

CAFF Partners with Central Coast Farmers and Ag Groups to Share Conservation and Management Techniques

In a series of workshops and farm tours, Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) is helping Central Coast farmers learn from their peers to improve their on-farm practices with innovative techniques to increase biodiversity and wildlife habitat, conserve water resources, and manage pests naturally. In November, CAFF co-hosted the first of these educational tours at two farms.

Hidden Springs Ranch

Beginning at Storrs Winery's (www.storrswine.com) Hidden Springs Ranch just outside Aptos, the tour examined ongoing farm projects supported by CAFF and Wild Farm Alliance. Owners Steve and Pamela Storrs introduced their farm and described their journey over the past two decades from students at UC Davis to bottling and packing around 12,000 cases of a year, highlighting the unique *terroir* of the Santa Cruz mountains in their award winning wines. The 50 attendees included farmers and staff involved in the project including the Wildlife Conservation Board, Xerces Society, and the Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz. One of the main attractions at the Ranch was a stretch of different types of perennial native grasses planted along the row ends of their young organic Pinot Noir vines. Steve's favorite is the thick and bushy tufts of *Festuca Rubra*, also known as creeping red fescue, which appears to be one of the winners of the experiment.



Planted with plugs by hand, the grasses secure exposed soil that developed as tractors made u-turns over the path coming in and out of the wine rows. The grasses are helping to bring the Storrs closer to their goal of keeping the occasionally heavy rain on the farm, and preventing the precious top soil from washing away, as Steve has seen happen in previous downpours.

The Storrs are exploring a range of other practices to conserve natural resources and promote biodiversity on the ranch. These include cover crops, solar powered drip irrigation, wildlife corridors, and using a herd of sheep that are bred short and can squeeze just under the elevated drip irrigation applicators. The sheep clean up the weeds and

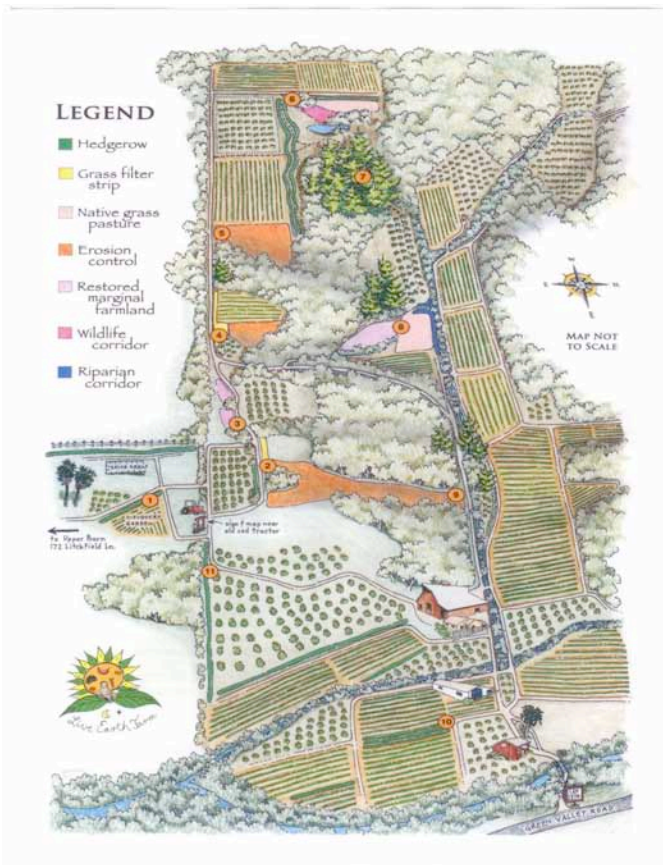
undergrowth during the winter, and fertilize the vines, without the compaction, power, or chemicals that would be used in a conventional system.

Near the end of the tour, the group was led along one of the wildlife corridors. A heavy gauge, 8ft steel deer fence borders their fields but was moved back from a road, which runs along one side of their property, to allow deer the space to move safely away from the road. Following the fence to either side of their fields, the deer find corridors that lead up the wooded hillsides of their property.

Live Earth Farm

The next stop on the tour was Live Earth Farm (www.liveearthfarm.net), an 80-acre organic farm in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains near Watsonville. Formerly a horse ranch that was disked after every season, Live Earth now supports a diverse range of row crops and orchards with significant land devoted to natural habitat, wildlife corridors, native pasture, and a series of hedgerows, grass filter strips, and flowering shrubs. The farm grows a dozen fruits and 40 varieties of herbs and vegetables with a roving cast of chickens, goats, and lambs. The majority of its fruits and vegetables are sold through a CSA membership of around 900, as well as at 10 weekly markets. Following a recently illustrated map of the many environmental projects initiated on the farm, the group listened to farmer and owner Tom Broz as he gave a detailed explanation of their various projects.

In their numerous hedgerows, Live Earth increases biodiversity and counts on a variety of other benefits. The native plants in the hedgerows are chosen with overlapping flowering periods through the year, attracting beneficial insects and pollinators. The hedgerows with shrubs and trees can be developed as windbreaks and used to retain surrounding soil and water if needed. While small, diversified growers have understood the many benefits of hedgerows for years, only recently has academic research confirmed these benefits through technical studies and monitoring (see UC ANR's California Agriculture - Oct/Dec 2011 issue for some of this research¹).



¹ Morandin L, Long R, Pease C, Kremen C. 2011. Hedgerows enhance beneficial insects on farms in California's Central Valley. Cal Ag 65(4): 197-201. DOI: 10.3733/ca.v065n04p197

Tom says they often follow the “4d formula” promoted by the Santa Cruz RCD for combating runoff on their hilly property: detain, decrease, dissipate, or divert. Along the dirt access road we walked, he pointed out grass filter strips. A few areas are planted with



the same deep rooting native perennial grasses at Hidden Valley Ranch. After years of driving the road in wet conditions, sections of it had developed deep gullies and were eroding down the hillside. In another steep section, they planted shrubs, live oaks, and willow trees to stabilize a slope where there had been erosion and even a landslide. A hedgerow along one of their apple orchards was alive with the bees that pollinate the apple flowers every spring.

These conservation projects produce tangible benefits for the farm, but take more than just tossing some seeds around. Live Earth has invested significant labor resources in digging, mounding, planting, and maintaining each of the sites. There is also the cost of the seeds, starts, and farm equipment used. The grasses, which were drilled into the pasture, require regular mowing to ensure the native perennials will be able to overtake the annual

weeds that compete for the space. Many of the sites also require years of irrigation, until their roots penetrate deeply enough to access water below the ground, with some hand watering required due to the sites’ remote locations. In order to protect a small redwood grove an American Conservation Experience team had to remove several tons of invasive English ivy by hand that threatened to smother the trees.

Nevertheless, Tom and the Storrs feel their investment of time and resources have been worth it, and both plan to continue their conservation efforts. CAFF helped organize these farm tours with funding in part from the USDA – Risk Management Agency Commodity Partnership Program and the Natural Resource Conservation Service Conservation Innovation Grant Program. CAFF is planning similar workshops in 2012 about the wide range of practices and techniques that can improve the sustainability of farming operations in this farmer-to-farmer format.