

# GOOD FRUIT GROWER

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## Faraway regions form a growing relationship

A Washington county and a state in Kyrgyzstan have become sister regions with goal of reviving the Kyrgyz tree fruit industry.

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Geraldine Warner // Oct 19, 2015



**Cashmere orchardist Jim Koempel chats with Raisa Tologonova, an influential orchardist, breeder, and nursery owner in the Kyrgyz state of Issyk-Kul, who will be key in efforts to revive the region's tree fruit industry.**

 (Courtesy Randy Smith)

Fruit growers from north central Washington who visited the state of Issyk-Kul in the central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan have been struck by the geographic similarities of the two regions.

Issyk-Kul has a large lake resembling Lake Chelan surrounded by high mountains. It has a dry climate and a reputation for growing quality tree fruits, such as apples, cherries, pears, and apricots.

But there are striking differences. While the Washington tree fruit industry has been growing and thriving, Kyrgyz growers struggle because of lack of infrastructure, capital, and knowledge.

Tree fruit grower Randy Smith of Cashmere, Washington, has visited the country three times and helped host several visits of Kyrgyz officials to Washington State.

Most of the orchards in Kyrgyzstan, which was part of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) until 1991, used to be state-run cooperatives, and are in poor condition. Smith said the country is still trying to deal with the questions of land ownership and property rights.

“The reason they don’t have money for investment from outside sources is primarily because outside investors are skeptical,” Smith said. “Who owns the land and property rights? All this has to be addressed before there’s going to be anybody willing to put chunks of money into that country.”

## Farming



**Raisa Tologonova discusses fruit growing in Kyrgyzstan with Cashmere, Washington orchardists Jim Koempel (crouching) and Randy Smith (standing). Tologonova’s daughters are on the left and interpreter Olga Kuticheva is on the right.**

 (Courtesy Randy Smith)

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large proportion of the population is focused on subsistence farming. The government has designated the Issyk-Kul region as environmentally sensitive, so organic products must be used in place of synthetic pesticides.

Issyk-Kul produces more fruit than it can consume, so growers sell some fruit to neighboring countries, such as Kazakhstan

and Uzbekistan. Almaty, the capital city of Kazakhstan, with a population of 2 million people, is only 60 miles to the north, but it takes seven hours to drive there. A shorter route is closed because of border issues.

Much of the fruit goes to St. Petersburg and Moscow in Russia. There are no packing houses or cold storage rooms in Issyk-Kul, so at harvest time Russian truck drivers pull up at the orchards with refrigerated trucks full of empty boxes. Growers load their fruit and are paid whatever the truckers think it's worth, Smith said. Some of the apples that go to Russia are put into cold storage and sold several months later at a higher price, increasing the profit for buyers, but not for producers.

## Sister regions



**The Washington State delegation was invited to dine in a yurt in Kyrgyzstan. Pictured are (from left) Jim Koempel, Randy Smith, Doug England, Governor of Issyk-Kul Emilbek Kaptagaev, and Ron Skagen.**

 (Courtesy Randy Smith)

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year ago, a party from Kyrgyzstan, including Emilbek Kaptagaev, the governor of Issyk-Kul, came to Lake Chelan to sign a memorandum of understanding between the two regions. The parties agreed to promote the exchange of experience and knowledge in agriculture and to deepen the mutual understanding of citizens through exchange of information and official visits. This spring, a group from Washington went to Kyrgyzstan to re-sign the document.

Smith said the idea of a formal relationship emerged two years ago when a delegation from Kyrgyzstan visited Washington State. Smith hosted a dinner, at which guests included Washington State Senator and orchardist Linda Evans Parlette and Chelan County Commissioner and orchardist Keith Goehner.

Speaking through an interpreter, Smith told Muktar Djumaliev, then the Kyrgyz ambassador to the United States, that it's often the custom in the United States to say a blessing before a meal. Recognizing that the Kyrgyz visitors were Muslim, he asked if

they would like to offer a Muslim grace also.

