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## EDITOR'S COLUMN

*This is the grass that grows wherever the land is, and the water is - Walt Whitman*

This time of the year you can watch the grass grow. Cows, calves and sheep are focused on the spring event of pastures aflame in green forage. If you are lucky enough to find fresh milk, the taste and texture are an experience in itself. You can taste the rich natural resources that are so abundant in the spring.

In West Marin, grass means open space. Thanks to our long-time ranching families, forward-thinking government, and committed citizens, nearly half of the County still exists as working farms and ranches. Most of Marin's agricultural products are grass-based and account for over 99% of the agricultural land, and about 95% of the County's gross agricultural income.

Ellie Rilla, our Farm Advisor, just returned from New Zealand, where she found interesting comparisons with our local agriculture. The "Kiwis," as they are nicknamed, are part of a grass-based agricultural system just like ours, except that the grass is green year

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## Beyond the Green Blur

Grass plays such an important role in our daily lives that it's hard to imagine a world without it. A grass-free planet would not only look different, but the world supply of food, shelter, and fuel would be drastically limited.

Without grass, our local landscape would be entirely changed. The grassy cover of the gently rolling hills reveals so much about the earth below. Beneath their carpet of grass, we can see the beautiful contours of the Coast Ranges, softened by time and the elements. In late spring, when the grasslands start to dry up, their changing color divulges even more. First to turn brown are the hilltops and slopes where thin soil just covers the bedrock. Then we can see where the deeper soils are, as these pockets stay green much longer. As Carl Sandburg said, "I am the grass; I cover all."

Grass is such an underappreciated plant family. Many people look at a grassy field and see "vacant land" - they really think there's nothing there. But if you look beyond the green blur, you'll see that there is so much going on in that few inches closest to the ground, and underground, for that matter. Grass has so many different shades of green - from the gray-green of our native creeping wildrye (*Leymus triticoides*) to the brilliant, shiny green of Italian ryegrass (*Lolium multiflorum*). Along with worms, snakes, bugs, rodents and myriad small creatures, a whole range of other colors and textures help to animate this green.

California's grasslands are rich biological reservoirs supporting many of the state's rare and endangered species. Grass species include annuals and perennials, natives and exotics, dominants to rare endemic species. Grasslands also include many types of forbs - herbaceous broad-leaved plants such as clovers and wildflowers.

Grass offers something for everyone! If the aesthetics of grass don't appeal to you, well, its place in the food chain should. Grass, in the form of grains, makes up the main source of calories for humans. The earliest hunter-gatherers consumed grains from annual grasses. Grains such as wheat and barley began growing in human settlements between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago. For meat eaters and dairy

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## **Historical Dry-Farming Revived in West Marin**

The coastal area of Marin County has a history of dry-farming. The remnants of a geological formation of silt, sand, and sediment was uplifted and deposited over bedrock five million years ago, resulting in an unusual condition of deeper, fertile hilltop and hillside soils perfect for dry-farming.

The famous Tomales potato crops of the past were planted in the spring and grew without irrigation through the summer. Oats and barley were sown in the fall for winter crops, taking advantage of the more or less predictable Mediterranean wet winters. (The unfortunate history of erosion and poor farming practices in the late nineteenth century depleted this remarkable resource and filled in waterways.) Even in the recent past, dry-farmed potatoes were part of the Tomales landscape at the Gobbi, Ambrosini, and McCall ranches. The Point Reyes Seashore has a history of dry-farmed artichokes and peas as well.

Today, dry-farming is being re-invented in the northwest section of Marin County. Farmers like David Little, Peter Worsley and Elmer Nelson are dry-farming potatoes, tomatoes and some squash. The deep Tomales sandy loam



*Farm manager Jim Leap from UC Santa Cruz and dry-farmers Peter Worsley and David Little from West Marin at a recent UC Cooperative Extension workshop on dry-farming on March 10, 2005.*

soils are perfect for the practice with high moisture contents and a deep water table.

Dry-farming is well suited for parts of Marin where water is scarce. In northwest Marin particularly, with its unique topsoil conditions on the gently sloping hillsides, dry-farming seems to be the answer to lack of water for irrigation. Practiced carefully, with a solid knowledge of soil conservation and tillage, potatoes, squash, and tomatoes are great fits.

