

# *Tilth Producers Quarterly*

A Journal of Organic and Sustainable Agriculture

## **A New Beginning**

By Mark Musick

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**The Tilth Newsletter**

Winter, 1977

*Early arrivals to Pragtree Farm were recruited to help pound in the final nails on the end walls of the large new "Roadhouse" where the meeting was to be held. The long spell of hot weather that had baked Western Washington for weeks had been broken a few days before by torrential August rains and familiar cloudy skies.*

*The morning of the meeting was cold and misty, but the weather didn't prevent a much larger than anticipated crowd from gathering at the farm. The sound of banging hammers ended about an hour before the meeting was to begin, and everyone was able to gather inside the Roadhouse, protected from the wind and a brief downpour which finally hit later in the afternoon. Aside from the thunderous noise of rain on the roof, the meeting continued on without pause.*



As an outgrowth of discussions which led to the formation of the Tilth Producers' Cooperative, a Planning Meeting was held at Pragtree Farm on August 27th to discuss the formation of a new general membership organization for the alternative agriculture movement in the region.

At the Planning Meeting, "Tilth" was adopted as the name for the new educational and research organization which is being initiated for the purpose of conducting and promoting a biologically sound and socially equitable agriculture in the Pacific Northwest. Beginning this winter local chapters will be established to bring together people throughout the region who are seeking to create a new agriculture. Over 70 people attended the Planning Meeting; people from Idaho, Washington, Oregon and Northern California. Following a tour of the farm and a pot luck lunch, the group worked throughout the afternoon to discuss the needs that they felt as small farmers, new homesteaders and home gardeners who were seeking to understand and practice new approaches to agriculture.

The meeting began with personal introductions. Then Elaine Davenport, a long-time home

gardener from Seattle, described her experiences on a recent tour of European organic farms which led her to the idea of forming a new organization here in the Northwest.

Last fall Elaine had joined a tour of organic farms in England, Germany, Austria and Switzerland in conjunction with a major conference of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements. One of the things that impressed her most, she said, was the number of large and very active organic agriculture organizations that she discovered in Europe. Involving people from all walks of life, they sponsored very effective educational, marketing and research programs.

While on the tour Elaine also got to know several people involved with the Maine Organic Gardeners and Farmers Association, which is one of the largest and most effective organic agriculture organizations in this country, with over 1,000 active members in local chapters throughout the state. From the wide range of programs these groups offered, Elaine said she realized that we in the Northwest were really lacking an organization that could bring together and support all facets of the organic agriculture movement in our region.

Upon her return from Europe, Elaine began sharing with others her enthusiasm for what she had learned. At an early meeting of the Tilth Producers' Cooperative back in February, Elaine stressed the need for an organization in which both farmers and home gardeners could work together for mutual support. At that meeting it was suggested that we take a two-fold path: to go ahead with the creation of the Producers' Co-op as an economic base for commercial farmers and market gardeners (for more details see [Producers Co-op Update](#) *The Tilth Newsletter*, Winter, 1977), and, in a parallel process, to create an "umbrella organization" for research, communications and education which would serve the needs of both farmers and home gardeners and in which everyone could participate.

At that meeting it was perhaps Skeeter, visiting from Eastern Washington, who said it best. He said that what he felt we needed was a "soil association" to bring together everyone whose concern was the health of the soil and the creation of a new agricultural way of life. It was these early discussions which led to the Planning Meeting at Pragtree Farm.

### **Needs, Resources and Programs**

The heart of the Planning Meeting was a discussion of the needs that people felt and an evaluation of whether or not existing organizations could meet those needs. Here are some of the needs that people identified: keeping everyone in touch with each other, supporting marketing programs such as farmers' markets, having a public voice for organic agriculture, conducting research and technical information exchange, helping new farmers get established, initiating educational programs for both the general public and for the public schools, and fostering the exchange of ideas and of resources such as machinery and locally adapted seeds.

Following the discussion of needs, a long list of existing resources was drawn up, ranging from the Extension Service and groups like the Grange to regional alternative publications such as *Cascade Rain* and the new *Small Farmers Journal*. It was good to see how many resources that there are available, but it was also obvious that none of them really met the needs that people had identified earlier, and it was agreed that something new was needed.

