

# THE FURROW



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## VITAL SIGNS

The rural health care challenge

■ Cut fuel costs ■ World wide wedge



# GOLD COAST

*Ventura County is one of California's most diverse regions*

*By Dale McDonald*

**T**o the south lies the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, perhaps our planet's most fitting monument to urban sprawl. The last census determined that some 13 million people live there.

To the north is Santa Barbara, home to the very few who are either rich enough or lucky enough to breathe that ocean air.

Between the two is no less than one of the greatest, most diverse, agricultural areas in the world: Ventura County. It's also an odd place, where the rural and urban dwellers, and the mega farms and family farms, and the sailors and the surfers and the workers, all tend to peacefully coexist. At least most of the time.

**Cooperation.** The main reason these neighbors tend to get along is simple—they like living here. So they've done what it takes to keep open space open, and the open space just happens to be farms, for the most part.

"We have a very long history of careful, thoughtful growth," says Leslie Leavens-Crowe, whose family has been landowners



►**Above:** Anything grows in Ventura County, and it grows year-round. Agriculture is intense and technologically advanced. ►**Left:** Strawberries (also pictured above) are the number one crop, valued at more than \$366 million in 2007.



►Above: David Borchard tried, and failed, to leave farming. He's sixth generation, growing lemons and avocados. ►Right: Recreation is big in the Ventura area, and boating is one of the most popular pastimes.

in the area for over 100 years. "First, you can't subdivide any agricultural land less than 40 acres. That's been on the books for a long time. Also, if someone wants to change zoning for development, it requires a public vote. Another important factor is that in the 1990s, the SOAR (Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources) initiatives were passed that restrict development of ag land. Finally, land is assessed at production value, not development value."

**S**till, it's not a perfect world. John Krist, CEO of the county Farm Bureau says, "There are challenges, of course. Urban folks like the scenery, but they don't like dust or noise or helicopters spraying next to schools or neighborhoods, and they complain about it. Even so, we are the future for others to look at. If you have agriculture in an area where people like to live, you'll have to address the same issues we've addressed."

Like collaboration, Krist says ag's success is also due to innovation. In fact, the number one crop changes just about every generation. In



►**Above:** What sets Ventura County apart is the generally cooperative spirit that exists between urban dwellers and agriculture. ►**Right:** Cut flowers rank eighth in value for the county, bringing in nearly \$50 million in 2007.

the 1960s citrus ruled, but today's number one crop is strawberries. Twenty years ago nursery stock was nonexistent, now it's number two. Just a few years ago there were no raspberries, now the crop ranks number six.

"Our farmers are driven to find an edge in the marketplace," Krist says, "and they are open to new ideas and willing to experiment. It's a great place. Look around California, and you won't find commercial agriculture and urban populations side by side anywhere else."

**Contribution.** Certainly, agriculture packs a bit of a pop here. In 2007, the value of the strawberry crop topped \$366 million. Nursery stock accounted for almost \$300 million. All of the county's crop production totalled more than \$1.5 billion. It's a lot of money, but it flows toward an almost unbelievable diversity of





►**Above:** Susan Flores-Henderson, vice president of Valley Crest Tree Company, shows off its specialty, trees grown in containers that the company pioneered. ►**Right:** Everyone seems to surf in Ventura County. Farmers, too.

crops. In addition to strawberries and nursery stock, the top 10 in value include lemons, celery, tomatoes, raspberries, avocados, cut flowers, peppers, and Valencia oranges.

But that's only the top 10. Twenty other crops, ranging from greens (\$16.5 million) to beans (\$2.9 million) bring in over \$1 million. Livestock adds more than \$9 million.

**Never ending.** Steve Donovan, farm manager for Deardorff Family Farms, says, "The thing that makes the area so attractive is that we can grow in the winter. We plant for 30 weeks, and harvest for 30 weeks. Did you know that from January through April, this county provides 95% of the country's celery?"

"Something is growing every day of the





►**Top right:** Flowers ready to go at Pyramid Flowers. The Van Wingerden family began growing flowers in Holland in the 1600s. ►**Middle right:** These young lemons represent the third ranked crop, at over \$235 million in 2007. ►**Right:** Richard Atmore runs an average of 250 mother cows on 7,000 acres. They require 30 acres per animal unit.

year. We have something for sale almost every day. That's why we pay high rents. Cash rent here is higher than land values in other areas."

In the mountains that begin on the edge of Ventura, it's a different story. Richard Atmore runs a cow-calf operation on range so dry it takes 30 acres per animal unit. It takes management skills most cattlemen don't have.

"The Spaniards and other early settlers brought grass seed to compete with sage. You have to manage it closely. If you left it alone, it would revert to Coastal sage scrub, which is a nice way of saying it would revert to brush."

Atmore's parents were school teachers, but





► **Above:** At Deardorff Family Farms they plant crops for 30 weeks and harvest them for 30 weeks.

► **Right:** Leslie Leavens-Crowe is all about family. She runs a lemon and avocado ranch along with her brother and cousin.



*"You won't find agriculture and urban populations side by side anywhere else in California."*  
—John Krist

he wanted to be a cowboy. David Borchard, who grew up with lemons and avocados, thought he wanted to make movies.

"I wanted out," he says, "So I pursued film production in school but didn't love it enough. Then I got into landscaping, then came back, a full circle. I'm sixth generation, and my ancestors left Germany, crossed the Oregon trail, and planted a mustard crop here. I like trees, combined with classic business management."

**F**or Susan Flores-Henderson, vice president of Valley Crest Tree Company, the Ventura area provided opportunity. Crowded out by people, the company needed a new home.

Valley Crest is unusual, in that they pioneered growing trees in containers. Big trees. Some grow in "pots" as big as cars.

"They are cost effective because there is very little risk when you plant them," she says. "They live. But the coolest thing is growing



► **Above:** Emily Thacher Ayala focuses on foodies who want specialty crops, and want them fresh.

a product that helps the environment. Trees don't do any damage. They are artistic."

Finally, there is the niche occupied by Emily Thacher Ayala, who direct-markets all manner of citrus. "When the foodies arrived 10 years ago it really helped us. People are interested in exotic foods and want them fresh. That's what we do. Provide exactly what they want." ■