

A Snapshot of San Juan County Agriculture

How would you fit a farm in a 30 by 30 foot tent? Better yet, how would you fit all of San Juan County's agriculture? The Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC) and many other groups managed to solve that problem recently at our county Fair.

Had you timed your visit to the Ag Tent properly, you would have been treated to scrumptious smells and tasty tidbits. Five different chefs divulged their secrets to using the freshest local produce, meats, and seafood in workshops spread over two days. Most of these restaurant owner/chefs work within the Islands Certified Local program, using a guaranteed percentage of local ingredients. You can look for the ICL logo at your favorite local restaurant or farm. (Here's another tip: you can buy an "Island Grown" T-shirt from the ARC, so your college student will remember where they came from).

If this sounds like a lure just for tourists, consider that in 2002, agriculture brought in \$3.1 million to the San Juan County economy, according to the USDA Census of Agriculture. Aquaculture was the singular leader, but if you group all livestock together, they are heads and tails above other products. This should come as no surprise to anyone who looks past their windshield while driving through our beautiful open fields. In fact, the number of cattle and calves rose 66% between 2002 and 2008.

Moving on through the Ag Tent, we can see other examples of the products our farmers grow. Beautiful sheaves of grain grown in the San Juan Valley rest on leaves of hay from all over the county. Labeled branches from Orcas remind us that fruit and nuts grow on trees, not on shelves. Eggs and clams, flowers and soaps, yarn and beef--- the list goes on and on. Why go to the mainland when you can get it here?

These foods, fibers, and flowers certainly grow well here, but they don't grow by themselves. It takes a farmer to plant, tend, and sell them. You may already know that the Islands Grown Food Cooperative has the first USDA inspected mobile slaughter unit in the country. If you didn't, check out the front page of the Wall Street Journal from September 5, 2008. Yet another innovative group in county agriculture is the San Juan

Islands Agricultural Guild, which is looking into a permanent indoor farmer's market in Friday Harbor. They are successfully raising the money through fundraisers involving --- no surprise — dinners of local foods. And don't forget that WSU Extension offers classes, bulletins, advice, and connections to the state's agricultural university.

Along another side of the Ag Tent are the Foodshed maps. People have been walking in, calling, and checking the ARC website (www.sjcarc.org/) to fill out surveys and help us figure out how much food is grown here, either in home gardens or on commercial farms. The maps are dotted with color coded product labels, giving a quick visual rundown of what is grown where. The biggest surprise so far is how many avid gardeners produce a large percentage of their own food. The San Juans are not only rural, but truly agricultural.

Marketing is the key that opens the door to economic prosperity for our farmers, along with maintaining our farmland base. If you enjoy the fruits of these farmers' labor--- not only the fresh food and fibers, but the scenic vistas, the clean air and water, and all the components of our rural, agricultural quality of life—let them know. Eat something fresh and local today, and thank a farmer.