

Vegetables

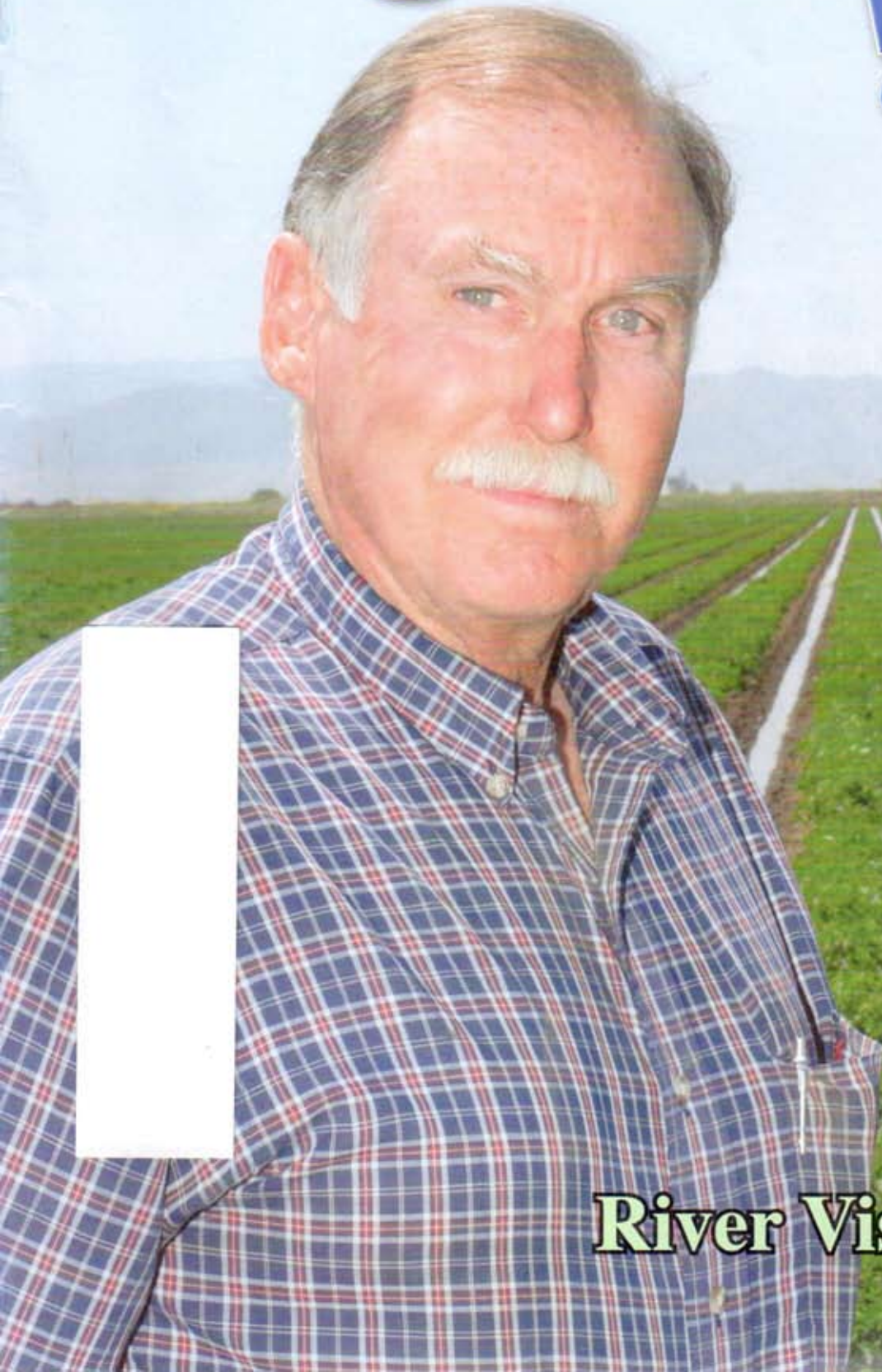
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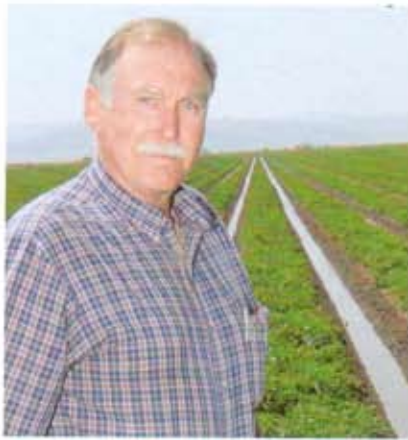
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River Vista Farms



About the Cover: *Woody Yerxa, owner of River Vista Farms stands in his processing tomato field in the Sacramento Valley.*

