

Sustainable Landscape

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By [Chris Nichols](#)

News-Sentinel Staff Writer | 1 comment

Mighty oak trees once dotted the rolling hills outside this quiet south Sacramento County town, providing perches and nesting places for everything from owls to today's threatened Swainson hawks.

And while many of the oaks were cleared a century ago to make way for grape vines, one local vineyard manager has a plan to return the venerable trees to the landscape.

Robert Pirie, who has tended the vines at Clay Station Vineyard off Borden Road for more than a decade, plans to add roughly 50 oak trees to the vineyard property.

That will add to the 25 oaks Pirie's already planted along the edges and bare patches of the 1,200 acre vineyard. A neighbor hopes to plant about 50 additional oaks, all from a batch grown near Pirie's father-in-law, Stan Rall of Lodi.

"It's good for birds - owls and raptors - and fits right into that sustainability thing that Lodi is trying to do," Pirie said.

Aside from creating a home for wildlife, the trees "are just gorgeous," he noted, standing near a recently planted oak, tucked into a corner of the vineyard by a barbed-wire fence.

A healthy number of hawks and owls helps to cut down on rodents at the vineyard, and allows Pirie to forgo some harsher pesticides.

After mentioning his oak plans, Pirie said he was overwhelmed with his father-in-law's contributions.

"I was just going to get a few, and then he got to talking about how he wanted some oaks, so I just kept picking up more (acorns)," said Rall, a former Lodi fire marshal.

This is not the first time managers at Clay Station have committed themselves to environmental causes.

[A mighty but slow growing tree](#)

Robert Pirie, vineyard manager at Clay Station Vineyard, hopes to plant up to 50 oak trees among the company's grape vines. (Brian Feulner/News-Sentinel)

Several types of oak trees grow in the Central Valley and Sierra Nevada foothills. The fastest growing is the Valley oak, which can mature and provide wildlife habitat within about 20 years. Its limited to areas with a steady supply of water. Blue oaks are the most common oak trees in the foothills east of Galt and Lodi, but they are also among the slowest growing. They can take up to 50 or more years before they mature. Live oak trees are similarly slow growing, and are named because they keep their leaves year-round.

Source: John Buckley, executive director of the Twain Harte-based Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center.

The vineyard was among the first to join The Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing, an environmentally minded growing program.

Its operations are judged each year for their sensitivity to the soil, water and surrounding wildlife.

Outside, experts certify the vineyard as sustainable based on a comprehensive set of criteria.

Adding more oaks to the landscape was not a requirement of the Lodi Rules, but instead an extra step the vineyard took.

"Their willingness to do what they've done (as part of the Lodi Rules program), and now these extra things really speaks for itself," said Cliff Ohmart, the architect of the Lodi Rules for the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission.

Pirie and Rall realize their work won't pay off immediately. Their live and scrub oaks will take decades to mature, though the live oaks are among the fastest growing of the species.

Still, the two are happy to give something back to the hills east of Galt.

"Maybe this gets somebody else to do this," Rall said, from the scenic property, framed to the east by the Sierra Nevada mountains, and to the north by the decommissioned Rancho Seco Nuclear power plant.

"It's a simple thing to do," he added. "You could teach someone in a short time."