Keeper of the Dream: Matthew Sutton's Orchard Keepers helps homeowners realize dreams of backyard orchards

By Laura Copeland

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SANTA CRUZ

He doesn't have his own orchard yet, but add up the land Matthew Sutton has tended across the county in the past few years and his acreage stretches for miles.

And even though the land isn't his, he knows it well.

"If I throw this down, will the oxalis eat it? Is it worth it?" a Westside homeowner asked Sutton last week, holding up a bag of organic fertilizer and walking the perimeter of his flora-filled front yard. He and his wife hired Orchard Keepers, the company Sutton founded in 2002, to install a backyard orchard a few years ago.

"The oxalis will definitely use it, but the tree will get some," said Sutton, who was there to do some pruning. He recommended throwing down the fertilizer anyway and scratching it into the soil.

Orchard Keepers pairs Sutton, a champion of trees and perennial cropping systems, with county residents who want to create backyard orchards. Some of his clients do all the work themselves and hire him because they need a how-to list; others, like the Westside homeowners, bring in Orchard Keepers to design, install and maintain an entire backyard food-production system.

The frontyard of the Westside home -- about an eighth of an acre now dense with fruit, vegetables and native grasses -- was a dry dirt slope when the homeowners brought in Orchard Keepers to set up terracing and, ultimately, an orchard. The family of four wanted everything inside the 6-foot-high property fence to be edible -- music to Sutton's ears.

The local-foods movement is as much about buying food from county farms as it is about growing food in county backyards, Sutton said. And unlike the weekly work a large-scale orchard demands, he says a backyard orchard -- when smartly installed -- requires only "pulses of work throughout the year: pruning, planting, composting, some harvesting. Winter is the main push in the orchard. Each season there's about a weekend of work to do."

It's a message he tries to relay not only to his clients but to students in the classes he teaches at the UC Santa Cruz Farm and Garden.

"Our motto is if we're gonna water it, you should
be able to eat it," Sutton said.

THE NOT-SO-PEDESTRIAN CRCHARD

Sutton and a crew of three installed terracing and paths in the Westside hilltop yard in 2008 to maximize the space before planting trees. Sutton favors dwarf and semi-dwarf trees, which won't grow higher than 6 or 7 feet, so he can pack in more varieties.

Then came the vegetable beds, bordered by cover crops and native grasses like festuca rubra. Bell beans and oats help nourish the soil, and once they're established, they require no additional water.

"We're usually growing crops for ourselves," Sutton said. "Cover crops are crops for the soil. It's free nitrogen. There's no industry to create this fertilizer."

Today the Westside family enjoys homegrown fruit almost year-round, from apples to cherries -- low-chill varieties that do well in Santa Cruz -- to peaches, Asian pears, figs, kiwis, persimmons, Oro Blanco grapefruit ("It's the grapefruit to grow in Santa Cruz" is Sutton's testimonial), even avocados.

They have fresh eggs, too, born in a corner chicken run Orchard Keepers installed.

"The sweet thing about this area is that we can be picking fruit every day of the year if we make the right selection with varieties," Sutton said.

During Orchard Keepers consultations, the first question Sutton asks isn't about the space or the budget. It's about how much time the owner can devote to maintenance. Some "orchar"s he's worked on, he said, have had just two trees.

But if things are planted smartly, Sutton said, even larger orchards don't have to require a lot of upkeep.

"In the industry it's called the pedestrian orchard," Sutton said. "You can do everything from the ground, or maybe with a 6-8 foot orchard ladder."

FULL EXTENT OF THE SEASON'

When Sutton visited the Westside site last week to help with pruning, he pointed out to the homeowner that the family's sapling apricot tree had four to five fruits.

"Oh great, that's a start," the homeowner said. "Wait, are you saying that like it's a start, or like that's all I'm gonna get?"

Sutton laughs. "We might have a dozen."

Not even Orchard Keepers could've stopped February's heavy storms that triggered the apricot tree to bloom early.

"On a good year, this tree would be covered," Sutton said, touching a branch. "It doesn't seem fair, but we just fall prey to these two weeks every year, and our soil care and pruning is all for naught."
Well, not all for naught. The family had apples until early January, and citrus is due next -- then Satsuma mandarins, then oranges, grapefruits, lemons and limes. Sutton installed nine dwarf varieties of citrus trees to give the yard the "full extent of the season," he said.

It's an impressive display of backyard food production, but Sutton said he's still holding out hope for his dream project.

"I'm just waiting for the acre piece of land that's just sitting there," Sutton said. "Maybe I could turn it into a CSA model."

AT A GLANCE
Orchard Keepers
WHO: Matthew Sutton started Orchard Keepers in 2002 with a vision of someday having his own orchard, he said. Today he helps county residents create backyard 'orchards' by restoring old orchards, pruning fruit trees and introducing native plants
COST: Consultations are $75 for an hour or so; pruning 10-15 young trees about $120. Services run from the gamut from design, installing and helping maintain a backyard food system to one-tree grafting projects.
DETAILS: 566-2947,
www.orchardkeepers.com