

New beginnings

Farm sows seeds to repair damaged lands

Story by Caleb Hampton

In Yolo County, nestled among sprawling orchards and field crops, is a one-of-a-kind farm. Each spring and summer, Hedgerow Farms turns into a patchwork of yellows, greens and violets as its fields of native wildflowers come into bloom. For more than three decades, the farm has cultivated native plants for seed production, supplying land managers working to restore wildlife preserves and other nature areas.

“We basically create our own superbloom,” says Julia Michaels, restoration ecologist at Hedgerow Farms. “We go out into the wild and, with permission, find big blooms of native wildflowers and collect a small amount of the seed.” Hedgerow Farms uses the wild seed to plant a field of the native species at its 300-acre farm near Winters, “turning a handful of wild-collected seed into thousands of pounds of seed.”

The farm was founded in the 1980s by John Anderson, a veterinarian, environmentalist and farmer credited with pioneering sustainable agriculture methods such as hedgerows, rows of native trees and shrubs planted between fields. “He just started planting natives because he saw a need for it, learning along the way, and it became so valuable for the restoration community,” Michaels says. Anderson died in 2020 at the age of 77.

Focusing on native grasses and wildflowers

Hedgerow Farms produces around 400 species of native grasses and wildflowers, which it sells to government agencies and other land managers for use in ecological restoration projects, often after wildfires, floods or other disasters. “What we’re doing is amplifying the amount of seed that eventually goes back into the wild,” Michaels says. She likens the farm to captive breeding programs that help endangered animal species reproduce in captivity before releasing them back into nature.

Julia Michaels, restoration ecologist at Hedgerow Farms, stands in a field of milkweed grown for seed at the Yolo County farm for use in land restoration projects.



Photo/Caleb Hampton

The farm harvests plants for seed from April through October, using machines similar to wheat or rice harvesters. The plants are then dried on tarps and put through combines to separate the seeds from the plant material. The seeds are cleaned and shipped to a warehouse in the San Joaquin County town of Tracy.

Native plants grown at the farm include blue-eyed grass, poppies, lupine, sage and many others. Over the years, the farm has built an inventory of millions of pounds of native seeds. Hedgerow also has a farm in the Santa Barbara County community of Los Alamos, where it grows plants better suited to coastal climates and soil types.

Because the farm is so unique in what it grows, “there’s lots of trial and error and learning from mistakes and experiences,” says farm manager Jeff Quiter. “There’s not a lot of research on stuff that we grow.”

‘Forging the way’

A handful of farms have adopted Hedgerow’s model. But for years, according to land managers, Hedgerow Farms was on its own in producing native plant seed in California, and it continues to lead the way.

“They were out there alone forging the way for restoration,” says Stacy Martinelli, environmental scientist



Photo/Fred Greaves

Jeff Quiter, left, farm manager at Hedgerow Farms, walks between fields of lupine and yarrow. Manolo Sánchez, right, collections expert at the farm, searches for native seeds to plant at Hedgerow Farms, above.

for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The department, which must go through a bidding process before making purchases, had to write special contracts with Hedgerow Farms, Martinelli says, because they had no competitors. “They were the only company that provided what we wanted.”

One of the keys to the farm’s success, Michaels says, is the knowledge and experience of its collections experts. Originally from Chiapas, Mexico, Manolo Sánchez was working in Yuba City’s apple, peach and prune orchards in 2010, harvesting fruit and doing other traditional farm work, when his friend, Alejandro García, invited him to work at Hedgerow Farms.

Since then, Sánchez and García have crisscrossed California, going as far north as Humboldt and as far south as Bakersfield, trekking through hills and creek beds to collect samples of native grasses and wildflowers to plant at Hedgerow Farms. “They’re some of the best botanists in the state,” Michaels says.

Genetics matter

The farm pays close attention to the genetics of each species, which is tied to a particular location, microclimate and soil type. “Every species we grow has a place it was originally collected from. We generally try to return the species back to that area,” Michaels says. “If we collect seed from a poppy from the Central Valley, we put the seed we produce from it back into Central Valley restoration projects.”

In 2016, Martinelli of Fish and Wildlife began sourcing seeds from Hedgerow Farms for a restoration project in the Knoxville Wildlife Area, a nature preserve in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Napa, Lake, Colusa and Yolo counties.



Photo/Beth Savidge

The wildlife area is home to deer, bobcats and golden eagles, and draws hunters and other nature-goers.

“There was an exceedingly bad weed problem in the wildlife area,” Martinelli says, referring to swaths of land taken over by the invasive yellow star thistle. “It was a challenge for wildlife to get through.”