Reduced yields per acre can be compensated for by farming more acres, if you have the ground. And especially, if you do not have the water!

## **Organic School Lunch Program from Marin Organic and Marin Food Systems Project**

The Organic School Lunch Program run by Marin Organic and the Marin Food Systems Project is in full swing. Using a combination of donated and purchased food, the program enables schools throughout Marin to offer local organic meals to their students. Since November, over 5,200 pounds of food have been gleaned from farms, and 1,000 quarts of Straus yogurt were donated. Some of the produce delivered to the schools includes: potatoes, winter squash, chard, kale, beets, and lemons. So far, gleaned food accounts for about 70% of what is delivered, but it is expected to be about 50% gleaned and 50% purchased in the coming months.



*The Marin Conservation Corps joined the Marin Organic staff and potato farmer David "Buster" Little in a potato gleaning project that went to Marin public schools.*

Last week a group of school food service workers from Tam Unified School District came out to Warren Weber's Star Route Farms and enjoyed a tour of the farm. As participants in the program, they were thrilled to see how the food they cook is grown and also to tell stories about the tremendously positive response they've been getting from both students and parents alike.

In addition to getting rave reviews from the students about the Straus Vanilla yogurt and granola parfaits and the carrot cake made from local, organic carrots, revenues at all of the participating school lunch rooms have risen by hundreds of dollars per week.

This program is very exciting and is sure to grow. We'll keep you posted. - Helge Hellberg, Executive Director, Marin Organic

## New Zealand: Grassland Paradise

In March I traveled to New Zealand with twenty extension colleagues. We were impressed with the island country. As a farm advisor, what stuck with me was their agricultural know-how.

New Zealand is lightly populated, at four million. Maori settlers arrived around 1200 AD and found lush, temperate rain forests filled with birds, but no mammals or natural predators. They began as foragers until the game ran out and eventually experimented with farming. Thus began the development of an island food system leading to today's agricultural landscape.

Today, with a year-round temperate climate, New Zealand's biggest natural asset is its grass, agriculturally speaking! This well-managed resource allows competition on a global scale. Dairy, beef, sheep, and red deer are farmed on a year-round pasture-based rotational grazing system. And it works.



*Rotational grazing of sheep in New Zealand*

New Zealand is the world's largest supplier of solid milk products, and is a competitor in global lamb and beef markets. Five million dairy cows and thirty million sheep make up 20% of the economies export market. Without natural predators, red deer have reached epidemic proportions here. The over-population of deer, reduced to two million from 10 million in the 1980's, was dealt with through the creation of "deer farms" to produce commercially available venison.

New Zealand farmers are faced with many of the same issues that Marin County farmers struggle with. I spoke at length with Mike Cornbull, a young dairy operator whose family is operating a 400-cow leased dairy. *"We're working hard, saving our money so hopefully, one day soon, we can buy our own land and start our own dairy."*

Maybe it's just a case of perfect scale or size, but I found a sense of pride and connection with their locally grown food. Everyone seemed to know where food came from. As I devoured ripe plums and nectarines, *"Oh, that's from the orchards in Otago,"* said Ann, our host at a farm stay.

I hope the Kiwis can retain this sense of place and connection with their food and fiber and that we can truly regain what we lost, here in the Bay Area and beyond. - *Ellie Rilla, Director, UC Cooperative Extension, Marin County*

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lovers - there's an obvious connection between grass and these foods - cows and sheep eat grass. Rice, corn, and bamboo are also grasses. Much of the world's population survives on rice and many live in bamboo structures. Corn is an essential grass, too. As well as a food staple, corn, along with switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), is a source of ethanol, a promising fuel.

In West Marin, grass also means open space. Thanks to our long-time ranching families, forward-thinking government, and committed citizens - and to grass - nearly half of the county still exists as working farms and ranches. Most of Marin's agricultural products are grass-based and account for over 99% of the agricultural land, and about 95% of the county's gross agricultural income. Grass-based products include butter, cheese, milk and other dairy products, beef, lamb, grass hay, and silage.

