Seattle Tilth Roots

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In 1974, Kentucky farmer and visionary Wendell Berry spoke about the state of American agriculture to a captivated audience at a Spokane symposium. He challenged attendees to change our relationship with the land and the food it produces and “bring together individuals and organizations concerned with creating a better kind of agriculture.”

Fired-up symposium attendees met later that year at Pragtree Farm in Arlington, WA, a hub of alternative agriculture, and Seattle Tilth founders such as Mark Musick and Elaine Stannard emerged as new leaders. The group adopted the name “Tilth,” organized the Northwest Conference on Alternative Agriculture, which drew more than 800 participants, and began organizing and writing newsletters and publications.

They had a willing and eager regional audience: Steve Solomon was starting Territorial Seed Company in Oregon and the Seattle P-Patch network was just getting started. Within three years, the Tilth Association was formally incorporated and local Tilth chapters formed in California, Oregon, Idaho and Washington – including Seattle Tilth at the Good Shepherd Center in Wallingford. Though Seattle Tilth is sometimes referred to as “Tilth,” we are actually one of nine Washington Tilth organizations!

Like most great things, Seattle Tilth came into being through serendipity and hard work. In 1976 Mark Musick spotted a “for sale” sign on the Good Shepherd Center. The site was zoned for development as a shopping center. Seattle Tilth founders and community members saw promise in the beautiful building and orchard. Together they saved the property, which was purchased with city funds. Within two years, Carl Woestwin, a longtime Seattle Tilth staff member, migrated from Pragtree Farm to be the Good Shepherd Center groundskeeper.

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With other founders and community enthusiasts, he helped create a plan to develop the site. Volunteers used pickaxes to demolish an old basketball court and swimming pool to make way for our first community learning garden and children's garden. Seattle Tilth began teaching classes and published “The Future Is Abundant,” a sourcebook for sustainable agriculture in the Pacific Northwest.

Even after the parent Tilth organization disbanded in the early 80's, Seattle Tilth and our sister organizations remained leaders in the local organic and farming movement. Because of those visionary founders, many thousands of people have connected to their food, planet and community. Together we're still striving for a "better kind of agriculture"! 