

Featured Farmer: Chris Robb Robb Farms, Waimea, Hawai'i

Area under production: 14 acres

Years farming in Hawai'i: 30 years growing various crops: roses, orchids, coffee, and vegetables. I was a Horticulturist with MacFarms of Hawai'i.

Crops grown, products/services: assorted vegetables -- lettuce, broccoli, beets, leeks, fennel, onions, and eggplant.

Number of employees and/or family members involved: 5 full time employees.



Production System

Fertility Management: Fertility management is performed using standard balanced organic fertilizers, some compost, and various cover crop mixes.

Pest management: Pest management is obtained primarily with biocontrol, where I allow the existing parasitoids and predators to control insect pests on the farm. In my case 90% of my pests have an existing parasite or predator. We just have to wait for their population to increase to the point where they control the pests. However, constant scouting allows me to be aware of insect outbreaks. With pure biocontrol you have to be able to tolerate 10 to 15% losses, particularly with aphids. Thrips however are controlled with Spinosad; they vector viruses that cannot be tolerated. I only spray when I have to.

Food safety management: Food safety is 70% common sense, the rest is record keeping. Keep it clean.

Strategies for controlling costs: Minimize redundancy in tasks. Reuse an item as many times as you can, but not boxes. Buy quality tools and equipment -- they last longer. Buy name brands with local dealers, parts will be easier to come by.

Production planning: Production planning is straight-forward. Some crops are seasonal, so you seed and plant for x amount of months. Most of my crops are year round, so you have a weekly schedule that you live by. Once you get a market, you have to be able to supply year round. That is the biggest challenge for local farmers and why the historical trend was to buy from the mainland. They don't like excuses why you can't supply them.



Big Kahuna sorghum/sudan grass hybrid

What is your marketing strategy?

Marketing: Marketing has been relatively easy. I started out 20 years ago in Kona when competition was minimal. Quality is the name of the game. If you have good quality and consistent supply, it will sell itself. The consumer is actually pulling the local products through the market place. Getting certified really separates you from the crowd. There seem to be a lot of growers calling themselves organic who have never been certified. True organic farming requires a very broad understanding of entomology, pathology, soils, and knowing good basic horticulture practices.

Pricing: Pricing has been stagnant for around 10 years. I really need to review my current list to fit the current market. As a grower, there is always downward pressure on prices. The mainland has far greater economies of scale, which allow them to grow at a lower price. We have many factors working against us, so we need to be real and streamline our operations as best we can. I'm constantly asking myself why do I do things a certain way and can I improve upon it, better, cheaper. This business is definitely anti-Alzheimer's because you're always thinking and planning. There's something new to learn everyday.

Approaches to keeping up with market trends: Well-grown organic produce is of higher quality and has a better shelf life than conventionally grown produce, period. I am constantly reading Ag journals to keep up with what is going on in the mainland, food safety requirements, and have visited a researcher in Salinas to see how

they do it. There's always a better way. If you can go to the California Farm show in February, it will blow your mind.

Could you give us an idea of the future for you?

What does sustainability mean to you and how to you plan to ensure sustainability for your operation? The market is open for more local products and unlike many growers, I have gone the retail store route instead of the hotel/restaurant business that many are vying for. I'm more into import displacement. That, I believe, is more sustainable and the approach to take. More local sources for fertilizers would be beneficial, locally made potting mixes, and reusable plastic bins instead of cardboard boxes would be a step in the right direction. There are many ways to be more sustainable -- it takes time and sourcing but that is where we're headed.



Soil Max legume cover crop mix

Explain how the next generation successfully integrated into the farm, how it happened or didn't happen? I have three sons who grew up on the farm. One currently works for me and another is graduating from UH Hilo in May who will also be joining the farm. My wife is also joining the business after 30 years in healthcare. She will add her skills to our expansion plan.

Challenges you expect to face in the next 5-10 years: We want to expand and take it to the next level, but I need a Fee Simple land base where we can invest and build a better processing facility to keep up with food safety and have something to pass on to our sons. I also want to build greenhouses for certain crops; the wind up here is really a limiting factor for expansion and consistency.



HOT TIP from Robb Farms

Just grow organically! Organic vegetable production can be done profitably in Hawai'i if you promote biological cycles above and below ground and control your costs.

Mahalo nui loa to Chris Robb for this article and photos, and to Ted Radovich for photos.