You've probably heard the term "working landscape." This refers to lands that are worked by, and work for, the ranchers who earn their living out here...and to grass. Carl Sandburg also said, "I am the grass; let me work."

- *Lisa Bush, Certified Rangeland Advisor*



## Farm Day Hosts 2,000 Kids

On Thursday, March 17, 2,000 kids and 1,500 adults poured into the Marin County Exhibition Hall for Farm Day. The theme this year was

*"The ABC's of Agriculture."* Thirty-three Marin and Sonoma exhibitors covered the ABC's of farming and ranching. Farm Bureau members Sally and Martin Pozzi brought ewes and lambs and their gentle Pyrenees sheep-dog, and the Moretti's from Tomales brought a dairy heifer calf. Cindy Jensen, UC Cooperative Extension 4-H Program Representative, noted, "We want the kids to be involved with animals. This year was great. We had horses, goats, lambs, calves, rabbits and chickens for the kids to pet and touch." The kids loved the program. Second grader Kirsta Rodriguez-McKee from Bacich Elementary School sent us a letter saying, "Farm Day is a day you go to a farm. I saw llamas, horses, slugs, snails, ponies, sheep, and rabbits. We saw carrots getting grown and we even got to plant seeds to grow one."

UC Cooperative Extension provides the leadership for a committee of volunteers representing agriculture and educational agencies that host this annual event.

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round! New Zealand, like our Pt. Reyes National Seashore, has an exotic deer problem and they came up with an interesting solution. But the most compelling observation that Ellie returned with was that farmers, both young and old, are trying to find ways to stay in agriculture and are proud of their products and heritage. It seems that wherever you travel these days and talk to farmers, the topics, concerns and shop talk are remarkably similar.

Kids are in the news this issue. Marin Organic and the Marin Food Systems Project are well on the way to bringing more local organic food to our school children. Hundreds of hours of dedicated work have gone into this project. Thanks to the two organizations for the sweat and leadership.

On page three you can see the beaming face of a young Farm Day exhibitor and her yearling Jersey calf. Farm day brought 2,000 kids together to get a taste of farm life. The enthusiastic responses of all the children to the hard work and efforts of many collaborative agricultural and educational groups helps to provide a future base of understanding and support for our farmers. And all this comes from grass!

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Editors: Steve Quirt & Ellie Rilla  
 Production: Frances Healey  
 Contributors: Helge Hellberg, Executive Director, Marin Organic;  
 Lisa Bush, Certified Range Advisor



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**University of California  
 Cooperative Extension • Marin County**  
 1682 Novato Blvd., Suite 150B  
 Novato, California, 94947

## News from Marin County Farms, Ranches and Producers

- ~~ **Bob Berner** was honored on February 15 by the **Marin County Board of Supervisors** for two decades of dedicated service as **Executive Director of Marin Agricultural Land Trust**. "MALT has become the gold standard in agricultural preservation throughout the nation," said Supervisor Steve Kinsey. "Bob Berner is the mind behind the method, bringing his quiet expertise and leadership to the organization, enabling board, staff, and ag producers to do their best for the industry."
- ~~ **Marin Agricultural Land Trust's** eighth annual show and sale of western Marin County landscape paintings will take place on Saturday, May 21, and Sunday, May 22, at the Druid's Hall on the Village Square in Nicasio.
- ~~ **David Evans**, West Marin rancher and owner of **Marin Sun Farms**, and **Ed Pearson**, produce farmer of Novato, have just been elected board members of the **Marin County Farmers Market Association**.
- ~~ The **Doughty** family of **Point Reyes Vineyards** received the "Best of Class" for their **1992 Carneros Late Disgorged** sparkling wine in the **Brut Cuvee** category from the **San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition**.
- ~~ **Straus Family Creamery** has introduced **four new yogurts, two new ice creams** as well as new ice cream packaging that features a cow drawn by **Ellen Straus**.
- ~~ **UC Cooperative Extension** from **Marin and Sonoma** are conducting a **survey** of livestock producers to determine the current needs and status of our local industry.

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