“It was like a seminal moment,” Smith recalled. “A special feeling was created at that dinner and everybody around that table agreed we wanted to focus on creating a sister region relationship between Chelan County and Issyk-Kul oblast (state).

Smith traces his interest in central Asia back to September 11, 2001. He happened to be in Washington, D.C., when al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon and attempted to strike the White House, which was just four blocks from his hotel.

“I didn’t know it at that point in time, but the whole focus of my life was going to start to shift,” he said. “I started thinking, ‘Are there opportunities for us, as Americans, to build a closer relationship with Muslim people on a whole different level than we have currently experienced?’”

Through a Russian acquaintance now living in Washington and other contacts, Smith began to learn about the former Soviet countries of central Asia, of which Kyrgyzstan is the poorest.

“After a while, I realized this is the opportunity I’m looking for to build a relationship and, hopefully, have a positive impact on another country of Muslim faith and give it another avenue to turn to, rather than radicalism,” he recalled. “This is a really, really big picture view.”

## Tree fruit



**Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan, would be a good market for Kyrgyz fruit if it could be accessed more easily. It is only 60 miles away from Issak-Kul but it takes seven hours to drive there.**

 (Courtesy Randy Smith)

Smith first visited Kyrgyzstan five years ago along with Cashmere orchardist Jim Koempel and Dennis Bolz of Wenatchee. “We fell in love with their country,” he said. “Jim and I focused on, ‘How do you redevelop tree fruit in this region of the world?’”

Like its northern neighbor Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan claims to be the genetic home of the apple. Smith said this disputed claim is not surprising, because the borders between the “-stan” countries were artificially created by the Soviet Union to separate people. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages, which are rooted in Turkic languages, are very similar to each other but unlike Russian. Although most people spoke Russian during more than a century of Soviet domination, there’s an effort to revive the local languages.

During that first visit to Kyrgyzstan, Smith and Koempel met grower Raisa Tologonova, who owns 40 hectares (100 acres) of land on which she has an orchard, a germplasm repository of local apples, a breeding program, and a nursery. She is well connected, politically, and has a tree that was planted by former Russian president Boris Yeltsin.

“She will be a key player in whatever type of agricultural development occurs in that region,” Smith said.

Smith and Koempel had brought a half-dozen copies of Good Fruit Grower. After a meeting at the governor’s office with Tologonova and other Kyrgyz people, the two orchardists pulled out the magazines. Tologonova promptly grabbed three of them, put them on her chair, and sat on them so no one else would take them.

On a later visit, Smith took her a gift of hand pruning shears, along with another half-dozen copies of Good Fruit Grower.

“She said, ‘These tools are very nice, but these magazines—I will treasure them,’” Smith recalled. Her daughter translated all the articles from English.

## Deteriorated

On their trip to re-sign the memorandum of understanding earlier this year, Smith and Koempel were accompanied by Ron Skagen, Wenatchee banker and PUD commissioner; Doug England, manager of Manson Growers Cooperative on Lake Chelan and a Chelan County commissioner; Josh Jorgensen, general manager of Mission Ridge ski area, Wenatchee; retired judge Tom Warren of Chelan; and Smith’s son David.

England said when the Russians left the country in 1991, they took all the orchard equipment with them, and in the early days of independence the Kyrgyzs broke up the concrete irrigation ditches to remove the metal rebar for scrap.

“When you drive around, there are thousands of acres of dead orchard, just because they could not get water to them,” he said.

But Smith said there are some bright spots emerging. Most of the new orchards being planted are stone fruits.

“We stopped at one apricot orchard, and the guy was using drip irrigation, and it was impressive how he’s taken a tough piece of land and turned it into a nice orchard,” Smith said. “There are these pockets of ingenuity out there.”

That’s how the Washington fruit industry developed a hundred years ago, he noted.

“You have pockets of ingenuity and somehow critical mass is achieved and an industry emerges. I think there’s a growing awareness in Kyrgyzstan that that has to happen somehow, but what they could really use is technical assistance and education.”

Smith was impressed with a pear variety he didn't recognize that was shaped similar to a Bosc but had a smooth skin, with a definite blush on one side, and could be eaten right off the tree. He visited a man who had fruit trees in his backyard, including this pear variety.

