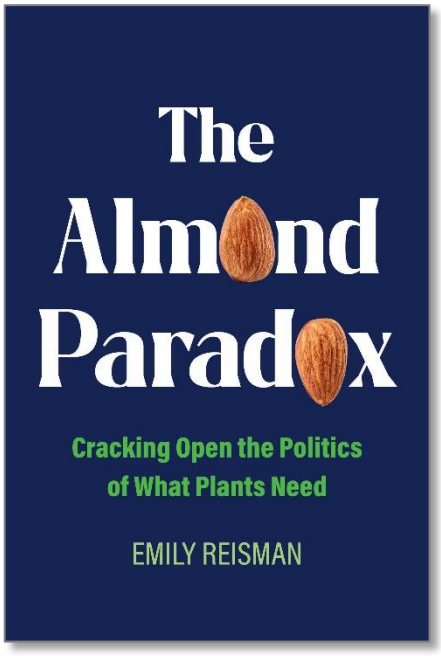
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Agricultural knowledge, place, and production in *The Almond Paradox*

Book review by
Stacey F. Stearns *
University of Connecticut Extension



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Almonds are a controversial crop in the U.S.; many decry the trees' thirst in water-stressed California, where most global almond production occurs (Gonzales, 2015; Palmer et al., 2024; Pollan, 2007; Reisman, 2019). But this is only part of the story. Emily Reisman examines how different agricultural, political, place, and environmental contexts shape our understanding of what almond trees "need," comparing intensive almond production in California with Spain's traditional rainfed systems in her 2025 book, *The Almond Paradox: Cracking Open the Politics of What Plants Need.*

Dramatic increases in almond production have also led to steady, higher demand for the product, fueled by marketing investments from the grower association. Almonds are no longer a seasonal holiday food and instead are eaten year-round with many uses. These market demands have shaped almonds as a major agricultural crop in California's Central Valley, creating new challenges for food and environmental systems.

The comparative framework between the U.S. and Spain outlines opposite approaches to water use, pollination, and environmental sustainability as the book delves ever deeper into why agricultural decision-making matters and the impacts those

* Stacey Stearns is a communications specialist with UConn Extension. Her interests include food systems and resilience, agritourism, communicating research for public audiences, community-based education, and the ways effective communication can support positive change in agricultural and rural communities. Stearns maintains strong ties to agriculture through her family's dairy farm. She can be contacted at stacey.stearns@uconn.edu;
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4711-7244

decisions have on the entire food system. As Reisman explains,

> Rainfed growers relying on almonds to fill a niche in a more complex landscape and livelihood prioritize resilience. Their practices are rooted in pragmatism. Capitalist agronomic knowledge strives to identify every possible deficit or stress but remains unable to see a plant's strengths. Given the right social conditions, a plant notorious for being thirsty can just as easily be championed for its thrift. (p. 73)

Using the premise that almonds are not inherently "thirsty" or pollinator-dependent, Reisman offers a compelling examination of how agricultural knowledge is constructed, challenging assumptions about almond production while raising important questions about sustainability, science, and political economy. She addresses such key themes as political ecology, agriculture knowledge production, capitalism and food systems, environmental sustainability, and the relationship between science and policy. As she summarizes,

> How much water almonds "need" is less a function of flows through plant tissues than flows of capital. The upward creep of the crop water requirement demonstrates how a seemingly stable agronomic fact is in reality a reflection of increasingly intensive practices designed to maximize returns. (p.72)

Pollination is another example of an agronomic fact being shaped by the place and production system. Reisman and Pollan (2007) explain that California imports bees from all over the U.S. and overseas each February to pollinate almond trees. The impacts include disrupting the bees' seasonal cycle, introducing parasites and pathogens into their hives, and increasing the environmental load as hives are hauled in each year. The beekeepers become economically tied to almond production as a source of income. In Spain, on the other hand, almond orchards are able to rely on native pollinators and local beekeepers.

Capital flow shapes production practices and is influenced by agribusiness partners and university funding priorities, among others. One challenge Reisman cites is that science uses "values-neutral language." Researchers and extension professionals may also understand the environmental harms of the unsustainable practices in almond production, but their position is complex when the system prioritizes maximizing production over environmental sustainability or other factors. Those creating and disseminating agricultural knowledge have a huge influence on what our agricultural systems have become and is one area where change can begin.

Throughout the book, Reisman challenges assumptions about almond production and demonstrates how agricultural "facts" are shaped by place and context to encourage readers to examine other crops and agricultural facts; the almond is just one example. Reisman shows how the food system is interconnected and connects to current debates about climate resilience, water management, and agricultural sustainability, encouraging readers to examine the food system as a whole, using the almond as the example that the status quo is not necessarily the only solution.

While Reisman contrasts the systems, she does not point to Spain's practices as the ideal solution. There, almonds were traditionally grown as an income diversification strategy on land unsuitable for other crops. Over time, Spain has started incorporating the same intense production practices seen in California. Reisman challenges readers to rethink the food system so that values-based decisions are used in crop production instead of capitalist-based decisions. Academic and other institutions now face more pressure to prioritize sustainability efforts instead of just farm profitability. "Fundamentally, a better future requires a political economic system that favors agricultural forms serving societal needs rather than squeezing farmers between high costs and low prices such that productivism is the only path" (p. 125). A path forward could allow a crop like rainfed almonds in Spain to remain in the margins; Reisman emphasizes the benefits of place-based knowledge and agricultural practices as a path toward greater sustainability.

In *The Almond Paradox*, Reisman echoes many of the concerns raised by Michael Pollan (2007) in his critique of industrialized food systems. Both authors challenge assumptions about efficiency, present the influence of economic and political forces on agriculture, and argue that modern food production often becomes ecologically vulnerable when it prioritizes standardization and growth over local environmental conditions.

The in-depth analysis of the almond paradox expands the agricultural sustainability discussion beyond resource-use metrics and encourages readers to consider how knowledge is created and normalized. This has implications for university research, the Cooperative Extension System, and policy development. Readers and food systems leaders are urged to question assumptions about best management practices using a place-based and values-based perspective. This in turn connects the broader issues facing society, including water scarcity, food systems resilience, and global agricultural development. The larger question still to be answered is defining sustainable agriculture practices so that the word "sustainable" is less opaque and, as Pollan (2007) warns, the current solutions do not become future problems.

Ultimately, *The Almond Paradox* demonstrates that agricultural systems are shaped not only by biology and ecology but also by history, economics, politics, and culture. By revealing how ideas about what plants "need" are shaped as much by social systems as by biological realities, Reisman offers a thought-provoking contribution to contemporary discussions of agriculture and sustainability.

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