

## Things are looking good out on the farm

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If we spend much time in the true metropolitan areas of California, the vast San Francisco Bay Area or the super-sized mega-suburb of Southern California, we may fret about bucolic Monterey County being overwhelmed by the expanding urban mass.

When traffic is backed up from so-called Mountain View to so-called Redwood City for no apparent reason, we must finally accept the jarring statistic that one out of eight Americans lives in California. When we visit the bleak Inland Empire with its oversized strip malls and smoggy, treeless subdivisions, we may depress ourselves by wondering whether it could happen here.

But reassurance has arrived. As optimistic as a seed catalog, it's the annual Monterey County Crop Report, out this week to certify that things are looking pretty good out on the farm, all things considered.

The latest report isn't thick, just an eighth of an inch. It isn't meant to be literary, but if you're fond of the way rows of lettuce look in the morning mist, if you enjoy the smell of fresh-cut alfalfa, you may find a few things almost poetic amid all the numbers.

On page 9, for instance, you'll learn that someone produced 3.65 acres of tulips last year, up from the year before. Imagine 3.65 acres of tulips in bloom. Then you'll learn about the larger plantings of chrysanthemums, roses, snapdragons and miniature carnations. Suddenly the townhouses of Santa Clara County don't seem so close.

How romantic to read the names of our local grapes — chardonnay and cabernet, certainly, but also grenache, petit verdot, roussanne, sangiovese and viognier.

Who wouldn't feel better after learning that our wheat fields have grown to 1,220 acres?

Even if the produce aisle is the closest you ever get to the land, you may feel absolutely agrarian as you skim the report's honor roll of "million-dollar crops," old favorites such as strawberries and surprises such as radicchio, bok choy and rappini, whatever that is. Read the lettuce varieties aloud and you'll sound like a railroad conductor announcing the approaching towns: "Butter Leaf, Endive, Escarole, Romaine."

During the general plan ballot wars, some who produce this ultimate mixed salad were accused of plotting to plow it under to cultivate the quick profits of row houses. The report's bottom line helps splinter that theory. It calculates the county's total ag income at nearly \$3.5 billion last year, up 4 percent despite the E. coli troubles that wilted the spinach industry. The report documents that Monterey County agriculture puts food on our tables in more ways than one.

Some of the corporate partnerships that own acreage may view the report as a mere accounting, an inventory. Those who depend on farming for their livelihoods, and those who like Monterey County pretty much the way it is, will see it as a demonstration of the value of agricultural diversity and a reminder that a healthy farm economy helps slow the spread of pavement and pollution.

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