

Calistoga Tribune

Friday, June 18, 2010

Independently owned and published in Calistoga for Calistogans since 2002

50¢

Well-stocked mountain home



Suzanne Pasky Fouts looks out over the 340 acres of Mountain Home Ranch, a treasure that she and husband John are guarding for generations to come through a dedication to sustainability. Below, pet goat Willy, a familiar figure at Mountain Home Ranch, munches on fresh hay.

PHOTOS BY MICHELLE WING

High atop the Mayacamas ridge, couple practice eco-stewardship

By Michelle Wing

Tribune Staff Writer

Mountain Home Ranch's 340 acres is a little slice of heaven — and the Fouts intend to keep it that way for future generations, with serious dedication to eco-stewardship.

Sitting atop the Sonoma/Napa County ridgeline, Mountain Home Ranch's rambling property contains old-growth redwoods, miles of trails, an 11-acre foot lake, and stunning views. The ranch itself has been in the family for 100 years, homesteaded by John Fouts' grandparents in 1913. John Fouts and Suzanne Pasky Fouts took over ownership 15 years ago, and the rustic resort now serves primarily as a group retreat center, although bed and breakfast accommodations are also available.

What sets this place apart, though, is the Fouts' commitment to leaving the land in even better shape than they found it, through environmental practices, animal husbandry, agriculture, and sound energy use.

Pasky Fouts spent a year studying permaculture at the Regenerative Design Institute of Northern California in Bolinas. Permaculture is sustainable agriculture that renews natural resources and enriches local ecosystems. She brought what she learned back to Mountain Home Ranch, and put it into practice.

The ranch has "mountain" in its name for a reason. Its hilly terrain is a challenge for a gardener. So Pasky Fouts has turned every little available nook and cranny of flat space into a garden. "We try to grow as much as we can on the

land."

These are not your neatly lined gardens; these are disheveled jungles of plants, flowers mixed in with vegetables, mixed in among fruit trees. But it's not at all meaningless, Pasky Fouts explains. Having a wide variety of plants draws in insects, and increases the success of each type, while eliminating the need for insecticides, which usually protect monocrops.

Pasky Fouts has learned many lessons along the way. Planting rows of vegetables in front of a huge blackberry bush, she found that the further away she got, the poorer the plants fared. She discovered that it was because of the high intensity of pollination provided by the bees in the blackberry bush. The next year, she planted in a circle around the bush, and had much better success.

Pots of herbs are planted outside the kitchen door. Plants are often dual purpose, both edible and attractive. Fruit trees are scattered about everywhere. Pasky Fouts and the ranch cooks make jam, can, and freeze the fruits. "Anything left goes to the animals," she said.

A new project this year is growing mushrooms on logs. They just successfully harvested their first shiitake crop.

Instead of digging trenches to shunt off winter rainwater, Pasky Fouts built berms to catch the runoff. The resultant pools of standing water soak back into the earth, recharging the ground water and keeping the nearby creeks running year round. It also eliminated erosion problems, and as a bonus, collected rich, loamy topsoil,



which she was able to load into wheelbarrows and transport to other rockier locations of the ranch to create garden beds.

The ranch relies on rainwater catchment, using lake water for irrigation, and drip systems. They hope to add a greywater component to the loop, once approved by the county.

Fertilizer is provided by three horses, two cows, two sheep and two goats. The horses roam free, keeping weeds and underbrush in control. And that wonderful manure, added to the topsoil, cre-

ates still more land for gardening. The animals, Pasky Fouts said, with the exception of the horses, are all rescue. There are also a number of feral cats who provide mouse control, and hens and chickens who supply fresh eggs for their guests.

"I call myself a petatarian," Pasky Fouts laughed. "I don't eat anything that has been a pet."

The animals have been a big draw for guests, especially children, many of whom have never really made the connection between a cow and the cellophane-wrapped package in the grocery store. "We go through 100 pounds of carrots on any given weekend," Pasky Fouts said, noting that many of the kids end up becoming vegetarians. "That's not our goal, but..."

The ranch also has a wood gas-

ification system, a high-efficiency/low-emission wood burning stove used to heat the pool. The Fouts use dead trees from their property to fuel to stove.

Other efforts include insulating the interior of cabins with wood saved from neighbors' homes and barns, trading in all of the ranch vehicles for hybrids (except the big truck, which uses biodiesel), replacing all the old appliances with energy-efficient models, using only environmentally friendly cleaning supplies, and actively recycling or reusing everything possible.

"We're only here for about 100 years," Pasky Fouts said. "I want the next generation that comes to be able to enjoy the land."

For more information about Mountain Home Ranch, go to www.mountainhomeranch.com.



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE WING

Suzanne Pasky Fouts (above left) sniffs calendula in one of Mountain Home Ranch's many gardens. (Top right) Cabins are being insulated with pine boards salvaged from neighbors' old homes and barns. (Bottom right) Comara, in the rear, and Sprite, the bay, provide weeding services, and free fertilizer.