See story page 4

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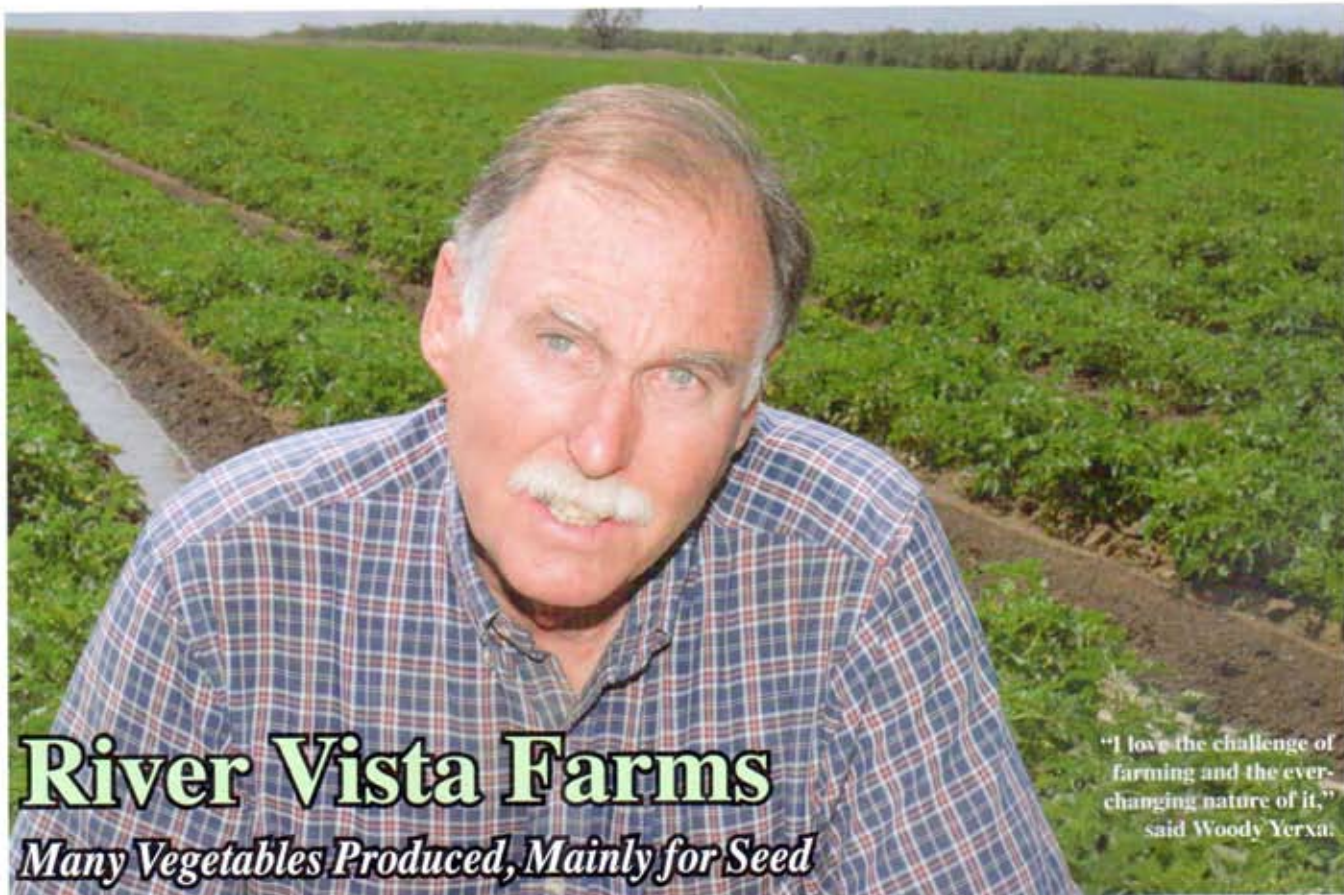
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River Vista Farms

Many Vegetables Produced, Mainly for Seed

"I love the challenge of farming and the ever-changing nature of it," said Woody Yerxa.

By Patrick Cavanaugh, Editor

On River Vista Farms, near Colusa, Calif., abundant, and quality water flows down the furrows of a processing tomato field. In the background, the sun silhouettes workers making sure the water gets uniformly across the field.

Keeping a close watch on the growth of the tomatoes is Woody Yerxa, a fourth generation California grower,

who farms 3,800 acres of many vegetables, along with almonds, walnuts, and prunes, along with other crops. "Water is abundant," said Yerxa. "We have great riparian rights, good ground water and our irrigation districts have excellent entitlements."

The operation spans the heart of the Sacramento Valley throughout Colusa County and over into Sutter County.

