

Extension agent focuses on agricultural education



Pat McGlynn, Montana State University Extension Agent for Flathead County on Tuesday, Feb. 22. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

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After 13 years sowing the seeds of knowledge to Flathead County growers, gardeners, farmers, property owners and students — a bountiful harvest awaits Montana State University Extension Agent Pat McGlynn who retires in May.

For McGlynn, the job has combined her passions for teaching, research, horticulture and agribusiness.

“I think it was just in my blood,” she said, recalling starting a garden as a child growing up in a rural town in upstate New York. “I was always in the woods.”

Only a barbed-wire fence separated the backyard of her childhood home from a herd of cows and it wasn’t long before she volunteered to help out on her friend’s dairy farm.

“I just loved working with the animals and learning about the crops,” she said.

Initially, McGlynn wanted to teach full-time. She wrote a dissertation on school gardens and earned a doctorate in agriculture education from Cornell University. When a friend brought the Flathead County extension agent job to her attention, the word “entrepreneurial” caught her eye.

“They were looking for somebody with an entrepreneurial spirit to help, specifically, small acreage, agriculture. I thought, ‘Wow, I’ve been doing this all my life and had been working on research projects at Cornell.’”

ONCE IN

the valley, her first task was to advertise an agent was back in town after a long absence. To do this, she planted a garden on the courthouse lawn to promote the Master Gardener program.

“There hadn’t been an ag agent here for 15 years, so I thought, how will people know I’m even here to call me with their questions?” she said.

The garden would also be a learning experience for McGlynn.

“I’d never grown anything in Montana before either. I thought here’s all these people who want to learn how to garden and I’ll learn right along with them,” she said.

Word got out.

During an interview with the Daily Inter Lake in her office on South Main Street in Kalispell, McGlynn brought out a thick binder and leafed through newspaper articles chronicling the work she’s been involved in over her tenure. She’s also tracked the number of incoming questions into the thousands a year. It’s not hard to imagine looking at two stacks of pink papers containing written messages that were compressed into filing trays by her desk.

Questions range the gamut, from the commonplace identification requests of weeds, insects and plant diseases, or getting second opinions — to the unique — whether or not dung beetles could be shipped from Africa to take care of horse manure.

“OK you’ve been discovered now what?” she said.

“The first two people to come to my office were two cherry growers. They had had several years where they weren’t able to sell their cherries because they ran into the Washington cherries at the processing plant and they were looking for later harvesting varieties,” McGlynn said. “I knew about horticulture plants, but I didn’t know anything about cherries. Let’s investigate this together. The first thing we needed was funding.”

She began with the Department of Agriculture and secured grant funding to hire experts from Washington and Oregon universities, launching a five-year cherry variety trial in 2010.

“That’s really the extension mission — to help people solve problems and to get in there and discover what the people need in the community — in my case, it’s agriculture challenges — and try to figure out solutions. I never say I have all the answers, but I can find somebody who knows,” she said.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

is a satisfying part of the job, but there’s also the joy of bringing people together to accomplish a task.

“The joy of that first project was there were cherry growers who only lived two miles down the road from each other but hadn’t visited each other’s orchards before,” she said.

Then came the cold hardy wine grape study.

“There were individuals who had been growing grapes for a long time in their backyards, they’re small acreage, but they didn’t have a way to get together,” she said.

“Again, that was another time where I didn’t have that information, but I knew people at Cornell, so I was able to not only go to their research conferences. I was able to obtain money from the Department of Agriculture and the USDA to put in the research plots but also bring those experts here to meet with our grape growers,” she said, the experts coming from North Dakota, New York and Minnesota.

“These grapes are higher acid, lower tannin,” she said, explaining the varieties that grow in Montana. “The winemaking is also very different so we brought enologists, or winemakers, from other states to help with that.”

What would also come to bear out of the project was the formation of the Montana Grape and Winery Association, which recognized McGlynn for her contributions in “providing the foundation” for the group at its 2016 annual conference.

“After grapes were the hops and after the hops were the dark fruits,” she said, smiling, almost forgetting to include an apple orchard trial.

“I love working with teams of people who are interested in the same goal,” she added.

AS THE

valley continues transitioning from agricultural land to residential, the extension has sought to meet the changing needs, teaching classes such as land stewardship, land management and poultry management.

“Everyone wants a chicken now,” she said.

Even prior to the pandemic many people were moving here, she notes, pointing out that she’s taught over 400 people in the Master Gardener class with roughly 75% of students in every class are not from Montana. Students have often learned to grow vegetables someplace else or never before.

“We have a lot of folks move here who are early retirees. They are very active and they want to do something on their property,” she said, in pursuit of living the “Montana dream.”

But that dream can turn into a nightmare without doing the research. This is why McGlynn is passionate about educating the public with research-based information and best practices.

For example, when it comes to pasture management, she points out that while it’s legal to have two horses per acre there really should be 10 acres per horse. The result is that the pasture ends up having issues with noxious weeds and soil too compacted in about two months, she says, and the landowners don’t know how to rectify the problem.

“That’s why we teach land stewardship classes so that it helps people not fall in a pothole,” she said. “A lot of time people make mistakes in their garden, or their pasture, or whatever it is on their property because they just don’t know. It’s educate, educate, educate, educate.”

Her desire as an agent has been to help people achieve practical goals for their properties while respecting the land, and in turn, having something that can be handed down to generations of family.

IN RETIREMENT

, she is looking forward to returning to some of the work that has been put on the back burner in the past couple of years in order to take on the additional duties of the Flathead 4-H agent position, which remains open, she said, if anyone is interested in applying.

“We’re the second-largest in the state,” McGlynn said, with 655 members.

She has set her sights on becoming a private consultant in property design, such as where to install fences or orchards.

Another is researching her interest in agritourism.

“I serve on the governor’s tourism advisory council and that’s a real passion of mine — helping farmers or people in rural areas get tourist dollars out to their places and create experiences,” McGlynn said, with a focus on education, of course.

“I think it’s the teacher in me and I love having them [consumers] understand all the work that goes into some of the products they have in their home so they honor and respect that whole lineage of agriculture,” she said.

But first, she said she wants “a few months of just breathing,” and visiting her family on the East coast, whom she hasn’t visited since the pandemic.

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