

The Mariposa Agri-Nature Association held the first in a series of free workshops with concepts and resources to grow your home based farm projects. More than two dozen interested folks from the community attended to hear presentations included networking and sharing ideas, direction from the general plan, working in tandem with tourism and an emphasis in stewardship of the land with respect for natural resources.

*Kris Casto, President of the local Ag-Nature Association gave an introduction and brief history of how the organization began more than twelve years ago. Then original seed was planted by Robyn Smith. Robyn works with the Natural Resource Conservation Service. She met with a handful of interested parties. The group then hosted the first Ag-Nature farm tour. Bringing in visitors from the valley and surrounding areas, the tour was a two day event with thirteen farm and ranch venues to visit. It was a hit and was followed by yet another event during harvest season in the fall. The second year was equally successful.

JJ Gillispie described how the event eventually evolved to fewer venues and included yet more of an educational theme. Due to the preparation involved in getting the venues ready for visitors, the event was pared down to only once a year. The venues expanded to include nature walks, dinners, artisans and the History Comes Alive Tour.

Later the event morphed into Tomato-Fest. The downtown event brought tourism to the downtown area and five rural venues. All of the tomatoes were grown in local gardens. Who knew there were so many varieties, many of which were heirloom?

These family friendly events have been well received by residents and tourist. The goal of providing education from those who are producing a product and adding economic value from it's production has been achieved.

*Partnerships, participation, education and making your property "value added" are a few of the topics discussed. Ideas of what can be done to improve your property, grow a product and then seeing the benefits are achievable,

*Two successful family farmers presented their experiences.

Guest speaker Kim Costa of CostaLivos spoke about wanting to make as small of an impact on the land surrounding their home as possible. Hand pruning, fire clearance and watering in the summer months were all essential in making it work. Irrigation and burrowing pests were both a problem early on. The community stepped up with suggestions on how to mitigate both, giving them the steps to take to make it profitable for them. Sharing knowledge is the heartbeat of Ag-Nature, knowing what works and what doesn't. Their olive oil tasting room and gift shop now serves dinners three days a week. You can visit Don and Kim Costa at <http://www.costalivos.com>

Dave and Beth Lancaster from Sierra Cider tried fresh marketing for the apples from their orchard early on. Cider seemed a more value added and appealing way for them to turn. Being weekend warriors at first, Dave and Beth are both from farming backgrounds, have a love for the outdoors and aren't afraid of getting their hands dirty. They say that "retirement" is sort of a misnomer for them. They first started planning and taking classes at UC Davis and found out that there were similarities to making wine. They cut the cord and jumped into it. They took workshops as far away as Washington State and started networking with other growers. Lancaster's strongly recommend talking with others in the field, visiting other facilities and asking one important question, "What would you have done differently?" The couple also urges checking with local agencies and keeping within the codes-the building department will work with you. Find Sierra Cider online <http://www.sierracider.com>

***Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California, Second Edition** ISBN: 978-1-60107-742-4 and ISBN: 978-1-60107-698-4 **Small Farm Handbook**, Second Edition was referenced throughout the presentations as well written and researched books that are wonderful resources. These publication are full of many ideas, topics and suggestions that may help you evolve into a successful ag producer whether it's a family garden for personal use or a source of income.

*Sarah Williams, Mariposa County Planning Director, enlightened the crowd with some of the do's and don't's when planning your dream endeavors. Her department encourages everyone to contact them early in the process so your plan can succeed. The Mariposa County General Plan is re-written every twenty years.

Mariposa is a right to farm county and folks are encouraged to do value added projects within code. Special use permits may be needed to hold functions of certain size or frequency.

Maintaining a rural character, best use and responsible use to protect the integrity of the agricultural community are written in to the current general plan.

Zoning ordinances establish what can be done with your property. Agriculture use is allowed. Home enterprises are allowed as long as what you are doing is fabricated on site. You are allowed one employee per acre of land.

There is a link to the information Sarah shared and can be found on the website at www.mariposacounty.org/planning.

Recently a new state program relaxing some of the Health Department rules were explain ed. Cottage foods are allowed to be sold to the public on your property or at the farmer's market. This is considered "Class A". The "class B" takes into consideration that you will be wholesaling to local grocery stores and requires inspections from the health department. Generally the Cottage Law products are baked goods, but check with the County Health Department for any clarifications. Information can be found at www.MariposaCounty.org/enviromentalfoodfacility.

J.J. Gillespie talked about her experience when developing a commercial kitchen in her home. Her's was a first for Mariposa County. The county Health Department worked with the Gillespie's to fulfill J.J.'s dream of having a home bakery. County regulations at the time were vague and no one knew the direction to turn. They said she needed three sinks and a drain in the floor. So together they came to the conclusion that the sinks only needed to be a certain distance and the drain could be under them. J.J. and her husband Jim were successful at their business for a number of years. In this day and age the regulations have become more relaxed than they were for the Gillespie's. They were the pioneers that made it happen for the later generations of folks that want to provide farm to table goods.

Mariposa County has a Community Kitchen Facility program where you can rent a kitchen to prepare your products. Check with them for the list at MariposaCounty.org/health

Regulations as far as producing eggs for market take some planning ahead. Susan Labozetta explained that the process is not that hard. If you go to the County Ag Department and get a permit, they come to your home and determine that you are indeed producing the amount of eggs that you say you are on the application. From there on it's just a matter of paying the yearly, nominal registration fee.

In attendance was a gentleman, Greg Bouchet, who touched on what he describes as "Permaculture Design". Many problems with landscape can be turned into a resource and some may even qualify for grants under the energy saving sectors currently available. He is slated to present an overview of how this agricultural program can help stainability and self-sufficiency at the workshop to be held on May 17, 2018.