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Obituary: Russell Lester

Express staff
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White lily stock image
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January 27, 1954 – September 22, 2025

Russ Lester — organic farming pioneer, environmental advocate, school board leader, beloved husband, father, grandfather, brother, uncle and lifelong steward of the land — passed away peacefully at home in Winters, California. He was 71.

Born on Jan. 27, 1954, in San Jose, California — in what was then known as the Valley of the Heart's Delight — Russ came from a long line of California farmers. His ancestors journeyed west during the Gold Rush, but quickly traded pickaxes for plows, first farming wheat in Napa before settling in the Santa Clara Valley in 1889. There, they cultivated stone fruit and truck crops for four generations. For the Lester family, agriculture wasn't just a profession, it was a way of life.



Russ Lester
Courtesy photo

Russ's early years were filled with growing apricots, prunes and farm life in the Santa Clara Valley, working side by side with his parents, Hazel Barnes Lester and William Walter Lester II, and his siblings Stanley "Stan" Lester, Marie (Lester) Adams, William "Bill" Lester III, and George Lester. It was a childhood that shaped not just his career, but his convictions.

Russ attended UC Davis, where he studied botany, played water polo and — more importantly — met the love of his life, Kathy, who would be his partner in family, farming, and community for over five decades. The two settled in Winters, where they raised five daughters Sarah, Jenny, Christine, Amy, and Summer — and became anchors of the local community.

Russ was a trailblazer in organic walnut farming and processing, widely recognized for his systems-based approach to agriculture and leadership in Integrated Pest Management (IPM), water conservation, and healthy soils. He helped launch the CAFF BIOS project, developed a cover crop mix for walnut orchards, designed a novel irrigation system, advocated for sustainable practices before they were mainstream, and pushed for science-based, farmer-driven innovation. He never stopped tinkering, experimenting, and reinventing what farming could look like.

Russ set bold goals — and met them. Among his many achievements: making his farm carbon negative through innovative farming practices and pioneering renewable energy, utilizing walnut shells to power his operation. For this work, he was honored twice with the Governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Award, as well as the EPA Sustainable Agriculture Champion, NRDC's Growing Green Award, CAFF's Legacy Farmer of the Year, the Sustie Award from EcoFarm, and the IPM Innovator Award from the State of California. Russ changed not only how we farm, but the laws and systems that support it.

Russ also welcomed the opportunity to teach others what he knew — and loved — about farming. He felt that the best way to advance sustainable agriculture was by partnering with researchers, trying new practices, and then sharing them with anyone who was interested in learning new and innovative ways of farming. Russ probably hosted over a thousand field days on the farm.

Additionally, Russ served on the Solano Land Trust, Solano County Agricultural Advisory Council, CalCAN Advisory Council, the California Leadership Council for American Farmland Trust and many other advisory committees. He was also a proud graduate of Class 30 of the California Agricultural Leadership Program, a formative experience that deepened his commitment to servant leadership and agricultural stewardship. Of all his accomplishments, he was most proud of securing a conservation easement on two of his ranches, ensuring it would remain in agriculture forever.

In Winters, Russ was a community champion — literally helping to build and later rebuild the town's wooden park, serving for over 20 years on the Winters JUSD School Board, including time as President and Acting Superintendent, and most recently on the board of the Winters Education Foundation. In 2024, he was inducted into the Winters JUSD Hall of Fame.

Though Russ traveled the world promoting organic walnuts, his favorite places were always home on the farm and time spent in Yosemite, where he could soak in the beauty of the natural world he worked so hard to protect.

He loved the 49ers, spirited debates about politics or the environment, and the joy of seeing his grandchildren — Guillermo, Maddie, and Ezequiel — grow up. He rarely threw anything away, because he always believed it could be fixed, repurposed, or improved — just like farming itself.

Russ is survived by his beloved wife Kathy, daughters Sarah Lester Guzman, Jenny Lester Moffitt, Christine (Lester) Ashley, and Summer Lester, their husbands and families, siblings Stan and George, and many cherished nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends. He is preceded in death by his parents, siblings Bill and Marie, and daughter Amy.

Russ Lester was, at his core, a stubborn farmer with a big heart and a brilliant mind, a visionary with his hands in the soil, and a man who believed in taking care of the land and the people who worked it. His legacy lives on in every tree he planted, every practice he pioneered, and every person he inspired.

In lieu of flowers, Russ would want you to support the causes he believed in. Donations in his honor may be made to:

*CAFF – Community Alliance with Family Farmers

*CalCAN – California Climate and Agriculture Network

*Solano Land Trust

*Winters Education Foundation

*Yosemite Conservancy

A celebration of Russ's life will be held on Oct. 18 from 2 to 4 p.m. at Dixon Ridge Farms. All are welcome.