

SPRING WOES

Spring is perhaps the most sensitive season of the year for almonds, and being that we are in California, it is also one of the shortest seasons and arrives early. The almond is often seen as symbolic of watchfulness and eager hope for the new year since its tree blooms so early—sometimes as early as the first week of February! The almond is also sometimes seen as a symbol of imprudence and haste, however, because of its early bloom time. In February, the danger of frost and ill-timed rain is not yet passed. During the bloom period, freezing temperatures can kill or severely weaken the blooms and forming almonds. Rain keeps the bees in the hives instead of out in the orchard pollinating the trees, and it also creates damp conditions in the trees and the blossoms that can be detrimental to the crop. Bloom period is one of the times of the year farmers pray for no rain and no freezing temperatures to fill the chill requirement. This past winter we were low on hours for the chill requirement (300-600 hours below 45 degrees before bloom). These hours are necessary for bud development and differentiation (blossoms and leaves). When our chilling hours did come, it was just past bloom, and they were cold enough that we had a touch of frost on the developing almonds. Many other farmers experienced deeper freeze than we did during this time of nut set and therefore lost much of their crop. We emerged from the spring with not enough hours in the chill requirement and still in a drought (less than 10 inches of rain received this past rain year, measured from July to July). Despite everything we are hopeful for a reasonable yield.



FEBRUARY - APRIL

In this issue:

- Spring Woes
- The Plight of the Bees
- Hosting the Vets
- A Day in the Life of a Farmer



THE PLIGHT OF THE BEES

Without the honeybee, we would not have a single nut. Thus, they are of the utmost importance to an orchard. There is widespread concern over a recent decrease in the bee population. The cause of this decline is not fully known, but causes include pests such as the parasitic varroa mite, pesticides which harm bees as well as the intended insects; and poor nutrition. This last one is a puzzler to many, but bees have to eat healthy, too. We contribute to the health and safety of bees at Capay Hills Orchard in several ways. Shortly after planting our orchard we planted a hedgerow of native plants along the longest border of our property. We chose specific plants for their insectary habitat benefits— especially bees. We always have something in bloom for the bees. In addition, we plant a cover crop each fall of mustard and vetch which bees love. The sheep which come to eat the cover crop in the spring are only brought in after the cover crop has been pollinated and starts going to seed. Though the spraying of organic minerals does not harm the bees, we do not want to bother the bees even slightly during bloom period and so we also do not apply any organic mineral or horticultural sprays during this time. We also work with an organization called Project Apis m. which works to direct and encourage research about advancing the health and safety of honeybees, which consequently improves crops nationwide. You can check them out for yourself here: <https://www.projectapis.org>.

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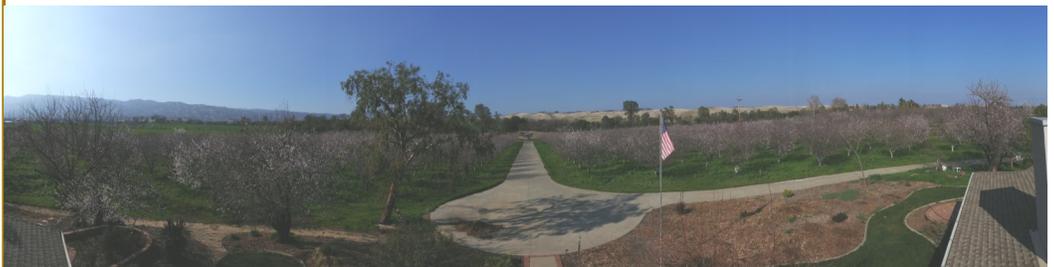
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Top to bottom: early blossom; new blossoms in the first week of bloom period; our old Volkswagen with the blossoms makes a perfect photo.

HOSTING THE VETS

Back in April, Capay Hills Orchard had the unique opportunity of hosting 25-30 U.S. military veterans (of various experience levels and military branches) and sharing them the experience of being a farmer veteran. The program was organized by the Farmer Veteran Coalition and the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT). The mission of NCAT is to help “people by championing small-scale, local and sustainable solutions that reduce poverty, promote healthy communities, and protect natural resources.” This program was designed to show veterans what farming is like, what it involves, and encourage them in sustainable farming practices. In addition the veterans, there were also several representatives from the Resource Conservation District and a representative from the Department of Agriculture. In the just under two hours the veterans and representatives were out at the farm, Brian showed them around the farm a bit and shared with them the good, the bad, and the ugly of farming. Brian shared from first-hand experience how organic, sustainable farming is great for the veterans because organic farming, like the military, requires loads of paperwork and it is labor intensive. Organic farming also fits veterans well because it requires an improviser to be willing to take chances, learn from others, and always look for the better way of doing things. Overall it was a great experience for the veterans and it was wonderful to be able to share a bit of our orchard and farming experience with them.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FARMER: DAY 4

This morning I got up and filled orders for an hour then took a walk with Gretchen. After that I took advantage of the cooler morning air and pruned the dead wood out from some trees for a few hours. I have about 300 done and 1100 to go. Then my crop advisor Luke came by and we spoke for about 30 minutes on microbial growth, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, and the results my last foliar test, which came back looking great. It is the first year the foliar test results gave proof of all our work and money spent on increasing the nitrogen levels in the orchard—this year the leaves exceeded the minimum sufficiency level for nitrogen. This results from the past few years of compost, manure, cover crop, and microbial supports. With farming you often don't see the fruits of your labor until months or years later, so it was great to finally see some of our hard work clearly pay off. The trees are very healthy and very happy and that makes for a happy farmer! The other day I had another visit from a researcher taking his monthly sample for a study on microbial activity. Our crop advisor Luke also checked the pheromone traps for navel orangeworm activity, which is currently low (that's great!) . It seems that removing the mummies (almonds that did not fall off during harvest) every winter really does help. The mummies can become great homes for the navel orangeworm so we knock them from the trees every winter. We call that a cultural practice to control pest and disease. After Luke's visit today I took a quick lunch and then did some paperwork. I documented his visit and some farm expenses. I do all the taxes myself, so I guess you could say I'm even our own CPA. I worked on taxes and organic documentation for a couple hours then went to order more labels for our almond products. The label needed some more updating to comply with new food safety law requirements: "Made in USA" and Certified by YCOA". Next I gave a tour to a few customers that were driving back to Oregon and in the area. We had a good talk about what I do and how I farm, they bought some almonds and left with a good experience. I then left to retrieve my car from the repair shop, which broke down yesterday in a town 30 minutes away. When I got back I worked till dark pruning ... and then dinner.

-Brian