

Norma and Darrell Cordova
Denair, Calif.

Products Raised or Grown: Almonds and row crops

Size of Operation: 800 acres

In Business Since: 1988

Farm Credit Partner: Yosemite Farm Credit

Working with Farm Credit Since: 1994



Norma (Brand) Cordova followed an unusual road to successfully become the next generation to manage **the Brand family's farm**. Now a 3rd generation farmer, Norma and her husband, Darrell Cordova, had spent 20 years as teachers when they were faced with the option of succeeding her parents in managing **the farm or letting it eventually be sold**. "It was a tough decision to leave teaching and come back to the farm," says Norma. "But we were looking at the future for the next generation." The Cordova's son, Trevor, is already working with them on the farm.

Although the Cordova family embraced the tradition of their 130-year-old family farm in Stanislaus County and 80 years in the current location, they haven't hesitated to also embrace new crops and new technologies. When they started in 1989, their 800-acre spread was primarily dry-land grain, with some pipe-irrigated blackeye beans. As the years went on, they recognized that almonds offered a better, more **lucrative opportunity, and in 2005 planted their first almond orchard**. They've since transitioned two more blocks of land – in 2008 and 2010 – for a total of 240 acres, all financed by Yosemite Farm Credit. Looking to diversify, they plan to shift 60 acres to walnuts in 2013, and anticipate transitioning their remaining land over time to the permanent tree crops. In the meantime, they use the land to grow two seasons of silage crops for nearby dairies.

As with any crop, growing almonds presents its own challenges. It takes three years before a tree is considered productive, eventually producing 4,000 pounds per acre. To help support optimal production, the Cordovas installed micro-sprinklers on their orchard land, a technology investment that reduces water use, enables more targeted irrigation, and can also be used to deliver fertilizer and other chemicals when and where needed. Also, the Cordovas practice minimal pruning which further increases almond yields.

Another aspect of almond growing has led the Cordovas to investigate an innovative development. Conventional almond trees require external pollination, and farmers use bees for the purpose, typically renting hives from beekeepers sometimes states away. The Cordovas have taken a slightly different approach, allowing a local beekeeper to house his hives on a portion of their land in exchange for a favorable rental rate. Despite this, though, the bees represent a significant input cost – orchards need 1 - 3 hives per acre and at \$150 per hive, the costs add up. Self-pollinating trees would eliminate the cost altogether, and the Cordovas planted their first such trees, developed by Zaiger's Inc., in 2010.

"This is the second year that they're in the ground, and we're pleased with the growth and the nut sets," Norma says. "It's very promising, and I think we're going to want to plant more in the future."