From that point people went on to outline the types of programs that a new organization could sponsor to respond to the needs of the organic agriculture community in the Northwest. Under Education, ideas that were suggested included weekly radio programs on organic gardening, slide shows and lectures, an apprenticeship program, school gardens, the publication of research reports and educational materials, conferences and workshops, farm and garden tours, the planting of demonstration plots in community gardens, participation in county fairs, and maybe even a traveling show to let people know about the potentials for a new approach to agriculture in the region.

In order to keep its members informed, it was agreed that *The Tilth Newsletter* be adopted as the official publication of the new organization. In addition, the idea was suggested for 'people-to-people' directories for each chapter so that members could keep in touch with others in their

community who share their interests.

In the area of Research, it was proposed that a research program be initiated through which every member could participate in studying and learning about biological approaches to agriculture. Research programs could range from the cooperative testing of plant varieties and the establishment of model farm and garden projects to the investigation of legal issues such as the control of poison sprays and the study of strategies for land reform.

### **Structure and Name**

Once there was a general sense of what the organization might do, the discussion turned to how it would be structured. It was agreed that the focus of the organization should be on independent local chapters in which people could join in sharing, learning and working together. Local groups would be empowered to define their own geographic areas and set their own membership fees. Local chapters would also be involved in determining regional policy. The regional level of the organization would work on developing programs and on maintaining communications between members through publications such as the newsletter and research reports. The regional level of the organization would be responsible to and supportive of the local chapters.

Now that there was a general understanding of the purposes and structure of the organization, it was time for us to come up with a name. Woody Deryckx suggested that the group adopt "Tilth" as the name of the new organization. When asked what the word meant, Becky Deryckx said that it had two meanings– the word "tilth" is used to refer to the quality of the soil and, in an older meaning, tilth was also used to refer to the cultivation of knowledge and wisdom.



Becky Deryckx

Becky explained how the word was chosen for the group which organized the first Northwest Conference on Alternative Agriculture, held in Ellensburg, Washington back in November, 1974. That conference brought together for the first time all aspects of the alternative agriculture movement in the Northwest region. However, although Tilth has been involved since that time in several other conferences, it has never been formally incorporated and has never had an official membership. Now, a new organization was finally coming together, and, after further discussion, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to adopt the name Tilth.

## Getting Started

Following the completion of the first day of the Planning Meeting, a Steering Committee was formed to carry out the nuts and bolts of legally incorporating the new organization. This group stayed overnight at Pragtree Farm and met the next morning to establish Tilth's first Board of Trustees and begin the process of drafting Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws, and securing Federal tax exempt status. People on the initial Board of Trustees are Joyce Schowalter of Ellensburg, Mike Maki of South Bend, Carl Woestendiek and Elaine Davenport of Seattle, Tom Thornton of Ferndale, Binda Colebrook of Arlington, and Michael Pilarski (Skeeter) of Marcus, Washington, and Marshall Landmann and O.J. Lougheed of Eugene, Oregon.

The next meeting of the Board of Trustees will be at the Barter Fair. At that time a final set of By-Laws and Articles of Incorporation will be completed and the organization should be legally incorporated by the end of November. Once that is accomplished, local chapters can be initiated. Meanwhile, a lot of other groundwork is already underway. Elaine Davenport proposed that, as one of our first activities, Tilth sponsor a conference on Urban Agriculture in Seattle next February. A group has already been set up to work on the idea. Communications and Research Committees are being established. Mark Musick will coordinate the Communications group, and Woody Deryckx has taken on the responsibility of initiating the Research program. More details on these activities, and details on how to set up local Tilth chapters will be published in future issues of The Tilth Newsletter.

It was surprising that so many people showed up on such a blustery day to talk about the idea of forming a new organic agriculture organization, and it was gratifying that so much was accomplished in such a short time. Many of the people attending the Planning Meeting had first met each other three years ago at the Northwest Conference on Alternative Agriculture. Others had been keeping in touch through publications such as *The Tilth Newsletter* and *Organic Gardening and Farming* magazine, so in a very real sense a regional organic community has already existed. What was needed to give it form was for people to commit themselves to begin creating the organization together. Although much was accomplished, it was clear that there is still much to be done over the next few months and in the years ahead.