



8 investing mistakes you should avoid in 2011

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Tom Karwin: Organic conference a call to farms

Tom Karwin On Gardening

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The annual Eco-Farm Conference, now in its 31st year, continues to be the premiere organic farming event in the Monterey Bay area, as well as an invaluable resource for organic farmers throughout California and, indeed, the world.

The event also serves home gardeners by providing information and inspiration about the rationale and methods for successful organic gardening.

The conference is plowing along this week, with 1,500 attendees at the Asilomar State Beach Conference Grounds (www.visitasilomar.com) in Pacific Grove. Asilomar provides excellent facilities and positive "vibes" for the Eco-Farm Conference.

We provided early notice of this event in this column, and urged local farmers and gardeners to attend to grow their knowledge of, and commitment to, organic gardening.

The opportunity still exists for this Saturday's half-day of talks and exhibits, concluding with a plenary session, "Seeds are the Key to Food Sovereignty." For details, visit www.eco-farm.org.

Here are highlights of an extraordinary Eco-Farm pre-conference session — an all-day tour of organic farms in the Monterey Bay area.

Monkeyflower Ranch

Our first stop was Rebecca King's 40-acre sheep ranch, where she and her crew raise 100 milking sheep and produce sheep's milk cheese that she markets to chefs and farmers market visitors. We watched the sheep being milked, observed the

cheese-making process, and tasted the excellent product. Rebecca told us about dealing with the delivery of some 170 lambs within a very short period in January, much earlier than she had planned. Exciting times for her and friends who came to help!

She has given floral names to her cheeses, available locally at the Monterey Farmers Market (10a.m. to 2p.m. on Fridays at Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St.).

The ranch also is home to several goats and a couple cows, as well as pet dogs and ducks. Rebecca and her staff enjoy working with the docile sheep, but find the more active goats so crafty and strong-headed as to be tiresome. As youngsters, however, both the sheep and the goats are endearing.

Visit www.gardenvarietycheese.com for more information.

Jacobs Farm

We then learned about Jacobs Farm, which has several growing sites in California and literally hundreds of small-scale farming partners in Mexico's Baja Peninsula, forming the Del Cabo Cooperative. We visited the company's greenhouse facility in the Pajaro Valley, where the company grows organic culinary herbs and edible flowers in more than 1 million square feet of greenhouses. Larry Jacobs and his partner, Sandra Berlin, greeted us, provided a brief history of the enterprise and introduced some of their key staff members. Brendan Mele, director of California farming operations, led our tour through the greenhouses, where we saw what the conversion of these facilities from cut-flower production (by the previous occupant) to the Jacobs Farm crops of basil, chives, thyme, epazote, tarragon and other culinary herbs.

Mele provided an overview of the production process: soil preparation, planting, fertilization, irrigation, pest control and harvesting. We were impressed by the complexity of scientific process management and the skilled contributions of the work crews.

During our lunch break, Larry Jacobs discussed his legal battle with a manufacturer and an applicator of a chemical pesticide that had contaminated one of his organic growing fields. Following a lengthy dispute process, Jacobs Farm prevailed and the case established a significant precedent for the protection of organic farming operations from synthetic agricultural chemicals.

Visit www.jacobsfarm.com to dig deeper.



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Windmill Farm

This small-scale farm, on a hill with a spectacular view of the Monterey Bay is a labor of love by Ronald Donkervoort, who has been growing ever-changing crops of vegetables for sale at four local farmers markets. We saw a great variety of vegetables growing beautifully, and heard Donkervoort's accounts of planting every two weeks, year-round; planning which vegetables and how many to grow, based on many conversations with clients; and his dedication to his farming. Donkervoort now hires some younger workers to lend a hand, but has worked his series of leased farmlands on his own for many years, and exemplified a romanticized farming model that many young people dream of pursuing. It was clear, however, that achieving a modest income and personal satisfaction on a small-scale farm requires exceptional dedication and a consistently positive outlook.

It also helps to be a skillful gopher trapper.

Donkervoort claimed a good measure of success in that arena, too.

Santa Cruz Berry Farming Company

Our last stop was near Moss Landing, where Fritz Koontz grows strawberries on 150 acres of leased land within the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve. He provided a step-by-step description of the strawberry growing process, beginning with runners that have been propagated in areas that provide the 300-400 hours of winter chill that the plants require to develop vigor. The Monterey Bay area climate supports an exceptionally long season, culminating in a single harvest that begins in April and continues to November. The berries of the second year's crop are too small to compete in the marketplace, so Koontz removes the plants after the first crop and rests the soil for the following two years.

Koontz's partner, Dr. Beth Crandall, develops and evaluates hundreds of new strawberry varieties through a related company, Kanaka Peak Research LLC. She conducts a continuing search for plants that produce better-looking, better-tasting berries, resist pests and diseases, and thrive in the local conditions.

The Elkhorn Slough Foundation owns or manages 3,500 acres in the Reserve, in a long-standing program to protect the slough from commercial development. For more about the ecological importance of the slough and the foundation, visit www.elkhornslough.org.

Our personable tour leader, Amigo Bob Cantisano (a founder of the Eco-Farm Conference) and many of our fellow tourists were experienced organic farmers, so we enjoyed highly informative dialogues with our hosts at these farms. Overall, the tour was an extraordinary educational experience, and an enjoyable component of the conference.

If you would enjoy such an experience in January of 2012, mark your calendar now for both the tour and the conference.

Tom Karwin is a Santa Cruz resident; a UC Master Gardener, a board member of the California Native Garden Foundation, the Monterey Bay Iris Society and The Arboretum Associates; a member of several other garden groups; and a garden coach. He can be reached at gardening@karwin.com.

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