frequently applied.” I’ve noticed that when plants are interacted with frequently – pruned, picked, generally noticed and used – they seem to thrive. I suppose that’s true of a lot more than plants. I have so many questions about traditional forms of land management such as coppicing and pollarding, and about the land management techniques that are indigenous to this place, but quite a lot of it seems to come down to being there to notice and do what needs to be done.

March 1, 2019 The start of March and the early growing season is upon us. This is between me and you, but I burst into tears potting up strawberries and said, “I love this, I can’t imagine being at peace doing anything else, I want everyone to do this.” I’m sure it’s fine and nothing to worry about.

Tomatoes are started, cilantro and Asian greens, lettuces and eggplants, oh my! The last of the cabbage we harvested over a month ago, which froze in a bin during the snowstorm and came out looking pristine, is going in eggrolls. Our pet aji pepper that lives in the greenhouse is thriving, flowering, ripening beautiful yellow hot peppers. Stevia that we grew from seed last year is sending up new shoots. I grew watercress and tasted it alongside shotweed, or hairy bittercress, a common foragable potherb true of a lot more than plants. I have so many questions about traditional forms of land management such as coppicing and pollarding, and about the land management techniques that are indigenous to this place, but quite a lot of it seems to come down to being there to notice and do what needs to be done.

March 8, 2019 A little over a week into March, and there’s snow on the ground again. I’m working on positive framing: How helpful that in a time of rapidly accelerating and unpredictable climate change we don’t have expectations to unlearn. With only one full season of market gardening behind us we’re thinking back to the early planting season last year; looking at photos I find that we’re less behind schedule than I’d
At the annual meeting, Eric Lee-Mäder of the Xerces Society covered some basics of bees, then highlighted big gains in pollinator production during projects designed to restore habitat (as planted hedgerows and prairie strips) within working farmland. www.xerces.org.

Prescott displays this beautiful book on lichens on behalf of Marcia Sill, the highest bidder for this item at the annual meeting silent auction.

At the annual meeting, members look over the raffle items. The meeting featured presentations on bees and pollinator conservation.

South Whidbey Tilth's 2019 council of trustees.

2019 Council Elected at Annual Meeting

At the annual membership meeting of South Whidbey Tilth on January 27, 2019, members elected our 2019 council of trustees. New council members are Lynae Slinden (one-year term) as vice president, Anza Muenchow as Education Committee chair, and Leah Claire as secretary.

Reelected to continue in their positions are Edward Heuneke as treasurer and Finance Committee chair, and Andrée Linton as Membership, Community Relations, and Development Committee chair.

Continuing in the second year of their terms are Susan Prescott as president, Kirstin Clauson as Market Committee chair, and Ida Gianopulos as Land Stewardship Committee chair.

These generous and enthusiastic volunteers deserve a big thank you. Please give them your support by helping out on one of the committees.
Moving Forward – With Hope
by Leah Claire

I’ve been sitting with the results of the Tilth survey – poster-sized sheets of paper covered with the hopes and concerns of our community – spread out in a corner of my house. At the annual meeting people wrote their thoughts and highlighted points they wanted to emphasize on these posters. Along with the planning workshop, these notes will drive our course as an organization into the future. Speaking clearly is called for; it’s hard for me to write about the future. It’s hard to write about hope in a time of crisis, when teenagers are fighting against stacked odds for their own futures and the fate of the planet. It is difficult to grasp the enormity of the problems we face, when many of us were told the problems didn’t exist, or were getting better, or that the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice. I’m of the Millennial generation and we are at an age when our contemporaries are taking over the reins of power even as we realize how thoroughly our hands have been tied; an age when we are balancing the idea of having children against the certainty that their world will be chaotic and unpredictable to a degree that ours was not. We were raised in the belief that our way of life and our quality of life could be expected to conform with the previous generation and improve with time. We’re out of time, and we’re not educated for this moment. Largely, our educations prepared us for perpetuating the lifestyle and worldview that have led us here. When the interests of money and power have used the tactics of doubt and obfuscation against us for our whole lives, how do we collectively find another way? It’s hard to have hope.

