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PENINSULA

AND THE BAY AREA

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Photos by FREDERIC LARSON / The Chronicle

David Blume (center) runs Our Farm with the help of interns, such as Ariel Solomon.

Urban uprooting

Small farm priced out of Woodside location

By Michael McCabe
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On a steep south-facing slope in Woodside, one of the last working farms on the east side of San Mateo County's coastal range is about to pull up stakes.

Like farmers in general, the main farmer here, David Blume, is apprehensive about forces beyond his control. He sees his predicament as another example of rising real estate prices driving out the last vestiges of a time when the county was in touch with its roots.

All of the fruit and vegetables at the Woodside nonprofit farm are organically grown.

"Something is amiss when we can't keep farms close to the city," Blume said as he bent down to admire a particularly nice row of newly planted beans. "There is basically a spiritual component there that is lacking when the source of sustenance is not within your viewshed. It leads kids to thinking, for example, that milk comes from factories. Everything is abstract, computer-generated, now."

The focus of Blume's affection is called Our Farm, a "community-supported agriculture" project. Such enterprises hark back to farming styles practiced for hundreds of years in Europe and Japan, but they are relatively new in a nation dominated by corporate farms. The nonprofit operation produces organically grown vegetables and fruits, many of them hard to find, for "sharers" — customers from around the Bay Area who pay up front.

A few weeks ago, Blume said, he received notice from his landlady that rent for the two-acre parcel was going up and that maybe he should move on. He pays $1,800 a month — a bargain in Woodside, especially considering that the plot includes a house on the land where Blume and three interns live. He expects the property could be rented for as much as $4,000 a month, probably by people who want to board horses.

"The irony is that after eight years here,

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Blume hopes to move his Woodside operation to another nonprofit's Half Moon Bay location.

Small farm finds price too steep in Woodside

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this is finally the year we got everything together and the soil is at its peak. And now it's time to go," said Blume, 45, as he watched several interns harvesting the week's crop. "It's another tale of gloom from Silicon Valley."

If you talk to the amiable Blume for more than five minutes, however, you learn that Our Farm is about a lot more than just growing tasty food on a slope in Woodside. It almost borders on a crusade to educate people about the importance of small farms and the value of being connected to the land.

So being told to disconnect comes as somewhat of a shock, he said, even though he knew it probably would all come to an end some day.

Community-supported agriculture operations sell directly to fresh-food addicts. Our Farm's customers pay a monthly fee for their veggies — all of them pesticide-free and varied according to the season — and then pick it up at the farm or at weekly distribution points in San Francisco and the East Bay.

Our Farm's customers pay between $21 and $29 a week, depending on how much food they order, and receive their produce at or near the cost of production, Blume said.

During the year, Our Farm grows at least 45 kinds of fruits and vegetables. The underlying philosophy of Our Farm is "permaculture" — a name that combines the words permanent and agriculture — whose aim is to integrate plants, animals, landscapes, structures and humans into symbiotic systems, where the products of one serve the needs of another.

A permaculture design, Blume said, teaches you to understand and mirror the patterns found in healthy natural environments. The idea is to work with nature to create permanent agriculture by incorporating sustainable living skills into daily life.

Blume's landlady, San Diego attorney Gloria McLean, didn't want to discuss the farm's likely demise.

"I believe that it is a matter of his privacy," McLean said. "It is a gorgeous piece of property — I used to live there. But I have not decided what I will do with the property."

Blume expects the overall operation to survive because he also oversees a smaller one-acre farm in Los Altos. He is also hopeful that a tentative plan to move to Half Moon Bay will work out.

That plan would involve teaming up with the nonprofit Wildlife Associates, which houses birds, mammals, reptiles and other creatures on its 120 acres for educational purposes. The group brings its animals — a porcupine, a golden eagle, a bobcat, to name a few — into classrooms to place students face to face with true wildlife, not just the kind seen on television or computer games.

"We heard about David's plight, and I contacted him and said, 'Hey, let's talk,' " said Steve Karlin, founder and director of Wildlife Associates. "I believe sustainable agriculture is extremely important to society, and it goes along with what we are trying to teach children, to care for living things and understand the systems that support life."

Karlin said negotiations are in the early stages and there is no guarantee that the two groups will find a way to merge.

But Blume is hopeful. If it works, he believes Our Farm will gain a new lease on life.

"It is truly amazing how much work we've put into these precious two acres," Blume said. "At least 10,000 wheelbarrows full of horse manure compost, for example. We'll leave most of this excellent land to whoever takes it over."

There is one thing, however, that he is going to carry with him from Our Farm.

"We do plan to take as many earthworms as we can," he said. "We hope to be able to dig up at least hundreds of pounds of them — worms are more valuable than the vegetables. Now that's real farming."

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