

ALMOND BLOOM

To welcome the return of spring early this February, each almond tree meticulously adorned itself in delicate shades of pinky-white. From a short distance, the orchard looked like a soft field of palest pink cotton. Up close, a delicious waft of almond blossom perfume floated in the air, and the gentle rumble of honeybees was a soothing constant. Each blossom is always beautiful in itself—pure white petals with centers edged in pink and a little group of yellow stamens forming a golden crown in the middle of the white cloud. However, this beautiful season came and went in less than a month. After a only week or two of bloom, little spots of green began to emerge at each blossom's base to begin growing into new leaves. Only several weeks before the bloom, leaves had still been remaining on the trees from the previous year.



Non-cross-pollinated almonds

However, even though our almond bloom seemed to be abundantly blessed this spring, we soon discovered that it wasn't a perfect year when young almonds began dropping off the trees. After much investigation and consultation with other farmers, we learned that this almond drop was largely caused by a flash bloom. In a flash bloom all the varieties bloom but in a much shorter time span. The shorter-than-normal bloom period provided inadequate time for our bees to cross-pollinate the orchard fully. Without proper cross pollination, there are fewer or no nuts. The almonds which were not cross-pollinated fell off the trees shortly after the bloom. Because of this flash bloom, we will see yet another year of below-full production for our almond trees, although the crop will be considerably more than last year. Another factor which may affect the coming crop yield is the chilling requirement. Too few cold hours (more than 300 hrs. below 45 degrees are necessary) equates to poor bud development and lower yield. This past winter was especially warm, only seeing one night below freezing temperatures.

Every year in February, our small town of Esparto holds a large festival to celebrate the almond crop. This Almond Festival encompasses all the small towns of the Capay Valley and brings almost 10,000 people from all over Northern and Central California to see the beautiful valley. This year was its 100th year.



FEBRUARY - APRIL

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From top to bottom: the luscious cover crop accenting the orchard; happy sheep in a healthy orchard; a tree with all three spring stages: partial bloom, full bloom, and leaf-out.

RAIN MAKES THE GRASS GROW

In addition to the almond bloom being better than last year but not fulfilling potential, the rain amount totaled more than last year's but was much less than needed. After receiving 11.5 inches last November and December, we have only received three more inches this spring. January and March were completely dry, without a drop of rain. This 14 1/2 inch rain total, while exceeding last year's nine inches leaves us well below an average of around 21 inches per year. We hope and pray that a wetter year will come next year.

The end of February also brought sheep to our orchard. A neighbor of ours raises thousands of sheep, and this year he brought out roughly 200 sheep and lambs. Within 24 hours, half of them had mowed one section of the orchard down to golf course heights. By the end of the week, the entire orchard had been completely cleared of weeds and the cover crop. This grazing does two things: the sheep's manure releases important nutrients and the sheep mow the weeds and cover crop without the costly labor and fossil fuel use.



SPRING FARM CARE

Several more minor events also occurred this spring. Immediately after the sheep left, we applied organic foliar sprays of copper and nitrogen. In March, we disked under the regrown cover crop consisting of mustard, vetch, and radish. This action helps the manure and organic material reach into the root zone.

As part of our intensive nutrient management, we conducted a spring foliar (leaf) test. This test quantitatively tells us what our micronutrient levels are and also directs what steps may be required to mitigate any deficiencies. We had excellent results. The compost, sheep grazing, cover crop, and micronutrient applications were very successful in preparing the soil to feed the trees the necessary nutrients.

AROUND THE CORNER

The summer on its way will be hot and dry, as usual. Thankfully, our water well has been performing marvelously, and so the trees will be well-watered this summer. This year it is looking like we will begin harvest two weeks early again, in early August. Hopefully by the end of August and our next newsletter we will be able to report the beginnings of an abundant harvest.

This summer we will also again begin fertilizing the orchard with a liquid fertilizer. This fertilizer encourages microbial growth in the soil, which will help needed nutrients reach the trees' roots.

Living in the Capay Valley is truly a blessing. If you are ever feeling down in the dumps, all you need to do is take a drive through the Capay Valley in the springtime (that's February here). Your woes will vanish in the spectacular beauty of the land.