

NOTES FROM THE NUT

CAPAY HILLS ORCHARD QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER ISSUE 5

SUMMER WORK

Summer in the orchard began with more sheep grazing. In a trial run, we had six sheep (generously loaned by organic-farming neighbors) come and graze a section of our orchard. Our hopes were that they would provide fertilizer for the earth and trees and help us mow the orchard floor all the way up to the tree trunks. The several hundred sheep we had earlier in the spring helped mow the grass and added important nutrients, but the grass quickly grew back. While only a small section of the orchard was cleared of weeds before these six sheep had to leave, we learned that the sheep will do a marvelous job of mowing the orchard with little work involved. Next year, we hope to do this again, only with many more sheep and for a longer period of time. Having the sheep come frees up a lot of time and saves money that would otherwise be spent mowing the orchard and weed-whacking around each tree.

Practically ever since we bought our property 15 years ago, we have had plans of building a barn to be used primarily for storage of farm equipment. Much of our equipment had been under tarps or rusting. Last April, we broke ground and began to build a barn with the help of a local contractor. It was finished in mid-June, just in time to be used to celebrate Brian's retirement from 28 years in the U.S. Air Force. It is a wonderful wood barn, and right now it houses our tractor, sprayer, mower, and various other pieces of farm equipment. It keeps everything nice and shaded from the sun and dry from winter rain, which we hope to see some of this winter. In addition, we have new solar panels on the barn roof which provide electricity for the water well to irrigate the orchard. So we are about as green as we can get around here.

MAY-JULY

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HARVEST

We started harvest this year same time as last year, which is two weeks early, primarily due to the drought. The nonpareil variety came off on August 2nd. The other varieties will be harvested about one month later. Our food safety plan we created directs us to harvest onto tarps, not the ground, so we can offer safe, unpasteurized almonds to our customers. Previous years we harvested manually, but as the trees are getting bigger, it is no longer realistic and it can damage the trees. This year we are harvesting using a hydro-mechanical shaker. However, to protect your health and the nuts' health, we still harvest onto tarps. Here's how it works: In this process, there are three pieces of equipment. One piece of equipment is the almond "boat." This "boat" drives along with a conveyor belt in the middle of it and a bar with tarps attached to it. The tarps are unrolled from the bar and pulled around the tree, the shaker comes and shakes the almonds onto the tarps, and the tarps are rolled up on to the bar on the almond boat, dropping the nuts into the boat at the same time. The conveyor belt then drops the nuts into a crate at the end of the boat, which, when full, is carried with a fork-lift to the concrete pad, where the nuts are spread out to dry. This method, while not very time-efficient, is faster than harvesting by hand and is less damaging for the trees. They still need to sun dry for a week, get hulled and shelled, and sorted and packaged.

For those who have been craving our almonds lately, you will be pleased to hear that we should be able to start sending them out to you by middle of September, maybe sooner. So far, our crop is looking immensely better than last year's crop and maybe even better than the crop from two years ago.

CAPAY HILLS ORCHARD

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Top to bottom: harvesting with tarps and a shaker; family members approving the barn building plans; a Fritz tree awaiting its harvest date.

ALMOND ADVICE

We have had many of our customers ask us information about storing their almonds. For your convenience, we'll have a short article about that here.

Shelled almonds will retain quality up to one year at 32°F and for a year or more at 0°F. In-shell almonds can be stored for eight months at room temperature (68°F), and for a year or more at 32° to 45°F. Bottom line: the colder the better and the drier the better.

We never have any almonds to store for longer than 10 months. They are stored at 40-45 degrees in a very dry room (less than 15% humidity) and double bagged (not vacuum-sealed but with excess air evacuated). We have never experienced a problem. So our advice is to stick your almonds in the freezer if you don't think you will be using them in the next month or so. However, if you just found a bag at the back of your cupboard (with an unknown purchase date) just stick it in the freezer for a couple days (to kill any microorganisms you think may be in there) and you should be fine.

With the severe drought ongoing in California and the sharp rise in the number of new almond orchards, almond farmers have had to put up a strong defense for their crop against those who worry that almonds are robbing California's precious water reserves. However, research shows that many other foods, particularly beef and dairy products, use far more water than almonds do. For example, 10% of all California's water is used to produce almonds. 47% is used for livestock. While California alone produces 80% of the entire world's almond supply, it only produces 1.8% of the world's beef and dairy. Alfalfa is a major crop used for feed for livestock. It uses twice as much water than almonds and is the most water-intensive crop in all of California. So far more water is needed to produce the beef and dairy products in the store than almonds. It's also important to consider the frequency with which you eat almonds and almond products versus the frequency with which you eat beef and dairy products. Now you tell me: Which uses more water? That handful of almonds and glass of almond milk or a cheeseburger with a large soda? Undoubtedly, it's not the almonds.



OTHER NEWS

The next few months are exciting and busy, with harvests and all the work that follows, including some early winter work. One thing we hope to see far less often are wildfires. In just the past two weeks, we have had more than five fires start up in a 30-mile radius of our location. While all of California has been hit hard by multiple wildfires, Northern California has certainly been hit the hardest. In just one day two weeks ago, 36 wildfires started up across the state, most of them in severely-drought-stricken Northern California. Some of the nearby wildfires include the Wragg Fire (8,000 acres), the Rocky Fire (70,000 acres), and the Jerusalem Fire (20,000 acres and still growing). Please keep all of California and especially its firefighters in your thoughts and prayers.

For those of you who haven't visited our Facebook page or website in a while, we recently uploaded a video showing off our beautiful orchard from a bird's-eye view. We greatly encourage you to check it out and enjoy the view. We also hope to begin adding more current photos to our website for you to view.