

Program Trains Farmworkers To Be Organic Farmers

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SALINAS, Calif. (AP) — Bending over beds of shriveled strawberry plants, former farmworker Domitila Martinez pulls pieces of black plastic row covers in preparation for next season's planting. Except this time, she's the boss.

Martinez, who escaped the civil war in El Salvador three decades ago, used to pack tomatoes and harvest grapes for long hours and little pay in Central California. Then, one day, she heard an announcement on the radio: She could become a grower herself.

She enrolled in a small farmer education program in Salinas that trains farmworkers to establish and manage organic farms. Today, she grows four acres of organic strawberries in the Salinas Valley and sells them to Whole Foods markets.

"I really like being out here working," Martinez said, "because I'm working for myself."

The Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, known as ALBA, helps bring minority, low-income farmworkers into a profession long dominated by Anglos. Since the program started in 2001, it has created more than 80 small farm businesses.

With demand for locally grown and organic food skyrocketing, more people have become interested in farming in recent years, spurting a growth in farmer training programs.

But few programs focus on immigrants, especially Latinos, who historically have had difficulty making it as farmers because of language and cultural barriers, lack of resources, and lack of government support.

While the number of Hispanic farmers grew by 14 percent over the past five years, according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, significantly outpacing the increase in U.S. farm operators overall, Hispanic farmers comprise only 2.5 percent of all farm operators.

ALBA gives farmworkers, most of whom are first generation Latino immigrants, the opportunity to move up the job ladder, teaching them crop planning, production, marketing and distribution skills.

"A lot of farmworkers are working tirelessly to invest in their children's futures, but ALBA gives them the opportunity to improve their lives within their lifetime," said program manager Nathan Harkleroad.

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Other programs include Oregon-based nonprofit Adelante Mujeres, which offers a 12 week Spanish-language sustainable farming class, as well as access to land, technical assistance and a farmers market; and the Center For Latino Farmers in Washington state, which conducts workshops, provides resources and other assistance.

At ALBA's 90-acre ranch in the Salinas Valley, an area known as "the Salad Bowl of the World," participants attend bi-weekly classes during six-months of intensive training. They learn about pests and planting, beneficial insects and cover crops. They meet with guest speakers ranging from local farmers to university biologists. They visit irrigation supply stores, compost suppliers, farms and farmers markets.

"The idea is that the participants know how to access things, and that they develop relationships," Harkleroad said.

This year, the program added a three-month apprenticeship during which participants grow and sell crops as a class. Aspiring farmers then present a business plan. They fill out food safety and organic certification paperwork. And while most are farmworkers, a few spots are open to other aspiring farmers — the training is accredited by Hartnell College in Salinas.

ALBA also offers a farm incubator program, allowing newly minted farmers to lease the organization's farmland for up to six years — with access to tractors, equipment, irrigation and other support for a reduced fee.

And it runs a licensed wholesale distribution program called ALBA Organics, helping the new farmers with storage, marketing and distribution. It sells to stores and institutions such as Google, Trader Joe's, University of California at Santa Cruz, and Stanford University housing cooperatives. In fiscal year 2012, ALBA Organics brought in sales of \$4.5 million.

For Martinez, who graduated from the program a decade ago, assistance in finding land and the use of equipment proved crucial.

"This program gave me the ability to start farming on my own," said Martinez. "When you're starting out, you have no money for tractors or other things."

The 60-year old Martinez now employs four people during harvest season and others throughout the year — but still does the bulk of the labor herself. She started out by selling her strawberries door to door, but later contracted with Whole Foods stores in the San Francisco Bay area and the central coast.

Farmworkers say ALBA's other benefits include reduced exposure to dangerous chemicals in the fields.

"We learn how to work with nature and how not to hurt the environment and the workers," said Andres Garcia Rico, who works in large scale agriculture and completed the training this fall with his wife. "There are so many people dying of

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cancer, getting sick because of pesticides."

Small scale farming also offers a break from the repetitive motions that farmworkers perform all day on conventional farms. ALBA farmers grow up to 60 varieties of fresh produce — so their work varies throughout the day.

And organic farming rubs off on the family's dietary habits, Rico said. His three daughters helped plant and harvest the vegetables this summer — and were more than happy to eat them for dinner.

As ALBA farmers promote and sell their organic produce to friends and at area farmers' markets, those benefits expand, Rico said, resulting in more Latinos turning to organics.

Perhaps the biggest benefit at ALBA is the sense of community. On a recent November morning at the sprawling ranch, families tilled and weeded their plots and children rode bicycles on dirt paths. The farmers, ranging from very experienced to those just starting out, greeted each other and exchanged advice.

This winter, about 50 will be farming at the ranch, including 16 new farmers. For most, Harkleroad said, it takes a few years to go into farming full time. Usually, two to three acres can generate a full time living.

In January, Rico and his wife will plant romaine lettuce and cauliflower, followed by an array of other vegetables.

"It's going to be a challenge, but we're doing it for us and for our children," Rico said. "Our dream is to have our own ranch someday."

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