Fish and Wildlife is in the process of replacing 100 acres of thistle with native plants such as purple needlegrass and wild rye. “It was important for us to grow natives that were genetically similar to what should be in the wildlife area,” she says. “And that’s what Hedgerow offers. They collect the seeds themselves in the different lands and watersheds.”

Legacy of land restoration

“So much of the success of restoration depends on what species you plant and that depends on what is being made available through native seed farms,” says Michaels, who earned a Ph.D. in ecology from the University of California, Davis.

While the farm prioritizes partnerships with land managers for large-scale restoration projects, it also sells seeds for 150 plant species on a retail website for people who want to plant native species in their home gardens. And it provides farmers with plants that make good habitat for bees and other pollinators.

Hedgerow Farms, which takes its name from the rows of trees and shrubs that run along the edges of its fields, is itself an example of land restoration. Those rows, inspired by hedgerows Anderson observed decades ago in Kenya, create a corridor that stretches from the nearby Berryessa hills to the farm, transforming irrigation ditches into verdant creek beds where foxes, deer and rabbits scamper. The hedgerows also harbor beneficial predators that provide pest control for the farm. “They’re basically highways of habitat for birds and mammals and insects,” Michaels says.

Today, when collections experts Sánchez and García hit the road to gather seeds from across the state, they witness the farm’s legacy in the landscape. “It gives me a lot of pride,” Sánchez says, “that I can drive by some sites where we’ve planted and see how the flowers are doing.” 

Caleb Hampton
champton@californiabountiful.com

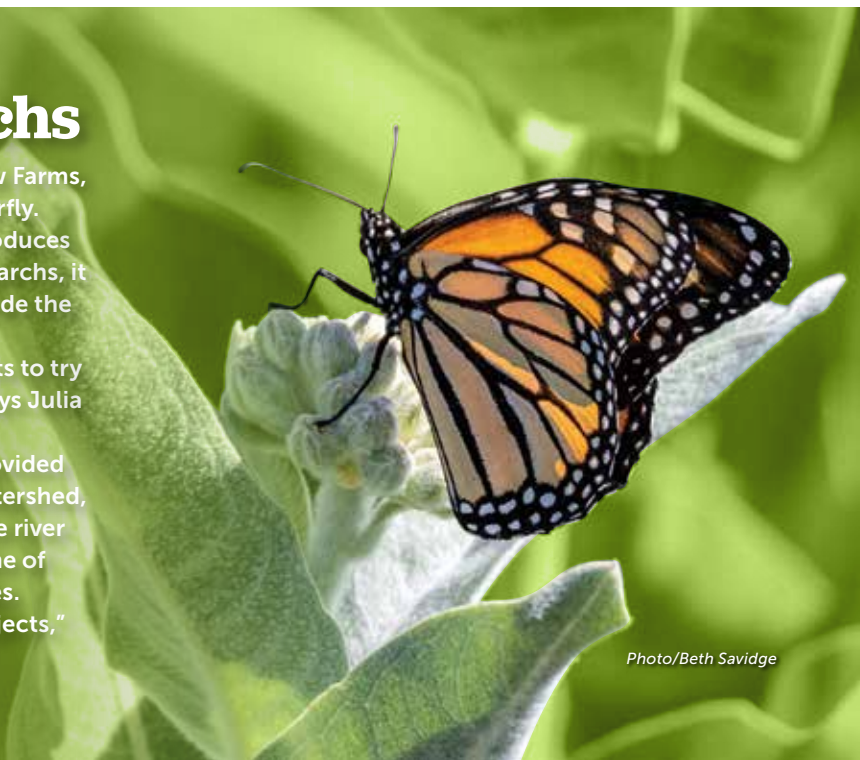
Milkweed *and* monarchs

Milkweed, one of the native plants grown at Hedgerow Farms, is the sole host plant for the endangered monarch butterfly. The flowering perennial has a thick, woolly stem and produces a milky latex that is poisonous to most animals. For monarchs, it is the only plant where they lay eggs, and its leaves provide the only food for monarch caterpillars.

“We grow milkweed at our farm for restoration projects to try to prevent the monarch butterfly from going extinct,” says Julia Michaels, restoration ecologist at Hedgerow Farms.

Recently, milkweed grown at Hedgerow Farms has provided seeds for ecological restoration of the Klamath River watershed, currently the site of the world’s largest dam removal. The river system near the California-Oregon border runs along one of the monarch butterfly’s North American migratory routes.

“It’s a critical species wanted for many restoration projects,” Michaels says of the native plant.



Photo/Beth Savidge