

# “1000 Oaks Day” Plants for the Future

by Steven Knudsen

Just off the paved road outside Parkfield lives a man who is planning and planting for the future. One tree at a time and one season after another, Jack Varian has developed a passion for sustainability. If all goes as planned, his actions today will grow for the next 400 years.

Varian is planting Valley Oak trees, native to the Parkfield region, and has collected a team of specialists and volunteers to assist him in his pursuit of transforming his rural landscape on the more than 16.5 thousand acres of the V6 Ranch into what he calls “a more environmentally friendly approach” to ranching.

On a clear day in February, about 60 volunteers from the San Luis Obispo

Native Tree committee, Cal Poly, local 4-H plus agricultural and community groups joined Varian, Bill Tietje, UC Cooperative Extension Natural Resources Specialist, and Doug McCreary, UC Cooperative Extension oak regeneration expert, to plant 1,000 oak trees. Acorns for these saplings were collected from a small grove of Valley Oak trees that grows behind Parkfield Elementary School. The students there, who attend grades K-6 in one of the last one-room schoolhouses in the state, collected about 3,500 acorns for Varian. The student’s active involvement in this process was both a challenge for them and a learning experience in conservation.

In October 2006, Varian took the acorns to Growing Grounds Farm in San Luis Obispo for sprouting. Growing Grounds, a nonprofit wholesale nursery operated by Transitions-Mental Health Association, employs adults with mental illness at a living wage to grow and care for the plants. Nursery Coordinator Megan Hall supervised sprouting and growing the trees.

“It was really wonderful to be involved with this restoration project,” says Hall. “I think it’s amazing to see ranchers like Jack giving back to the land.”

Last October, one year later,

Varian was shocked to discover the magnitude of growth, with nearly 2,500 Valley Oak trees sprouted and grown. “We selected 1,000 of the oak trees and donated the remainder back to the nursery,” he says.

Back on the V6 Ranch, the volunteers formed into groups of three to plant the

native saplings. First educated by Varian on 11 tips for growing oak trees and then instructed on the best way to plant them by McCreary, the groups spread out over a predetermined four-mile stretch of property running back toward Parkfield. “The volunteers did a lion’s share of the work, planting nearly 850 trees in a single day,” says Varian.

Each of the year-old seedlings, planted in groups of three in a triangle shape into the soft soil, were encased in wire baskets to protect from gophers. Soil was prepared with a shovel and covered with weed cloth to prevent grasses that would choke out the small seedlings. The cluster planting then was surrounded by three recycled iron fenceposts, collected by Varian, and encircled with hog wire to keep pests and critters away. All told, more than 330 planting sites were completed, all in a line with 60 feet separating each planting. Trees now run along the road and the foothills of the valley. “The trees should grow about three feet per year, under perfect conditions,” says Varian. “We are going to do everything we can to ensure that these trees get what they need to prosper.”

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Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). This is a partnership effort, according to Tietje. "It is important to remember that the Varian V-6 Ranch funded much of the remainder of the project out of pocket, including in-kind, and the many hours that Varian and his ranch hands will put in to sustain the trees."

Next in the strategic plan is irrigation. Each tree will receive water from a PVC irrigation line installed at the end of winter. Varian has allocated two wells in which he will use solar power to pump water into micro sprinklers that can sus-



tain the small trees through the hot summer months.

This project has been a long time coming. In 1990, Varian realized that he was not satisfied with the way the ranch was being run and took over management of the cattle and husbandry of the land. During the past 18 years he has focused heavily on transitioning the land back to its natural state by encouraging the growth of native grasses, willow and oak trees and by evaluating and reevaluating the impact his herd has on the land.

Paramount to Varian's long-term goal of preserving the land for future generations was his entering into a conservation easement with the Trust for Public Lands. In April 2001, Varian sold his development rights to the Trust, now held by the California Rangeland Trust. This contract consolidated the number of legal parcels on the land to one, thus preserving the agriculture land in perpetuity. A sign at the ranch gate indicates the land is permanently protected by the conservation easement. By entering into the contract,

Varian is able to focus on his long-term goals to improve quality of the rangeland and enhance biodiversity on the ranch.

In 2000, Varian was the first to receive the Native Tree Committee of San Luis Obispo County Stewardship Award. The committee works to promote voluntary planting and conservation of native trees through education, propagation and stewardship. "The most important crop on my land is scenery," says Varian. "As development pressures force more agriculture land to disappear, we have chosen to preserve the beauty so that others may enjoy it in the future; as our lands' beauty survives, so do we."

Varian credits his success in range management to an education in "holistic management practices" that includes intensive rotational grazing, improved water management, proper fencing and a passion for the environment. "We believe that the whole world should be thinking seriously about greater sustainability," says Varian. "Our agriculture businesses and livelihoods depend on it."



### Jack Varian's 11 Tips for Growing Oak Trees

- Protect your trees from gophers
- Protect your trees from ground squirrels
- Protect your trees from grazing animals
- Protect your trees from wild pigs
- Protect your trees from grasses
- Irrigate to establish oak trees
- Plant your trees in alleviant soils
- Plant your trees in groups to allow for selection
- Plant your trees in the sun not shade
- Select your acorns from established trees in your local area
- Grow your passion for growing oak trees

Wholesale Valley Oak and Blue Oak trees are available at Growing Grounds Farm by calling Megan Hall, (805) 543-6071. Both varieties sell for \$3.65 per gallon container. Growing Grounds Farm is not open to the public; please call for an appointment.

### Photos

Far left – Dan Schweitzer demonstrates the correct way to plant young oak trees in protective wire baskets at V6 Ranch. Lower left – About 60 volunteers gather. Top left – Jack Varian & ranch dog Bob look out over the valley where trees will grow. Above – Next-generation 4-H volunteers plant a Valley Oak.

Photos by Bill Tietje and Steven Knudsen.