



# TWO SMALL FARMS

## Community Supported Agriculture

June 4, 5, 6 2008

### **Destruction, Rebirth and Renewal: Reflections on our 2nd Season of Grassland Restoration at High Ground, by Laura Kummerer**

Last week as I witnessed the powerful fire raging in the Santa Cruz Mountains, I began to reflect on the phenomena of destruction and renewal. As an ecologist I think of fire as integral to the rebirth and diversity of the landscape. It clears out the old and creates space for the new. But being human I dread the loss incurred by such rampant change; the loss of home, the loss of the familiar.

In our work to restore the damaged grassland on the Conservation Easement of High Ground Organics Farm to a thriving ecosystem, we are working with a force of destruction akin to fire. We are in our second season of re-introducing the disturbance of grazing back to this grassland. Our goal is to use thoughtfully timed livestock grazing and replanting to transform the weed tangled hillside to its historic vibrant diversity of bunch grasses, wildflowers and a myriad of birds and insects that evolved with this endangered ecosystem.

Historically California grasslands were healthy and diverse only in the presence of fire and/or grazing. The plants of the grassland community evolved mechanisms such as fire retardant seeds and protected plant organs to endure cyclical destruction and even thrive in its presence. About 12,000 years ago the native people of California recognized the essential role of fire in rejuvenating grassland ecosystems. They set fire to grasslands on almost a yearly basis. Grazing as well has a long history in California grasslands dating back to millions of years ago when Mastodon and Bison roamed California, to more recent times when large herds of Pronghorn Antelope, Tule Elk and Grizzly Bear lived off the grasses to the present herds of domesticated livestock.

It was these forces of destruction that deposited essential nutrients back in to the soil and cleared away the decayed vegetation of previous years' plant growth, removing the thick blanket of decayed material that often smothers out seedlings trying to germinate. In the absence of fire and grazing, this blanket of thatch, as it is called, has grown up so thick that the rainbow of approximately 250 species of wildflowers that used to paint the California coastal grasslands with color in early spring are rarely seen anymore. Some of these species have been lost forever, but some species like the lupines and clovers of the pea family with thick protective seed coats still remain dormant in the soil just waiting for the removal of the thick blanket so they can bloom once again.

As I rotate the small herd of goats, visiting from Mariquita farm, through the grassland paddocks, I try to mimic the cyclical nature of the historic free roaming grazers. Last season as I witnessed the beautiful native California Oat grass nibbled down

### **Strawberry U-pick This Saturday**

We'll open our fields for a u-pick this Saturday, June 7th at High Ground Organics' Redman ranch, 10 am - 6 pm. Come to the Redman House Farmstand first to check in with Hayward and pick up your empty flat (or bring your own to weigh in empty). She will direct you to the appropriate place in the field. Berries cost \$1.50/lb. The Redman House Farmstand is in Watsonville, right off Highway 1 at the Riverside Drive exit. Go West off the exit and turn right at the corner. The farmstand is next to the Chevron station.

**This Week**  
**Strawberries** <sup>HG</sup>  
**Baby MiniCor Carrots** <sup>MF</sup>  
**Collard Greens** <sup>MF</sup>  
**Spinach** <sup>HG</sup>  
**Bacon Avocados** \*  
**Oregano** <sup>MF</sup>  
**Mystery** <sup>HG</sup>  
**Mystery** <sup>MF</sup>  
**Flowers: Mixed Bouquet** <sup>HG,\*</sup>

to the height of a pancake by the goats, I struggled to have faith that the destruction created by grazing would ultimately rejuvenate this landscape. It was my human tendency is to put protective fences around every native bunch grass clump, tender wildflower and blanket of native morning glories. I had to remind myself that many vulnerable wildflowers will only bloom in the bare soil left by grazing and that the deep rooted bunch grasses have endured endless cycles of destruction in their 200 year life span. I still am working to surrender to the forces of destruction. At the same time I am learning to make sure that I don't hit native species at the time of their life cycle when they are most vulnerable. But even with doubts, I continue on. When I step back, I

can see that in just two seasons this grassland has moved from a hillside of 6 foot tall weeds to a neatly clipped hillside of grass. In two more seasons I hope to see a myriad of native wildflowers and bunch grasses where the invasive Poison Hemlock and Wild Radish once stood.

This spring small glimmers of affirmation that rebirth follows destruction have been found across the grassland. The California Oat grasses, that looked so bedraggled after the first round of grazing, woke up robustly after this year's winter rain and now cover the grassland in dense mounds. Although their size is reduced from their ungrazed counterparts, they are in denser clumps because whole meshes of seedlings were able to germinate. A small lupine bloomed its purple brilliance in an area that had been hit hardest by the goats last year. Although lupines are a relatively common plant, there have not been any lupines recorded on this property since we began observing it five years ago. Lupine seeds can live for 50 years in the soil just waiting for the right conditions to germinate. It is a treat to see that conditions were right this year for this beautiful flower. A handful of annual tarweed species are appearing all across the grassland. The sighting of these miniature sunflowers brings me great hope because they require the same conditions of bare soil and diminished annual grass competition for survival as their relative, the endangered Santa Cruz Tarplant that struggles to hold its ground on the property. The native morning glory is more prolific than ever, winding through the grassland in a great mass of fuzzy

leaves. And the wondrously cheery blooms of the California Sun cups brightened up the grassland with a density of flowers that I have not witnessed before. There has also been a shift in the bird species spending time on the grassland. This winter the grassland was covered with a community of Western Meadowlarks that had not been able to forage here in previous years due to the height of the weeds. Another set of grassland dependent birds, Western Kingbirds, have been foraging for insects all spring. And although a Burrowing Owl did not nest out on the grassland as I had hoped this winter, more and more ground squirrel burrows are popping up. This gives me hope that soon these shy owls will find a safe place to nest in Watsonville once again.

