Orin Martin, Santa Cruz County Stories: UCSC master gardener came for the literature, stayed for the apples

By Laura Copeland

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SANTA CRUZ -- He's a Mac.

He also dabbles in Gala, Fuji and Braeburn, but it's an heirloom McIntosh apple that has Orin Martin, manager of the Alan Chadwick Garden, waxing poetic during tours of the UC Santa Cruz hillside orchard.

"The snow apple, or farneus' in French, is probably the original McIntosh apple, dating back to the 1500s in France," Martin said. "That's an old apple."

On a steep south-facing slope at Merrill College, the Alan Chadwick Garden has more than 100 varieties of apples thriving in several feet of rich topsoil. But before Alan Chadwick got his hands on it in 1967, the neglected parcel grew nothing but chaparral and poison oak -- and before Orin Martin met Alan Chadwick, Martin's knowledge of gardening was almost as scant.

"I actually thought that gardening was an odious chore when I was growing up in New England," Martin said.

The gentle-mannered Boston native was interested in writing and literature, not horticulture, when he moved to Santa Cruz in 1969, two years after Chadwick. But on a friend's recommendation, Martin visited the garden and later attended one of Chadwick's public lectures, and he was immediately "struck down by the majesty, the beauty, the dynamism" of organic farming.

"When I started gardening, there were no New Leafs, no Food Bins," Martin said. "There was no organic produce industry. Twenty or 30 years ago, people were saying, Bah humbug, who needs it? You can't do that on a commercial scale."

Martin has spent his career building on Chadwick's work, preaching the gospel of biodynamic-French intensive gardening, which calls for treating the garden as a self-nourishing system. Martin also helped start the university's dense collection of dwarf fruit trees, which weren't around in Chadwick's time. No more than 6-8 feet tall, they're short enough to prune without a ladder, making backyard orchard-keeping less of a chore.

But the crop that brings Martin the most joy, he says, are his students in the university's six-month apprenticeship program, who often go on to start their own organic farms, urban gardens and teaching programs. Many of their stories are no different than his own, gardeners who might not have always thought of themselves as gardeners, like the vet who'd "just had had his boots on the ground in Iraq, the cradle of civilization where farming started," and is now...
teaching organic farming to other veterans.

"The garden is the curriculum, the classroom and the lesson plan, where theory and practice are really woven together, and I'd say masterfully so," Martin said.

It's a tenet best expressed in an adage Martin uses with his students, which he borrowed from his wife Stephanie, a third-grade teacher: "I do, we do, you do."

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GETTING TO KNOW

Orin Martin

IN A NUTSHELL: Master orchardist Orin Martin has managed the certified-organic Alan Chadwick Garden at UC Santa Cruz since 1977 and trained under its namesake.

ORIN'S ALMANAC: 'Last summer was the coolest summer on the Central Coast in 30 years. This one's worse.'

OUTSIDE THE GARDEN: 'I like to swim in the ocean. I've been keeping track. I've swum half a mile or more in the ocean 54 out of the last 57 days. They pay me to be professionally talkative, so I am, and it's way quiet out there.'

FAMILY TREE: Martin met his 'future wife, Stephanie, when she was an apprentice at the UC Santa Cruz Farm & Garden in 982, though they didn't get together until after she'd graduated. The Martins have two daughters who are alumnae of UC Santa Barbara.

IN HIS BACKYARD: 'I don't have a garden at home. I'm not home much. I guess I can offer the weak excuse that you can only be creative in so many places.'

OUT TO THE BALLGAME: A Boston native, Martin roots for the Red Sox -- but he's been in California longer now than he was out there, so when the Giants and the Red Sox played last year, Martin said he didn't know which team to cheer.