
NOTES FROM THE NUT

CAPAY HILLS ORCHARD NEWSLETTER ISSUE 34



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Joining the Farm ... Athena!

Yes, we've welcomed another member to our farm and our family! She's furry and friendly and best friends now with Koda, our youngest dog and a German Shepherd mix. An Alaskan Malamute and Siberian Husky mix, Athena is as cute as can be! Not all of the family lives near by anymore, but they love being sent pictures and hearing any news of her and Koda's latest adventures!

Speaking of adventures, Koda won some heightened admiration from the family when he managed to snag a squirrel (our biggest pest on the farm)! That's quite a feat for a large and lanky dog! However, acting like the alpha queen that she is, our oldest dog Roxy quickly deflated his accomplishment by glaring at him and stealing his squirrel for herself. But as you can tell by the pictures on the next page, Koda managed to retrieve his prize!

Roxy is getting older, slower, and quieter, but she doesn't mind reminding the younger dogs that she's still the boss. She mildly tolerates our new little pup, Athena. After spending the first couple days absolutely terrified of Koda, Athena and Koda are now best buddies.



It's Not Just About the Harvest

The fall is a very busy time, starting in late July and lasting through October with work days 12-16 hours long, but it's not just the harvest that is our focus during this season. There is a plethora of activities that we must complete all in a short period of time.

All our almond varieties are harvested within a 45-day period. We have three harvests--one for each variety. But first, we have to prepare for harvest. This includes mowing in the rows, deficit irrigation monitoring, and scheduling contracts for custom harvesting equipment.

Our harvest involves some unique characteristics: tight turn-arounds, changing weather, off-ground tarp set-up, and low branch challenges. We contract with a prune farmer to use his harvester. This contract also includes him and his son to operate this unique set of machinery. Brian runs the tractor and supervises the whole operation, and we also hire a few local high school kids to round out the labor force. We often have the same locals come back each year to help. This year we were trying to de-conflict 110+ degree weather and the changing schedules of multiple people to find the right time to harvest. Harvesting at night is not an option due to greater safety issues operating around the moving equipment in the dark, though of course it would be cooler in temperature!

After our harvest and our nuts were drying out on our dry pad, we had to prepare for unexpected rainfall. Usually our rain doesn't come until Thanksgiving or later, but this year it came about two months early--in mid-September! We ran into town to purchase 15,000 sq. ft. of tarps and covered up those almonds! Some of this work was done late at night and in the early hours of the morning. Thankfully this freak storm was followed by plenty of sunshine, so any moisture was fully dried out.

After drying for a couple weeks we transported the field run product (hulls and shells still on the nuts, along with sticks and leaves in the mix) to a local facility for hulling and shelling. The new facility we use is only 15 minutes away! The amount of time it takes for hulling and shelling is important. We don't want our almonds sitting around too long, otherwise insects decide to start feasting. As soon as we get notice that our almonds are done at the huller-and-sheller, we have to schedule a crew of workers to sort the almonds. This can take several days per variety. We have to sort the almonds as soon as we bring them back from the huller-and-sheller, so the turn-around from getting the call that the nuts are ready to the time we bring them back to the farm, hand-sort them, and place them in our cold-storage unit is only 24-48 hours. This year we had help sorting almonds from a few Ukrainian and Russian refugees. We do all our sorting on-site.

This process and coordination effort repeats itself with each variety while simultaneously packaging and selling almonds, marketing, sorting, mowing, etc. It's not unheard of for us to be harvesting one variety at the same time we are sorting another and packaging yet another! Crazy!

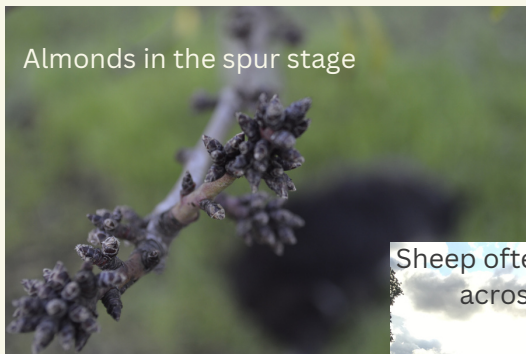
Add to this abundance is the poor timing of the due date for our organic certification. This is always in the fall and it requires significant paperwork preparation and a three-hour site inspection. We have also applied for a conservation grant to enhance our field borders with greater biodiversity plantings. We already have a native hedgerow on 3 sides of our property, but we would like to enrich this. More paperwork!

Once all almonds are harvested, shelled, and sorted, it is time to prepare for next year's harvest. At this time the almond blossom buds are developing. They are called spurs and resemble teeny tine pinecones (pictured below). Immediately post-harvest is a critical time for their development. Part of this preparation for the next harvest involves more plant tissue testing, coordination and discussion with our Certified Crop Advisor, and implementation of his recommendations. This normally leads to adding potash, gypsum, compost, and chicken manure to the ground, as well as a micronutrient foliar spray. All are certified-organic products. I spend many hours on our tractor spreading 110,000 lbs. of these materials, then completing a light till for the manure and to create a seed bed for the cover crop. I work with Seeds for Bees to develop a customized seed mix for our orchard: vetch, mustard, beans, peas, triticale, and radish. The cover crop tops off our fall nutrient inputs, but we're still not done with everything.

We continue irrigating until consistent rains return, which means that every day we irrigate, we must also conduct maintenance on the irrigation system which is damaged every night from elusive critters, such as birds and ants. Water conservation is very important to us, so we don't want any leaking irrigation lines. We also don't want plugged lines which would dehydrate our trees just as they are coming out of a stressful harvest.

Recently we started pruning all 1600 trees. We prune each tree to remove dead wood, problem branches, and to allow access for equipment, which also minimizes future damage to the tree. Our next procedure will extend in to the earliest months of the winter. "Knocking mummies" means removal of any nuts that didn't fall off the tree during harvest. This is done by hand with a long wooden pole and is a very monotonous task but one that is critical to the well-being of the tree and our next harvest. Mummies, as we call these nuts, become overwintering nest beds for the naval orange worm moth, which likes to lay its eggs in the mummies. In the spring the worms emerge to feast on developing almonds. Thus, removal of mummies is laborious but vital.

All the while we are running around doing our fall duties preparing the trees and soil for next year, we never stop marketing, selling, and packaging the almonds. Communicating with our customers is a necessary part of our farming system. You, the customer, are the most important aspect to our farm. Without you, we couldn't exist! We appreciate the fact that you care so much about your own health and how your food choices affect not only you, but this beautiful world we live in. Thank you for your support!



Almonds in the spur stage



Sheep often graze in this meadow across from our orchard



The prune harvesting equipment

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