



Featured Farmers: Camille Pakchong

Rainbow Roots Farm, Puhi, Kaua'i
Interview by Emilie Kirik

How did you get started in farming?

I wanted to move out of the commercial building maintenance industry, but my background in landscaping didn't teach me much about growing food. I wanted to learn more about how to grow vegetables successfully, and that is when I came across GoFarm. I was one of the "founding mothers" of GoFarm Kaua'i in 2017. I was the very first person on the island of Kaua'i to complete the GoFarm incubator training, a statewide commercial farmer training program. In 2019 I was offered the opportunity to farm at Kilohana Plantation in Puhi. The area was totally overgrown with deep guinea grass and weedy trees since it had been fallow for a long time. During 2020, we spent the year clearing and preparing the land and putting up fencing for our vegetable production areas. We also got a grant from the Kaua'i Safe and Stable Farms Initiative that helped us build a new packing shed to have covered work space that is much more secure than the tent we had been using before. Potable water was brought in for washing and we are connected to the old sugar irrigation ditch for field water.

Crops grown and animals raised:

I grow a diversity of vegetable crops including carrots, cabbage, leafy greens, and more that we sell to a local food hub. I also grow a number of cultural crops including taro, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, and some 'ulu that are for family and cultural use. On the commercial side, I want to focus on crops that have a better return: carrots, cabbage, eggplant, herbs, and flowers. There is an old lo'i with very deep sandy soil where I want to expand and do some carrot trials.

In 2022 I also participated in the Mālama Kaua'i Poultry Egg Education Program (PEEP) —the first chicken egg co-op on Kaua'i. The program helped with materials for the coop, start-up chickens, and feed, and in turn we sell our eggs back to the food hub wholesale. Here in Hawai'i we struggle with the high cost of imports, including animal feed and fertilizer.



Raising chickens is great for providing alternative fresh sources of protein locally, if we can find alternative sources of feed that are more cost effective. We could produce more options for protein sustainably here in Hawai'i. On a small scale, I am able to supplement the commercial feed with garden scraps and ti leaves. The chickens can be helpful for keeping the weeds down though, which reduces mowing. I would like to incorporate a runner for them in rotation with my cover crops and cash

crops, but I am still working out how to do this without creating a food safety risk to adjacent crop beds.

Challenges:

Space to grow, time management, and labor are big challenges. It is mostly just me working on the farm, with some help from my 10-year-old daughter and my husband. I have lots of community support and friends who help out too. My biggest challenge is not feeling support from my family. I wish it was everyone's passion, but it is mostly my passion. It is a chore for the rest of them. Starting a farm in my 40s has been a struggle—I wish I would have started in my 20s.

In addition to the farm, I work on the Kaua'i Plantation Railway which runs right past my farm. This job provides me with health insurance that I can't afford to supply through my farm business at this time. This job also gives me a platform to educate visitors and tell the true story of our island, explaining the history and the landscape, talking about invasive species, island sustainability, and the food security situation. Kids on school trips are my favorite groups, but I struggle with having to drive by my farm on the train 7 times per day and watch as the pests (birds, moths, etc.) are destroying my crops.

Production System

The soil here is low in nitrogen, so I have been amending with Allganic 15-0-2 granules. I see a big jump after fertilizing. I also use Cal-Mag, 11-32-0, or K-Mag following soil test results. I have noticed a gradient near the mulberry and coconut trees where the trees are competing for nutrients with the vegetables, suggesting that it isn't good to plant too close to the trees. Cover cropping and mulching also help to improve fertility over time.



I practice Integrated Pest Management (IPM) focusing on crop rotation and finding the right crops for my environment. I try to minimize the use of herbicide, especially in the production areas. Weeds are a major challenge. My farm needs to look good because it is very visible along the train track that is part of the agritourism site. The location requires a certain aesthetic. I use a lot of mulch including wood chips from the plantation for the walkways. In the beds I use cardboard and palm fronds to deter the chickens. Wild chickens are one of the biggest pests here. Our fencing is adequate now to keep out the feral pigs. Diamondback moth is a challenge in our cruciferous crops, and I use Bt for some control. Nematodes are also a problem and our carrots were getting nailed. I am using cover crop and working on improving soil health to help reduce this issue.



What is your vision for the future?

My main goal is cultural education and I do a lot of outreach. Part of this goal is to restructure what I am growing to make it more economically viable. Since the Kilohana Plantation is an agritourism site, I want to focus on creating more of a Hawaiian cultural experience, pivoting to add value with the limited labor and capital I have to leverage the visitor industry that is already here. My vision is

something like a 3-hour tour that includes education about Hawaiian culture, the importance of certain plants, and sustainable island agriculture; a hands-on component like poi pounding, lei making, or weaving; and a sit-down lunch or sampling of local products. I can use this platform to promote value-added foods already being made on Kaua‘i and don’t feel the need to start making my own. The experience would have a different seasonal focus throughout the year and also educate consumers about eating local. My long-term vision is educating and inspiring youth to be involved in the food system, keeping green spaces open, and providing food for our community.

What advice you would give to young farmers?

Start early – don’t wait.

Know that is it going to be hard. You can’t do everything by yourself, unless you are growing microgreens. It is a community thing and engagement is important. Get involved with the Hawai‘i Farmers Union United (HFUU), which is a network to support each other.

Be passionate and don’t give up.

Talk to the right people. If you aren’t getting the answers you want, you are talking to the wrong people.

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