These changes on the grassland seem small, but they indicate that damaged land can heal especially in conjunction with the re-planting, re-seeding and weeding we are doing out here. They also remind me of the importance of surrendering to the forces of destruction and rebirth. As my favorite poet, Mary Oliver, so beautifully articulates "...And therefore, let the immeasurable come. Let the unknowable touch the buckle of my spine. Let the wind turn in the trees, and the mystery hidden in dirt swing through the air..." I hope to be less timid about the forces of destruction in the years to come so I can be taken in to the "mystery hidden in dirt." You can come to visit the grassland and see for yourselves the vibrant life that pulses on the land and the vibrant life that is yet to be born hidden beneath the soil.

*[There is a link to a photo-essay to accompany this article at [www.twosmallfarms.com](http://www.twosmallfarms.com)]*

### Summer Solstice Restoration Event

*Saturday, June 21, 2008:* help caretake our newly planted hillside of native grasses, sedges and rushes. We will work from 4–6 pm followed by a potluck dinner—we can enjoy the bloom of the California Soap Plant which only opens up in the soft light of the evening. We may also be graced by barn owls and bats as the darkness falls. Call Laura Kummerer (831/761-8694) for directions and more information.

### A Note on Oregano from Andy

One of the few culinary herbs that is actually more flavorful dried than fresh is oregano. This week I'm putting a bunch of oregano in each harvest box because it's time to harvest it, and if we harvest it now, there will be time for the plants to grow back for a second harvest in the middle of tomato season. It's easy to preserve the oregano and to be ready for the first tomato sauce of the season. First, take the bunch of oregano apart and spread the stems out on a plate or pie pan. Second, place the plate or pan out of direct sunlight somewhere warmish and dry, like the top of the kitchen refrigerator. Then wait. In a week or so the oregano will be dry enough to crumble into a jar (Julia uses small canning jars) for storage. That's all there is to it. And tomatoes? Well, this spring has been unusually cool, even cold, but luckily I didn't plant out your tomatoes, basil, eggplants, or peppers very early, so the plants were not damaged in the late frosts. No, the harvest won't come early this year, but it will come abundantly. Our

*Everything in your box and the flowers are organically grown. From Mariquita Farm: carrots, oregano, collards, mystery. From High Ground: strawberries, spinach, mystery, some flowers. From Thomas Farm: some flowers. From Marsalisi Farm: avocados.*

basil is nearing its first harvest, and I hope to put it in the harvest box in a week or two. Basil can also be dried like oregano, but I don't recommend it. With basil, the aromatic compounds that make the herb so alluring are volatile; that is, they fly away, as in the Italian verb *volare*, or the Dean Martin song, "volare, volare..." and all that stays is a minty green flavor that is nothing special. When you get the basil use it fresh.

### Recipes from CSA member Cayce Hill

If I don't eat the avocado halves sprinkled with a little garlic salt and drizzled with lime as my main lunch dish, they will definitely make some mighty fine guacamole.

We made last week's collards in a pasta dish. First, we cooked two links of Andouille sausage, sliced it up, and set it aside to drain. Then we sautéed garlic and red pepper flakes in the same pan with a dash of olive oil on low heat until soft. Next, we chopped up about half the bunch of collards and added them to the pan with a generous splash of white wine. While they were cooking down, we put some pasta on to boil. Once the collards have wilted down and the pasta is ready, we toss the sausage, greens, some chopped herbs, sliced green olives and a mixture of some grated Parmigiano-Reggiano and another softer cheese (this time we used a Sheep Tartufo from Whole Foods) together. Bon appetit!

We'll often make the following recipe for bruschetta and munch on them with a glass of wine while we make the rest of dinner. It's also a delicious, healthy appetizer for a dinner party. You can cook down the greens and leave them to the side until you are ready to broil them on top of the bread.

### Bruschetta with Braised Greens, from *Recipes from America's Small Farms*

8 TBS olive oil	8 garlic cloves
1 lb. greens (kale, spinach, chard, turnip, beet, collards)	3½ cups chicken or vegetable stock
½ cup dry red wine (optional)	¼ tsp hot red pepper flakes
3 TBS grated Parmigiano-Reggiano	1 loaf French or Italian bread cut into 12 (1/4-inch) slices
Salt	

Heat 4 TBS of the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Finely chop 2 of the garlic cloves and sauté until they begin to soften, 2–3 minutes. (You may have to add the leaves in two batches if your skillet is not large enough, but the leaves will quickly decrease in volume.)

Add the stock and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 20 minutes, or until most of the liquid is absorbed. If you're using the wine, add it during the last 5 minutes of the cooking time and keep stirring until most of the liquid is absorbed or evaporated. Add the red pepper flakes and salt to taste.

Meanwhile, toast the bread on both sides, brush with the remaining 4 TBS of oil. While the bread is toasting, cut the remaining 6 garlic cloves in half, then rub each slice with a half clove while it's still hot. When the greens are ready, transfer them to a sieve and let them drain for a minute or two. Place about 3 TBS of braised greens on each slice of bread. Top with the Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, and serve immediately or broil for a minute or two to melt the cheese before serving.