On the other hand, it is hard to live in despair. I already have kids; they will grow up in an unjust and inequitable world and live with the consequences of our hubris. There is no amount of recycling or composting that I can do, no private school I can send them to, no amount of straws I don’t use or reusable bags I remember to bring to the store; there is nothing that I can do that will change that. There is nothing that you can do to change that. Together, we can still do nothing to change that – without groundbreaking cultural change. I believe – I have hope – that places like Tilth are where a different culture takes root.

Tilth is a wild and working place for community to gather and learn, involving people in the discovery of Nature in a living mythology in the contemporary world. By providing classes in natural growing, re-skilling in native landscape restoration, using old skills like making value-added prod-

We are fortunate to have access to Tilth’s beautiful 11 acres, and to be able to share that access with our community. Tilth represents a village of like-minded people; we have come together to prioritize the health of the natural world, and in doing so forge connections and partnerships that sustain ourselves and our mission. In its leadership and the rest of its committed volunteers, Tilth contains a wealth of knowledge that is increasingly being valued by the general public, knowledge that is absolutely key to any local or global efforts to combat climate crisis. As the conversation intensifies on the subject of anthropogenic climate change, and particularly the importance of agriculture and land management in health or harm, our responsibility to disseminate the information in our coffers increases. We already have outlets for this invaluable knowledge, in our classes, demonstrations, newsletter, community gardens and orchards and at our Farmers’ Market. Broadening our outreach, inspiring others on South Whidbey to pursue sustainable lifestyles and doing so in alignment with our commitment to social equity is important for more than bringing in new members; it is only through collective action that any meaningful change can take place.

It is important to address the aging members, volunteers and leadership, which was noted in several ways and can only be solved by engaging the broader community in our mission. Tilth is the work of the same small group of volunteers who understandably might be feeling burnout, perhaps in part from sounding the alarm we’ve globally been ignoring for so long, certainly because of the labor involved with carrying forward an organization with an ambitious and important goal. At least one person said it was agism to write that Tilth needs “new,
Evolution of a Biochar Kiln

Master Gardener and Tilth member Tom Vincent has been perfecting the backyard production of biochar for a few years now. Tom demonstrated his first version of a biochar kiln on a chilly October morning in 2107. We cooked duck eggs for breakfast atop the nested barrel kiln while waiting for the wood to bake to charcoal. Tom’s quest for the perfect kiln has not let up since.

After experimentation, the double barrel design became triple, reducing heat loss and allowing for more efficient burning.

A big improvement came last December after Tom attended a biochar seminar put on by the Tilth Alliance and Washington State University. There he learned about an open top kiln. In the same way that his original retort design works, Tom describes, “the open top kiln operates by heating wood to high temperatures in the absence of oxygen, driving off volatile gasses and moisture and leaving almost pure carbon (charcoal) behind. The chief difference between the retort and the open top is, instead of having two enclosures, one for feedstock and one for fuel, the open top combines them both into one container. Thus, the feedstock and fuel are one. Whatever you burn will be what you will turn into biochar.”

But cheaper, easier to build and simpler to operate can be improved upon! Tom’s latest open top kiln design, which he demoed in a class on March 30, is raised from the ground and includes a metal screen. With this kiln, the combustion process is more protected from wind. It burns more completely, produces less smoke and better charcoal.

Now making backyard biochar is easier than ever. Get all the details, and stay tuned for tweaks to the design by going to Tom’s blog at tinkersblessing.com.

What Is Biochar?
by Tom Vincent

Have you always wanted to start gardening but hesitated because your soil was terrible? Maybe it is sandier than at the beach or hard as a brick in summer? Or perhaps your soil seems sterile, bereft of natural organisms that contribute to plant health? One soil amendment that has been gaining in popularity to remedy poor soils is “biochar.” Simply put, biochar is charcoal made from organic material which is inoculated with nutrients, moisture and microbes. When added to garden soil, the porous nature of biochar allows it to hold on to moisture, nutrients, and microbes that plants need. In addition, the stable nature of charcoal means it will stay in the soil for hundreds of years, sequestering carbon in the soil, improving soil fertility, and reducing the need for chemical fertilizers.
Learning, from page 5

feared, but we’ve still got a long row to hoe, a lot of physical infrastructure to put in place and the plant babies just keep spilling out from the shelves in the greenhouse. As we head toward the spring equinox (not the start of spring, the peak of spring, the springiest of spring! Which is still pretty cold, let’s be real), I’m trying to get the sunshine in my eyes when it’s shining. Weeding the overgrown beds at our house is so rewarding as I uncover clumps of daffodils and other spring flowers.

