

SUMMER BUGS

The early summer months in some ways are quiet months on the farm. There is less labor to be performed, and this summer there were no almonds to package and mail out. Yet Mother Nature remained busy as always. The almonds grow in size and development within the hull and shell. Coyotes whine and howl at night in the nearby hills and slough, baby turkeys wander through the orchard with their mother, and occasionally we hear the screech of a peacock from down the road. Deer, jackrabbits, and a wide variety of birds are common as well. There is also the occasional snake. Other creatures in the orchard are much smaller. These are the insects, some of which help our orchard and some of which hurt our orchard. One insect that helps is the praying mantis. This insect preys (no pun intended) on pests such as mites, mosquitoes (pests to humans), and aphids. So whenever we see one hanging around the house, we gently pick it up and move it to a tree. Recently I was doing crazy S-curves with the lawn-mower, simply to avoid mowing over a praying mantis walking through the orchard!

Yet of course for every good bug, there is a bad bug. One pest is the beautiful and unique katydid (see photo). Unfortunately, the katydid loves to eat almond leaves, and in the case of this bug the old expression runs true, and it really is what it eats! The angular-winged katydid looks almost exactly like an almond leaf, which makes it incredibly difficult for us farmers to spy. It flies as well, making it difficult to catch. Since this is a pest we only recently found in our orchard, we are working with our crop advisor to find an organic way to rid ourselves of this leaf-eating pest.



MAY-JULY

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HULL SPLIT!

The almonds grew from the size of a pea in March to their greatest size by June—just under an inch long, with a hull of green felt. The summer days here are long, dry, and often blazing hot. It seems that we have had a record number of days over 100 degrees this summer. The early hours of the morning might cool down into the 60s or 70s, or they might just keep us sweating all night long. But for almonds, the weather is perfect. They need these long summer days of dry heat and short, mild nights in order to mature properly. From June to August, the nuts no longer grow in external size, but the nut is developing within the hull and shell. As the summer days pass, the hulls eventually turn from their green felt to a tannish-brown, hard hull, still somewhat felt-like to the touch. About 3-4 weeks prior to harvest, the greenish-brown hulls split open slightly. We almond farmers call this event “hull split”, and because of its timing before harvest, we are sure to mark it down on our calendars to help anticipate the harvest date. After the initial split, the split widens as the hull dries out and changes color. Due to the wetter-than-average winter we had and these long hot days, hull split for the Nonpareil almonds did not happen until mid-July, signaling a mid-August harvest, about two weeks later than the last few years.

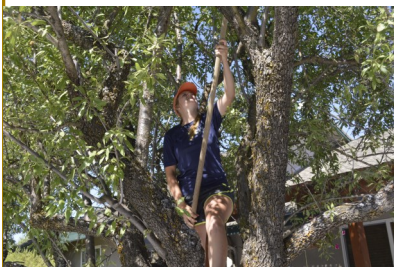


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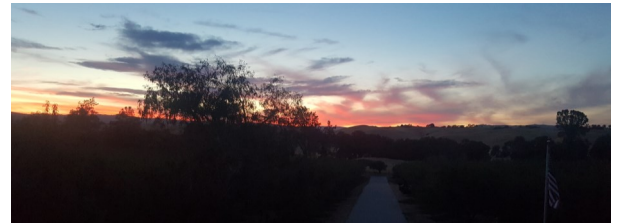


Top to bottom: Caesar, the newest addition to our dog pack; Alicia harvesting our old trees; installation of the freezer unit.

A HOPEFUL NEW YEAR

Living in an orchard just on the outside edge of the Capay Valley is a beautiful and hopeful experience. While the days are long, dry, and blindingly sunny, each day begins in a beautiful way with the sun peeking in your window and each day ends with a splash of the brightest oranges, yellows, pinks, and dusky purples as the few clouds in the sky gather at the horizon. The nights are filled with crickets chirping incessantly and bullfrogs croaking from the neighbor's pond. Lying out under the sky as the stars come out and the air cools is truly awe-inspiring and instills in you a complete peace. Seeing such awesome grandeur is humbling, too, and we thank God every day for giving us such a beautiful blessing. Each season brings its own changes and colors to the orchard and valley, and though summers are long, hot, and dry, the end of summer signals the hopeful beginning of a new year for the almond farmer.

As the hull split occurs and the almonds dry out and split wider, they also change color. The Nonpareil variety changes from green to a yellow-brown color, with a hint of gray. Next, the Monterey split open and change color. Their color is more purplish, which just happens to match with the blue stripe we paint on one tree in each Monterey row, to help us quickly identify each row's variety. The Fritz color change is also fitting. This pink-striped variety has a rosy pink tint when it changes color as it dries. As the nuts change color, they stand out from the green of the tree and we have a better picture of how our crop is looking this year. We are very pleased to say it is looking like a bumper year! Of course, we still have a while until we have our final product ready, but we have great hope for this crop! We are thrilled to share this hopeful news with you! Check out our Facebook page for pictures of each variety.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FARMER

In the last newsletter issue, we mentioned the introduction of a new article series in our newsletters. We really think you will enjoy reading about the daily experiences of a farmer!

Ever since we started harvesting our new trees, we have had to manage locating a freezer in which to freeze our nuts. Renting the freezer and trucking the nuts from our orchard to the freezer and then from the freezer to the huller and sheller was becoming quite expensive and quite the hassle. So we solved the problem by making our own freezer! You'll remember from a previous newsletter that we had built our own cold storage facility for nut storage. So we already had the room, but we needed a freezer unit to lower the temperature appropriately. Kyle (the oldest of us Paddock kids who lives in Texas with his wife Bailey) helped us locate a freezer unit. It was definitely a major expense, but it is one we see paying off in the long-run.

Installing the freezer unit ourselves proved to be quite the challenge. We had no idea how long or how difficult it would be to install the unit on top of the cold storage room. By the time installation was finished, it had taken multiple hours of work; additional help from a family friend; lots of sweat, stress, and problem-solving; and very careful maneuvering to get it into place and completely installed. By the time it was done, I think we were using Plan E! I think this is a perfect example of a typical farmer's day. A job you initially think is simple turns into an all-day project, and you have to be on the ball at all times and always thinking of a better way to do things! You can never expect something to turn out the way you first thought!