"I asked him about it," Smith said. "He said, 'It's no good.'"

The tree had so much fruit that the weight had tipped the tree over—a problem Smith had never encountered in pears before but wished he had.

"Here's this remarkable pear, which overproduces, but if you're not focused on selling it and making money from it, the volume you get from it becomes secondary," Smith said. "It just told me how much educational work there has to be done."

However, the attitude of the growers has changed since his first visit, he noticed.

"When we went over five years ago it was: 'Have you got any money to invest?' Now, they understand they have the raw materials—the land, and water, and climate—and they need technical assistance in how to raise crops. How do you maximize the profit potential through the use of science?"

Since their return, the group has been considering how the community in north central Washington can help the Kyrgyzs rebuild their tree fruit industry.

England said he hopes exchange visits can be arranged and believes students from each country have much to learn. For example, the orchards in Kyrgyzstan were not sprayed, and the U.S. visitors were told that codling moth is controlled by a natural enemy.

Smith said they're not sure where the memorandum of understanding will lead yet. "But we know it's going to be a learning experience. Ultimately it has to be beneficial to both sides." •

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## Kyrgyzstan is poor but pivotal nation



## World powers are focusing on the '-stans' of central Asia

Kyrgyzstan is the poorest of the “-stan” countries of central Asia but is considered a pivotal part of the world. It gained independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, along with four neighboring republics: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, but was left with little infrastructure.

Lacking resources, such as equipment and irrigation, the Kyrgyz tree fruit industry fell into decline, though agriculture is a significant part of the Kyrgyz economy, along with mining of gold and minerals. The country has one big dam to generate hydropower, but the greatest contribution to the economy is the money remitted by people who have left the country to work elsewhere. It's estimated that about 1.5 million of the Kyrgyz population of 5.5 million live out of the country, and there are concerns that they won't return.

Washington fruit grower Randy Smith has visited the country three times in the past three years. During his most recent visit, with a group of seven people from north central Washington, he noticed that the condition of the orchards had continued to deteriorate overall.



**SmithyrgyzstanSide1: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are building mosques in Kyrgyzstan towns, purportedly to stave off more radical forms of Islam.**

 (Courtesy Randy Smith)

He also noticed that small mosques had recently been built in every town. The group was told it was an effort by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to blunt more radical forms of Islam, but U.S. officials there were concerned and watching the development closely, Smith said.

Both Russia and the United States had air bases in Kyrgyzstan during the Afghan war. About six years ago, the Kyrgyzs asked the United States to shut down its air base, which it did last year. Russia is now providing the military stability in Kyrgyzstan, whose own air force consists of one helicopter.

Kyrgyzstan borders China to the south, and China is also expanding its sphere of influence in that country by building highways, including a four-lane freeway between Issyk-Kul and the capital city of Bishkek. Smith said it's rumored that China wants to build a highway or light rail system from Beijing to Europe via Kyrgyzstan and Istanbul—a modern version of the 2,000-year-old Silk Road—in order to facilitate travel and trade.

If Kyrgyzstan redevelops its fruit production, having this infrastructure could help it become a real force in fruit production, Smith said.

The U.S. Embassy arranged meetings, receptions, radio interviews, and presentations for the Washington group while they were in Kyrgyzstan. Smith said he was “blown away” by the attention they received, but began to understand that they were being used as the poster child for the idea that Americans care for the Kyrgyzs. They went along with it, however, because it gave the group credibility and exposure. •

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## About the Author: Geraldine Warner

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Geraldine Warner was the editor of Good Fruit Grower from 1992-2015. During her tenure, she planned and prepared editorial content, wrote for the magazine, and managed the editorial team. **Read her stories:** [Story Index](#)

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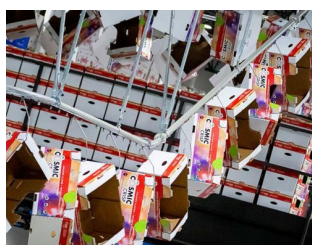
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