In many areas, especially while on top of levies, he has a grand view of the Sacramento River—thus the name of River Vista Farms.

It was Woody's great grandfather, Woodford Allen Yerxa who started farming prunes in Princeton, Calif., in Colusa County north of the Sacramento River. He was also one of the founders of Sunsweet, the major prune cooperative. However, excessive loans along with the hard-hitting Depression caused him to lose the farm. Woodford's son, Max, had been farming with him when they lost everything. Ironically, Max got back on his feet by working for the bank that took everything, and became the agricultural appraiser, and later even started farming again.

Max's son, Charles, is Woody's father. After Charles graduated from college he went into Officer's Training School and then into WWII. After the war he came home and began growing row crops such as tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons, and some wheat.

During several summer breaks from high school and college, Woody worked alongside his dad for a few years, driving



April 21 frost damage on tomato plants. Most fields did recover.

equipment, hoeing weeds, and pruning trees. He graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, with an agricultural business degree. Incidentally, a good education is part of the family tradition. Both his dad and mom (Virginia) graduated from UC Berkeley.

Woody started farming on his own around the late 1970s. His first crop was yellow squash for seeds. Woody and his father farmed under a partnership for several years, with Woody buying out his father in the late 1980s.

Woody gradually expanded the operations in growing more vegetable crops, along with walnuts and almonds, as well as wheat as a profitable rotation crop, field corn, alfalfa, sunflowers, and rice for seed.

"I also expanded the acreage of the vine seed operation which includes watermelons, cucumbers, cantaloupes, and squash," noted Woody. "We grow for seed in our region because the weather conditions are not conducive for the fresh market. We tend to be cooler and wetter in the springtime than the central and southern San Joaquin Valley and we cannot hit the fresh market window and make a profit.

Woody said the seed companies have been in the area since the 1940s and because of a hot and dry summer growing season, the area is void of viruses and other diseases, which provides a reliable supply of quality seed.

Because the seed production industry is so different, specialty equipment has been developed, such as windrowers, harvesters, and special seed washers and dryers. "I wash and dry the seeds and then deliver to the seed companies who will do the milling, packaging and sales," noted Woody, adding, "Everything is grown under contracts."

The biggest crop he produces is processing tomatoes—on about 1,300 acres. "The cannery industry is doing well with the current supply and demand in good balance," said Woody.

This year, some of River Vista's tomato fields were affected by an April 21 freeze. "It was the latest spring frost on record and most of fields seem to recover, however some early fields may take a cut in production," said Woody.

Normally, the operation has great processing tomato yields—among the highest in the state. "We have good

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Yerxa checks his crops, one part item of a long list of things to do each day.

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River Vista

(continued from page 5)

ground, good weather and excellent water quality," he said.

Enabling the diverse farming company to run efficiently are several dedicated workers. "They are tremendous and hard working people, and I owe all my success to them," said Woody.

"We have foremen for all the different crops with a lot of crossover from crops, so everyone is helping each other," Woody said. "Wherever we need people, we try to work as a unit--all going in the same direction.

He noted that a number of employees, such as irrigators and a hand labor crew live at the company's labor camp that was originally built in the early 1950s.

His wife, Kathy, takes care of the bookkeeping, workers comp, safety and pesticide reporting. "She does the work I don't like to do and allows me to stay in the field," said Woody.

His has and independent PCA, Kent Brocker, who handles River Vista farms' tomatoes, walnuts, almonds and prunes. He also has a PCA with Wilbur Ellis in Colusa, Mike Pettigrew, along with Woody, looks after the rest of the crops.

His main pest issue is tomato fruit worm, for which there are many good materials to use.

"My PCAs are very good at spotting beneficials in the crops," said Woody. "I've always said I'm willing to endure some short term damage in order to give the beneficials a chance to work," said Woody. "I've learned a lot over the years in terms of integrated pest management. (IPM).

"We do as much of our own ground spraying as we can," said Woody. "We can do a better job, and the cost factor is much less than calling in a custom applicator, or going aurally."

Every year we are planting vine seeds, based on contracts, which can change dramatically from year to year. And despite the fact they are not going to fresh market, the crops must be protected.

"We take the crops way past the time when they would normally be harvested and consumed. The cucumbers, for example, are harvested then ground up in the field, where the seed is extracted from them," said Woody. "The rest is left in the field.

One pesky item that puts a little added pressure on River Vista Farms is watergrass. "It's a big weed problem for us," Woody said. "There is a big reservoir of seeds in many fields in the area and it's difficult to eliminate. So we come in with Poast herbicide to take care of it.

"I love the challenge of farming and the ever-changing nature of it," said Woody. "You walk out the door with a plan of action and before 8am the plan is completely reconfigured." **W**

