

# Hedgerows offer many hidden benefits to Valley growers

TOM LEYDE 12:57 p.m. PT March 7, 2017



(Photo: Tom Leyde/For The Californian)

WATSONVILLE – Let's talk hedgerows. Why? Because they help create biodiversity on agriculture farms and benefit wildlife.

Those aren't the only things they're good for, as Sam Earnshaw, founder of Hedgerows Unlimited, will tell you. They also attract beneficial insects and pollinators, create windbreaks, prevent erosion, fight off pesky weeds and help prevent pollution in nearby waterways, among other benefits.

If that's not enough of a case for hedgerows, they also are pleasing to the eye when native plants used to create them bloom.

Since 1996, Earnshaw has designed and overseen the planting of miles of hedgerows on the Central Coast and as far away as Santa Rosa, Madera and Firebaugh.

Driving through the Pajaro Valley, Earnshaw, 73, points out hedgerows he has helped create for farmers over the years. Some are as long as a half mile. Others are just long enough to protect an eroding creekbed. If you didn't know what you were looking at, you would likely drive by without noticing them.

Earnshaw recalled giving a farmer a tour of hedgerows a couple of years ago.

"The farmer said, 'Those are hedgerows? I thought they were just bushes,'" Earnshaw said. "The farmers that have them like them for a lot of reasons ... they know it brings diversity to their field."

Organic farmers are especially interested in hedgerows because of the beneficial insects they host. But growers also favor them because they help protect crops from frost, improve air quality, increase surface water infiltration, act as living fences, barriers and boundary lines; improve soil health and quality and promote food safety.

A study by a group of scientists at UC Berkeley found that removing noncrop vegetation from ag fields contributes to foodborne pathogens. How it does that is not yet known. But their Central Coast study found *Escherichia coli*, linked to the bagged spinach poisonings in 2006, was more present in fresh produce near farms where noncrop vegetation was removed.

The scientists' findings were peer reviewed by the National Academy of Science. Still, some growers don't buy into the study's results.

A major barrier to the acceptance of hedgerows, Earnshaw said, is buyers and auditors of fresh produce. They are not well educated on their benefits and are keenly focused on food safety issues.

When laying out hedgerows, Earnshaw consults with a grower on his or her specific needs. He always uses California native plants. That's because insects that combat pest insects have evolved with them.

Among the plants you'll find in hedgerows are artemesia (California sage), white and blue ceanothus, coyotebrush, coffeeberry, elderberry, yarrow, willow, oak and quailbush (saltbush).

Planting hedgerows, Earnshaw explained, is about conserving a variety of life near fields, sustaining native plants and creating a functioning ecosystem that supports both farms and wild communities. He calls hedgerows the backbone of a biologically controlled system.

Earnshaw, who has a degree in forestry from UC Berkeley, came to creating hedgerows in a roundabout way. He worked for an engineering company that does analyses of Environmental Impact Reports and other impact statements.

The company became involved in a five-year study in Castroville in the 1980s on the use of recycled water on crops. While working on the project, Earnshaw met his wife, Jo Ann Baumgartner, now executive director of Wild Farm Alliance.

The couple became interested in organic farming and set up their own farm on 10 acres in Santa Cruz County, selling at farmer's markets and to stores. Eventually, they weened themselves away from farming. Earnshaw went to work for Community Alliance With Family Farmers (CAFF).

He led the Lighthouse Farm Program and began holding monthly breakfasts with farmers to discuss and learn about ag issues on the Central Coast.

"It was a great way to share this information about biological farming," he said.

In 1996, he began planting hedgerows in San Juan Bautista and in the Salinas Valley. In 2005, he became certified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service as a technical service provider. He built a website for his business, and the rest is hedgerow history.

Every farmer knows that there's no silver bullet in agriculture, Earnshaw said. But hedgerows are a hedge against many problems they face.

"You're dealing with the ecosystem that we have here," he said

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