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Eco-Ag

ECO FARM

Dry Farming: The Old Ways Meet the Future

The workshop on dry land farming, presented by Jim Leap of UCSC, Frank Leeds of Frog's Leap Winery, and David Little of Little Organic Farm was a revelation for me. I had heard of dry land farming for years but this listening to the wisdom and passion of these experienced growers made me rethink all that I know about agriculture.

The underlying principle of dry farming is water retention. By using the moisture accumulated in the soil during the winter months, it's possible to grow without a drop of water for an entire season. This is accomplished using tillage to prevent evaporation. The working of the soil lessens capillary action at the soils surface, keeping water below ground where it can be accessed by the roots. The tricky part is in the timing, Frank Leeds of Frog's Leap Winery said that if he didn't get the tractor stuck at least once in the spring then he wasn't getting into the fields early enough!

This method of farming is not new; indeed farmers have been using these methods for hundreds if not thousands of years. We tend to forget that widespread and efficient irrigation is a relatively new technology. These growing methods do not work everywhere. There are a few crucial variables to consider when dry farming.

- 1.) Mediterranean type climates are most conducive, with at least 20" of annual rainfall
- 2.) A deep soil with high clay content is important
- 3.) Choosing the right cultivars

With the right conditions, experience, and seed it's possible to grow tomatoes, potatoes, winter squash, dry beans, grains, and some perennial crops like grapes, apricots, and apples.

There are many positive aspects to farming without irrigation. Input savings, water savings, improved disease management, as well as improved taste are some of these advantages, though reduced yields are also a part of this type of growing. Dry farming requires experience and a unique understanding of the complex and miraculous natural systems at play in an agricultural setting. It was a pleasure to hear some of this wisdom at the conference, and to realize there are many ways to work with nature to grow and flourish.