



Russ Lester, owner of Dixon Ridge Farms, stands in a cover crop that is critical to his organic walnut growing operation. (Brad Zweerink/The Reporter)

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Growing nuts...

Local organic walnut farmer at the forefront of marketing crop

Mary Lynch, Staff Writer

Standing between rows of organic walnut trees on his Winter's ranch one fair morning last week, Russ Lester was explaining how a carefully managed cover crop plays a key role in managing pests in the orchards.

He bent down, and, stalk by stalk, singled out from the green tangle each beneficial plant and identified it - by its Latin name.

That's the kind of farmer Lester is: a thorough, systematic thinker who brings brain power, conviction, and sales savvy to organically growing, processing, and marketing one of Solano County's million-dollar crops - walnuts.

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"My goal was to be a research scientist, but I didn't enjoy academics as much as I thought I would," said Lester, a tall, broad man with a deeply tanned face scored with smile crinkles.

Lester attended the University of California, Davis in the 1970s, earning a degree in plant biology.

"I decided to do what I really enjoy," he said. "I enjoy growing things."

The place where he does that is the 1,250-acre Dixon Ridge Farms, off Putah Creek Road in Winters. His father, Will Lester, bought the property after selling the Santa Clara farm where young Lester grew up. He bought the farm from his dad in 1979.

Lester tore out the old, unproductive almond orchards the property was planted with and put in walnut trees instead.

Then, Lester launched the property on its transition from conventional to organic farming practices.

"I've always been an environmentalist, even as a teenager," said Lester. His father, too, farmed according to organic principles - monitoring insect populations, using only environmentally soft pesticides - long before it became a buzz-word - and a rapidly growing market.

According to the National Organic Standards Board, organic agriculture "is an ecological production management system that promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity."

Dixon Ridge Farms was officially certified organic 13 years ago. No synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides are used in the cultivation and processing of the walnuts.

Lester says the organic farming methods used on the ranch produce walnuts superior in quality to conventional ones, which contain residues of the toxins used in growing and processing them.

Even the gentle, chemical-free process of shelling and sorting the walnuts guarantees that consistent quality.

In the hulling house on the ranch, an automated line removes the nuts from their shells. Then they are inspected multiple times, by both computerized and human eyes, for incomplete shelling or defects.

The blond beauties delivered from the belt to a bin are unblemished and mostly whole halves, resulting in an attractive product with a very low rancidity rate - something cheap imports can't claim, Lester said.

Only 240 of Dixon Ridge Farms' acres are bearing acres. Still, the yield is high - about 2 tons of in-shell nuts per acre.

Another 1,700 acres worth of walnuts from other California organic walnut growers arrive yearly for treatment at the on-site processing center. There, the nuts are shelled, sorted and packed for shipping nationally and internationally.

Marketing high-quality walnuts to the world is an area where the walnut industry needs improvement, according to Lester.

"We're growing more and more acres of walnuts in California. We need to spend some of that money on marketing."

Lester said it's time to take a lesson from the almond industry, which is harvesting huge crops, and commanding higher prices - a statistic that flies in the face of the theory of supply and demand, he noted.

"They've simply created a larger demand for their product," he pointed out.

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Given the health benefits of walnuts, it shouldn't be hard.

Packed with beneficial Omega-3 fatty acids and Vitamin E, and free of cholesterol, walnuts have been shown to decrease the risk for Alzheimer's disease, and improve brain activity in general. In Chinese medicine, because the reticulated lobes of the walnut resemble the brain, they are considered "brain food."

Lester isn't waiting around for other people to launch an aggressive marketing campaign to promote walnuts.

He has been at the forefront of marketing his walnuts in Japan, where he sells them by their varietal names, much the way wine is marketed in the U.S.

Sales of the Chandler walnut - "the Chardonnay of walnuts," in Lester's view - have been so strong that Japanese customers ask for them by name.

American consumers - especially of organic produce - have the same interest in knowing the source and grower identity of the food they buy, Lester insists.

"We've been trying for years to get California distributors to see the difference between Chandler walnuts and other varieties," Lester said.

Trader Joe's and Whole Food's markets are among the retail centers where Dixon Ridge Farm's organic walnuts are sold, via larger distributors.

About 55 percent of all the organic walnuts grown in the state are processed at Dixon Ridge Farms, where about 25 employees work year 'round in the human-scale but state-of-the-art facilities.

Organic walnuts represent a fraction of the California walnut crop, however.

"Really, it means we're only handling about .5 percent of all the walnuts grown in the state," said Lester. "Ninety-nine percent are conventionally grown."

Only a small number of Solano County growers farm organically. Larry Clement, director of the University of California Davis Cooperative Extension, estimates that between 25 and 30 of Solano County growers farm organically - a small number, he said. Among walnut growers, Lester may be one of two.

"It's pretty much confined to smaller growers, growing for a specialty market," said Clement, of organic farming. Otherwise, according to Clement, "there's not a lot of price incentive."

Lester conceded that organic farming is more hands-on labor-intensive than conventional methods, and the plants are slightly more susceptible to pest-driven crop losses.

However, the price of organic walnut has remained steady for the past six years, he pointed out, with only a slight uptick this year.

Prices for conventional walnuts, on the other hand, have fluctuated.

Lester remains staunchly committed to organic farming.

"Not everything is known about it," said Lester, of the planet's elegant system of sustaining its own health and biodiversity, which organic farmers work to harness. "But you don't need to know everything. You look at meadows and forests out there, they've been doing fine for millennia - unless there's been some disturbance to their ecology."

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