

Feature Farmer: Marianita Loseto

RJ's Farm, Līhu'e, Kaua'i
Interview by Emilie Kirk

Area under production:

About 60 acres are leased, but about 20-25 acres are in production currently. We are willing to expand more again as the market returns after the 2020 slow down.

How long have you been farming in Hawai'i?

I was farming with my dad on the North Shore of O'ahu since we first arrived in Hawai'i in 1982. My father was working on a sugar plantation in Haleiwa and was able to use some adjacent land to farm for our family. In 1985 we moved to Kaua'i and I began farming with my family in Moloa'a growing papaya, long bean, eggplant, and ginger. I have been farming in our current Grove Farm Lihue location since 2008/2009, starting on 10 acres and then expanding.

Crops grown, animals raised, other products/services:

Ginger, turmeric, taro, taro runners, pumpkin/kabocha, white squash, long bean, eggplant, okra, other Asian vegetables, banana, green papaya, and tropical flowers. Taro is an expanding crop for us as demand is very high now. We ship it to O'ahu for processing. We also raise small numbers of goats, pigs, and ducks. The animals help eat leftover produce, and the ducks also help with slug and snail management in the taro. The animals are for our family use, not for sale. We also save our own seed from many of our vegetable crops.

Number of employees and/or

family members involved: 6 of us work on the farm: 3 are fulltime, others part time. Sometimes we hire on casual help for specific tasks.

Production System

Fertility management:

We are lucky to have very rich soil at our current location. For fertility management, we practice crop rotation and let the ground rest to prevent the soil from getting stressed. Rest each field at least 6-8 months after harvest with grasses that grow naturally, then cut and let it decompose before replanting. Even rotating crops without resting is a stress on the



earth – it is important to do both. We also use wood chip mulch and the following fertilizers as needed:

- Organic pelletized chicken manure for ginger, turmeric, and vegetables
- Triple 16 and special bloom formula for the flowers
- Different for the flooded taro lo'i
- No fertilizer is needed for the mature bananas

Pest Management:

Rats are a problem, so we have farm cats and also use traps.

For weed management, we either pull them by hand, use the weed whacker, or sometimes use a salt/vinegar mix for grass control. Sometimes we also let them grow, like when our ginger is maturing and we don't want to disturb the roots.

For insect pests, like white fly on Bok choy, once we see an infestation, we would rather turn the crop under than try and spray. This is better and makes it easier to control so the pest doesn't go and jump to another area or become resistant and harder to control in the future.

The crops we either cut and boil and feed to the pigs, or plow them under.

We generally avoid spraying following the rule “if you wouldn't want to eat it, don't serve it.”

Growing crops in season for our location also helps. This way we have healthier, more vigorous crops with fewer pest and disease issues. It is more economical, giving better returns on our seed and labor costs. For example, the cold, wet weather makes many crops grow slow. We work to educate our consumers to buy in season and save it! For example, blanching and freezing the okra in season.

Where do you market your products?

We sell to local restaurants, and small stores, local juice companies and other local value-added producers. Times and Safeway buy our tropical flowers and seasonal produce, especially bananas. Now we only go to one farmers' market per week. Before COVID, I used to attend 5 markets/week, but it is too much to juggle.

I like to also build a market for my products by sharing recipes so people know how to prepare the produce. Two examples of this are cooking taro runners and preparing a healthy winter tonic using thinly sliced ginger, turmeric, lemons, oranges, and honey.

What does 'sustainability' mean to you?

I think, 'What can come from my farming to feed my family regularly?'

Not to depend on others, from my own farm I can feed my whole family. It all comes from what surrounds me. Last year we had so much extra abundance when then markets closed, we were able to take it and donate to the food bank, local kitchens, community organizations. It felt so good that we were able to support others so they didn't have to struggle. I told people to come ask at my market booth if they are struggling, and I gave them produce for free.

Share the love, the aloha, from our 'āina to help the community—we have so much. I am grateful for all the support that we got along the way. I was frozen in sales for 6 weeks last year. The Farm Bureau reached out to encourage us to “do our homework” and learn about online options. So I got creative with other outlets like delivering to kupuna and selling at a discount.

Future vision:

I have a vision to expand production of more tropical lei flowers again. I would like to set up a place where people can come sew their own lei and talk story.

For next steps on the farm we are also looking at organic options.

What advice you would give to young farmers?

We learn from our mistakes.

For those mistakes that I learned from, I say thanks because that is how I grow. If we don't make mistakes, then we don't learn anything.

I consider myself as a beginner. Still as a beginner, I need to learn more.

Focus. Be yourself and concentrate on what you are doing. Do not be too pressured by other people. Do not copy from your neighbors with the big farms—don't burden yourself at the beginning.

Once you learn from there, then you can look at expanding if you want.

A lot of people plant a lot of produce at the beginning, but they don't have a market. Make sure you can manage and market what you plant.

Be happy with what you are doing and don't force yourself, because otherwise it will not work out right. You have to love what you are doing from your heart to your brain to your body.

If those things don't work, you will struggle.

And I always thank God that we are still here each day.



(Photo credit: Rosana Freyre)



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