

WANT TO GROW HORTICULTURAL CROPS IN THE FOOTHILLS?

Here's a checklist to consider before you start.

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Do You Understand the Risks Associated With Your Crop?

Some of the high priced horticultural crops grown in the foothills are that way because the fruit is of high quality and develops excellent color and flavor. Some of the crops occupy unique market niches, i.e. foothill cherries are marketed after the Central Valley growers are finished and before Pacific northwest growers enter the market. The attractive prices are partially offset by weather hazards that can prevent consistent year to year crops. They include: spring snow, hail storms, rain during bloom, frost, disease outbreak or rain that ruins fruit just before harvest. Cold weather during bloom can prevent bees and other insects from pollination of the crop.

Is Your Land Suitable for the Crop?

Is your land properly zoned and located where the crop is likely to succeed? Is the parcel size large enough so you can economically grow the crop? Five, ten or twenty acre parcels offer opportunities to develop a hobby, but what will you do when the business outgrows the size of your parcel?

Zoning Check with 1) Realtor if you're buying property or 2) with county Planning Department to determine if property is zoned for agricultural use.

Location

Climate Land on ridge tops or on upper slopes of ridges is desirable because air drainage lets cold air drain away.

Elevation The growing season shortens as you go up in elevation. It may be adequate to highly desirable for some crops but others will not have a long enough season to properly mature. Frost, hail and snow create more risk for crop loss at higher elevations.

Slope Soil erosion can be very serious. Expensive structures may be needed to control water runoff.

Road Access Some private road easements restrict business development.

Labor Will it be available during the time period needed and in sufficient quantity to perform required tasks. Supervision and training will require large management inputs if the farming enterprise is unique or uncommon.

How Will You Sell the Crop Five Years From Now?

Marketing: Will the varieties you plant today be in demand in five years? Will high prices disappear because large acreage is being planted elsewhere in California? In other states? What about imports?

Retail: Does your property lend itself to roadside marketing? Do you want to commit the time necessary to market roadside? Can you compete with local established growers?

You may wish to contact the different grower's organizations in the county, such as Apple Hill Growers (P.O.Box 494, Camino, CA 95709), El Dorado Farm Trails Association (621 4772) and El Dorado County Certified Farmer's Market (621 4772 or 622 6217).

Wholesale: Identify wholesale outlets before you plant. Find out which varieties are desirable to wholesalers and produce unique quality fruit under foothill conditions. Can you make a profit after the wholesaler deducts his commission?

Winegrapes: If you are interested in growing wine grapes, work closely with a winery. (El Dorado County Winery Association, (P.O.Box 1614, Placerville, CA 95667, 642 9717). Discuss varieties and arrange for a contract whenever possible before you plant. Right now there is a great interest in Rhone and Italian wine grape varieties. Varieties that looked good five to ten years ago (which now can't be marketed at desirable prices) are being grafted to these varieties. What will the wine market accept (demand) five years from now when you are in full production?. The wine business is international. Well-made, low-priced imports can take a market share from California wines unless our wines are competitively priced. Plant enough acreage of one variety to be of interest to a winery otherwise the grapes will be mixed with other varieties to produce a low-priced generic wine.

Site Development

When you have completed your homework, found a market, identified marketable varieties, located land with desirable climate, access, parcel size, and recognize there may not be a market for what you plant when it matures, then is the time to evaluate the site very carefully.

The Neighbors – Will Your Operation Fit the Neighborhood?

Before you develop, are there any restrictions on the road which gives you access to your property? Private roads put in by developers may have deed restrictions. In one case a Christmas tree grower located on a private road was denied access for a choose and cut ranch marketing operation by neighbors. Does your parcel have many small rural home sites around it? Agricultural operations give off dust, noise and odors that may be objectionable to a close neighbor, e.g., the court ruled in one case that cow bells were to be removed because they disturbed a neighbor's sleep and/or peace and quiet. The more close neighbors you have, the more likely one will object.

Hedges or wind breaks may be required to screen your operation from neighbors. Greenhouses and packing sheds are not necessarily nice to look at. Is the property large enough or located so neighbors can be screened?

Deer and Other Varmints

Deer fencing is required for most horticultural crops in rural areas. Rabbits, gophers and birds can also do significant damage.

Clearing the Land

The State Board of Forestry has jurisdiction over all foothill lands that grow conifer trees and/or Black oak which is considered a commercial species. Contact your local CDF Forester to see if a land clearing permit is required. There is no guarantee that the Board of Forestry will permit clearing of your parcel.

Soil

Check for adequate depth, water holding capacity, and drainage. Check the county soils map. Hire a backhoe and dig holes to check soil depth, drainage, etc. to verify the soils map is correct.

Water

Five gallons per minute from a well may be great for your home site, fill your hot tub, and help establish young trees and vines. It will not be enough to irrigate trees and vines on a sustainable year to year basis. Many fruit crops will not size properly without supplemental irrigation. You can also pump the well dry after a period of usage. Pumping costs may be prohibitive. PG&E can help you develop estimated costs for pumping water.

Water Required Varies with Elevation:

Property Elevation	Inches per Season (orchard with groundcover)	
1000 – 1500	49 inches	Add 10–15% for south, southwest slopes. Subtract 10–15% for north, northeast slopes.
1500 – 2000	44 inches	
2000 – 2500	39 inches	Add 25–30% for extra heavy cover crop. Add 20–30% to all irrigations to account for system losses and inefficiencies.
2500 – 3000	36 inches	
3000 – 3500	33 inches	
3500 – 4000	31 inches	

12 inches = 1 acre foot = the amount of water required to cover an acre of land one foot deep = 325,848 gallons of water/acre.

Note: Most foothill soils store 1.5 to 2 inches of water per foot from winter rainfall. This water and any rainfall during summer should be subtracted when calculating irrigation needs.

Investment Value – Long and Short Term

What happens when you can no longer take care of the crop? Will the next generation take over.? Will you need to sell? What about estate taxes?

Markets change over time. Varieties planted today may not be desirable in ten to twenty years. Who's going to make the investments needed to bring things up to date? Replant?

Selling Out

Many horticultural crop operations succeed because of the dedicated work and long hours put in by the boss. Resale is very difficult because many people with the capital to buy the operation are of retirement age and few will be willing to devote the hours necessary to keep the operation going. The next owner may put a negative value on your crop. They may wish to pull and plant another crop or put the land into, pasture.

Now that you and your significant other and your banker have worked your way through this checklist, sit down and discuss how hard you want to work for the next several years since many unforeseen problems will develop that are not addressed here. Better yet, work one cropping season with someone that grows the crop you plan to sell to see if you want to devote your life to it.

Finally, if you want to go ahead, order and read reference publications that are available for your crop. The University of California publications catalog available from our office lists publications developed by U.C.'s Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The U.C. Davis bookstore is another excellent source of information.