Looking back at last year, from the spring equinox to May Day was a busy time when things grew prolifically and we worked at the farm separately and hardly saw each other. This spring is a different prospect as David’s opened up his schedule quite a bit by quitting his job. It is a startling choice, at least according to the faces of several friends and loved ones. I hope that investing what we have, which is time, in an endeavor that we love and is important to us, will pay dividends in the future that we can’t now calculate and are unlikely to measure in dollars and cents. I know I look forward to the path, the journey and destination and all the plants growing along the way.

Moving Forward, from page 7

younger members, fresh ideas, energy” and that we just need new members regardless of age. I would say we need to gain new members of all ages and to value the contributions of our community at every age. It is becoming more clear how detrimental age segregation is to all members of our society, how damaging a worldview that centers the nuclear family at the expense of other arrangements and disparages communal living. Tilth is a place of common care for the land, a revolutionary practice as old as humans and as forgotten as many of our ancestors. We all need each other if we’re to bring this practice into daily life.

One of my favorite additions to the survey results is the context-free words, “Internet and old books.” In my mind, it’s a metaphor for the moment in which we find ourselves. Guiltlessly, we’ve turned over our lives to shockingly unregulated technology, shackling our futures to the promise of endless tech-fueled growth while ignoring countless calls to come to our senses and change our behavior. On the other hand the knowledge base represented by old books tends towards the hidebound, historically reinforcing the colonization and exploitation of the natural world and raising the voices of the privileged over those of the marginalized, while the egalitarianism of the Internet allows us to hear the voices of the many, not the few. The voices that have been traditionally sidelined and silenced are the most important to listen to when finding a way forward. This is a moment to find balance in a world profoundly imbalanced in so many ways. If we are to move ahead we must focus on our inextricable bonds to the natural world and on changing how we view those ties as a culture; if we are to live, we have to change what it means to make a living. Tilth’s mission statement is as radical we need to be—we just need to get the whole world on board, and to expand our ideas of what is possible.
Starting now – Permaculture work party, every Thursday at 11 a.m. in the Mary Alice Kois Permaculture Food Forest on the Tilth campus

APRIL

April Is Whidbey Island Earth and Ocean Month, activities throughout the month, see the schedule at www.whidbeyearthday.org

2 Farmer’s Shadow garden discussion group, Tuesday 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Bayview Sears House, 2812 E Meinhold Road, Langley

2 Teaming Up for Climate Action Today! Earth and Ocean Month Kick-off, 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. South Whidbey High School Cafeteria, 5675 Maxwelton Road, Langley

14 Market Cleanup, Sunday 11 a.m. bring work gloves and rubber gloves to shine up the campus, for details email market@southwhidbeytilth.org

14 Tilth Film Night, Sunday 6 p.m. potluck and films at 7 p.m. featuring shorts Living the Good Life with Helen and Scott Nearing, Unbroken Ground or the film The Hands that Feed Us-Amara Farm. RSVP to Melissa at melissa@movingimages.org

18 Business Meeting, Thursday 6 p.m. at Trinity Lutheran Annex classroom in Freeland. All members are welcome

18 Swarm Against Monsanto, Saturday, 11 a.m. arrive to dress for noon demonstration at Bayview Park and Ride

19 Bee Teach-In, Sunday at the Tilth Farmers’ Market

JUNE

3 Island County’s Hydrogeology & Water Rights, Monday, Whidbey Island Growers Association potluck meeting, WSU Extension office, Coupeville

4 Farmer’s Shadow garden discussion group, Tuesday 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Bayview Sears House

15 Whidbey Island Garden Tour, Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

19 South Whidbey Tilth 37th Anniversary

20 Business Meeting, Thursday at 6 p.m. at the Tilth Sustainability Campus. All members are welcome

30 SWAM - South Whidbey Acoustic Music Festival, Sunday at the Tilth Farmers’ Market

SAVE THE DATE

Sustainability Potluck is Thursday, August 15