No Farms No Food

American Farmland Trust
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

# Rancho Del Pueblo

Stewardship Profiles in California Agriculture
Environmental Leadership with Pest Management and Habitat Restoration

Sixteen years ago, after farming since 1976 in Hawaii, Texas, and throughout California, Steve Sprinkle founded Rancho Del Pueblo in Ojai, Ventura County. Rancho Del Pueblo is a 12-acre certified organic farm with it's own Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. The farm supplies produce for the Farmer and the Cook, a restaurant and market owned by Steve and his wife, Olivia Chase. They also sell produce to Veritable Vegetable and Heath and Lejeune, which are organic vegetable distributors, and to a couple of local schools and private caterers. Together Steve and Olivia have forty-six employees and a 3,000 square foot cafe and grocery store retail space. Steve practices small-scale intensive production, typically planting 15-20 crops in succession. He specializes in summer vegetables, beets, greens, head lettuce and leaf lettuce.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

- Improved rodent management
- Increased and enhanced beneficial insect and natural predator habitat

## PROBLEM

Rodents, namely gophers and squirrels, pose the biggest pest problem for Steve, and poisons aren't an option for an organic operation. This year, earwigs have also been especially problematic.

The farm's soil is dry and rocky, full of clods, and retains water poorly, making it difficult to incorporate soil applications. Steve attempted to improve it by planting over two acres of oat vetch cover crop but found that once fully mature, the ligneous roots wouldn't break down in the soil; the situation that was exacerbated by the drought and minimal soil moisture. Steve couldn't cultivated the land for over a year.

**"Coexist with wildlife and practice minimal intervention. You never know what you are killing and they may be unknown help in the ecosystem"**

**-Steve Sprinkle**

## SOLUTION IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT

To remedy the rodent situation, Steve has installed and manages thirty gopher traps around the twelve acres. Daily monitoring allows him to home in on rodent holes and other problem areas. In addition to setting traps, Steve relies on natural predators to assist with pest management, and has deliberately created habitat for mountain lions, bobcats, marmots, foxes, and coyotes on his farm. Farming on the edge of the wilderness means that wildlife is all around, and he says this motivates his stewardship. Steve left a perimeter of native grasses at the farm border, which provides habitat for birds and other wildlife.

To further enhance natural areas, Steve maintains a large 12,000 square foot area for seed crops, which provide beneficial habitat for lacewings and ladybugs. He has also invested in long-term hedgerows. Steve is always working to plan his approach in alignment with the broader ecosystem. For example, he knows that sparrows and crows want to eat bugs and that vultures eat dead rodents. To attract coyotes, he throws dead rodents along the path where coyotes enter the farm, and he knows they come because he later finds their droppings. In April and May, snakes are prevalent. Before working an area Steve clears the ground with a stick to protect the king, racer, and gopher snakes that are integral to his pest management strategy. He observes the birds on his property and makes provisions to provide water pans and habitat, installing perches and owl boxes above the fields and in the oak woodlands. Other organic pest management solutions Steve has implemented at Rancho Del Pueblo have included the use of bacillus thuringiensis for a past worm issue, and pyrethrum to protect lettuce crops from earwigs.

Steve uses a tractor spader on his land to aerate the soil and improve tilth. To further maintain adequate soil moisture levels, Steve starts his plants in the greenhouse, and then prepares the ground by irrigating the soil, making the beds, adding fertilizer and rototilling. Then he plants healthy plants directly into the field, rather than establishing crops by seeding.

We use organic soybean meal for nitrogen and grow cover crops for organic matter and nitrogen.

## CHALLENGES/OBSTACLES OVERCOME

It was over a year before Steve was able to establish the oat vetch cover crop in the soil. He found that the soil was not sufficiently hydrated to till in the cover crop, and he had to wait a year for sufficient rain to use the field to plant.

### STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES

- Pest Management
- Habitat Restoration

### PROJECT PARTNERS

- California Small Farm Conference
- Ecological Farming Association's EcoFarm Conference
- Orfalea Foundation

Ultimately, he learned that it wasn't enough to rely on annual rainfall and that he would have to use sprinklers to prepare the ground, however, irrigating attracts gophers, which then invaded. He also learned that he shouldn't let the cover crop fully mature, and that alternative cover crops such as like fava beans and Austrian peas serve as green manure without adding ligneous woody material that takes longer to break down. Previously, Steve would plant cover crops in April or May, but under the drought conditions, Steve found that he had more success planting the cover crop in March. He also uses soybean meal and rice compost as fertilizer, because their high nitrogen content.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

The gopher cages are an expensive investment that has paid off; Steve is trapping up to 15 gophers per day. Since he acquired the land 40,000-50,000 gophers have been killed. "If you don't do it they'll murder you," says Steve, "because they are drawn to wherever you irrigate."

***For more information about the stewardship practices discussed in this profile, please contact the farmer directly. You can reach Steve Sprinkle by phone at (805) 290-0988.***

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