

Why Beginning Farmers?

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Farming is hard. It's hot, dirty, and sweaty. In other words, farming is sexy!

You are probably aware of the public's increasing interest in agriculture. Just look at the rise of farmers' markets, restaurants highlighting local ingredients and markets highlighting local products, field trips to farms and volunteering at farms, school gardens, and the coverage of local farmers in magazines and other media. Farming may have been more common in the past, but it has never been sexier!

Unfortunately, this popularity has not translated into more farmers. Indeed, despite the upward trend in interest in agriculture, the USDA census shows that the opposite is happening.

Comparing 2012 versus 2007:

- Number of farms decreased by 6.9%
- The percent of principal farm operators 55 years and older rose by 6.7%
- The average age of principal farm operators increase by 1.8 years (to 60.4)
- The number of new principal operators decreased by 53.8% (principal farm operators, 4 years or less).

This last statistic is most troubling—it suggests that fewer people are choosing to become farmers, regardless of age.

The importance of agriculture to Hawaii goes beyond its economic contribution. Beside the fact that it addresses our unique food insecurity, it is an industry that is: important to our visitor industry for its preservation of green spaces and compatibility with visitor interests; compatible with and desired by rural communities; culturally relevant to many Native Hawaiians; and attractive to a growing number of Hawaii residents.

In recognition of the importance of agriculture and as a reflection of the current interest, we have seen a number of supportive initiatives -- from government purchases of agricultural land, to processing facilities, to the multitude of new market channels to distribute and sell local agricultural products. All of these, however, depend on having more, and more productive, farmers.

Immigrants continue to be a valuable source of farmers, and we certainly need to support the viability and growth of existing farmers, but how do we leverage the current interest in farming to develop more farmers for Hawaii? How do we take advantage of this unique opportunity?

Beginning farmer training programs are an obvious means to transform those with an interest in farming into productive farmers. Consider that, unlike just a couple of generations ago, most of the people who are interested in farming have no experience or connections to farming. Since farming is a risky endeavor that requires a tremendous breadth of knowledge, skills, and

experience, hands-on training is critical if we are to expect any of these aspiring farmers to make the commitment to farming and have a chance at success.

Even with training, will all the trainees become viable production farmers? No. Should we then do nothing? Treat this interest as a passing fad? Minimize the value of the interested-but-inexperienced as misguided, misinformed romantics? Also, No... not if we value the continuation of agriculture in Hawaii. “Real” farmers, as defined by some in the industry, may produce many, many times the output of these nascent farmers, but *some* of these new farmers will grow into mid-sized farmers (after all, isn’t that where most of the “real” farmers started?) and, in aggregate, even part-time farmers produce a significant amount of food for our State. Importantly, they also play a significant role in agriculture’s contribution to our State beyond the economy and food supply.

A number of beginning farmer training programs have arisen in response to the need for developing new farmers for Hawaii. Here is a listing of the programs that we are aware of:

Hawai‘i

- The Kohala Center: Beginning Farmer Rancher Development Program – non-credit
 - <http://kohalacenter.org/farmertraining>
- HIP Agriculture: Living Farm Internship – non-credit
 - <http://hipagriculture.org/education/internship>
- La‘akea Community: Internship Programs – non-credit
 - <http://permaculture-hawaii.com/residential/internships/>
- UH, Hawai‘i Community College: Agriculture – for-credit
 - <http://hawaii.hawaii.edu/agriculture/>
- UH Hilo: CAFNRM – for-credit
 - <http://hilo.hawaii.edu/academics/cafnrm/>

Kaua‘i

- UH: GoFarm Hawai‘i – non-credit, at Kaua‘i Community College
 - <http://www.gofarmhawaii.org/kauai>
- UH, Kaua‘i Community College: Plant Biology and Tropical Agriculture – for-credit
 - <https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/natural-science/plant-biology-tropical-agriculture-as>

Maui

- UH: GoFarm Hawai‘i – for-credit, at UH Maui College
 - <http://www.gofarmhawaii.org/maui>
- HFUU Haleakala Chapter: Farm Apprentice Mentoring program – non-credit
 - <http://www.mauifarmershaleakala.com/farm-apprentice-mentoring-fam-program/>
- UH Maui College: Agriculture and Natural Resources – for-credit
 - <http://maui.hawaii.edu/ag/>
- S.E.E: SAS Professional Farmer Training Programs – non-credit
 - <http://www.seefarm.org/#!/blank/c1yww>

O'ahu

- UH: GoFarm Hawai'i – non-credit, at Windward and Leeward Community Colleges, and advanced phases at CTAHR's Waimanalo Agricultural Experiment Station
 - <http://www.gofarmhawaii.org/windward>
 - <http://www.gofarmhawaii.org/leeward>
- Pacific Gateway Center: Kunia Agricultural Incubator – non-credit (unsure if active)
 - <http://www.pacificgatewaycenter.org/kunia-agricultural-incubator.html>
- Wahiawa CBDO: Wahiawa Farmer Development Program – non-credit
 - <http://www.wahiawacbdo.org/farmerprogram>
- UH, Leeward CC: Plant Biology and Tropical Agriculture – for-credit
 - <http://www.leeward.hawaii.edu/pbt>
- UH, CTAHR: Sustainable and Organic Agriculture Program – for-credit
 - <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/sustainag/student.html>