



Featured Farmers: Gerry Ross & Janet Simpson

Kupa'a Farms, Kula, Maui
Interview by Theodore Radovich

Hānai'Ai interviewed Kupa'a Farms in our [November 2015](#) feature farmer issue and wanted to reconnect with Gerry and the farm and how they have progressed since. Kupa'a's commitment has always been to produce food for the community, with the smallest footprint possible, building soil and using the waste streams to improve soil fertility. Throughout the years Gerry has continued to develop his production management system to include standardizing all of their beds, using a standardized

approach for seasonal vegetables, moving away from extensive tillage to primarily using a broad fork for soil aeration, and they have expanded their composting production to meet the needs of their operation. Want to move away from vegetable crops to more perennial crops to reduce intensive labor

How did you get started in farming? Kupa'a Farms was started by Janet's father, Jerry, more than 45 years ago on the slopes of Haleakala in Kula, Maui. He farmed conventional sweet corn and asparagus for 20 years and the soil when we arrived 2003 was characterized by low organic matter, low pH (5.5), and high erosion rates (6T/acre/year). We were dedicated to organic management practices and biodiversity right out of the gate (even though we didn't know what we were doing!) so we worked on diversification (more diverse crops and lots of agroforest and permaculture principles) to build soil health. Both of us came from non-agriculture backgrounds so there was a lot of trial and error. We got started late in life as farmers mostly on the somewhat romantic notion that being a farmer sounded like a great life. It is!

Area Under Production: The total farm area is 4 acres under cultivation and 6 acres in animal production. We eventually settled on a balance of 30% vegetable production, 40% perennial crops like coffee and tropical fruit, and 20% windbreaks and mulch banks that include edible components like banana and sugar cane for the 4 acres and we manage the 6 acres of pasture (too rocky for planting) with seasonal steers. Currently, the area under vegetable production is a little over 1/4 acre mostly comprised of human-managed beds that are 100 ft long and 2.5 feet wide. We have one nursery for the propagation of vegetable starts, (3) 100-foot-long tunnels covered with insect screens and a compost area. We generate all of our own compost from about 50 tons of food waste and animal mortalities a year.

Crops grown and animals raised: Taro, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, brassicas, onions, garlic, cucumber, cabbage, cauliflower, edible flowers. **Perennial:** coffee, cacao, vanilla, mango, avocado, citrus. We raise a couple of steers every 12-14 months and that keeps

our pastures managed and they are supplemented by spent brewers grain from a local brewery.

Number of Employees and/or family members involved: We don't have any full or even part-time employees. We have three family members who contribute to various aspects of the farm and we use work-trade interns to manage most of the labor, especially in the vegetable production areas. Interns have come via word of mouth random discoveries of our website.

Production System: We use an organic agroforest/permaculture approach in the perennial plantings that includes overstory trees and fast-growing midlevel legumes for wood chip production (gliricidia, Kx4 Leucaena from Jim Brewbaker). The presence of leguminous trees as essentially companion plants for cash crops has dramatically decreased the need for additional inputs for fertility. In addition, the mid-level legumes are pruned once a year and produce about 60 yards of on-farm woodchips which we use for mulch and as a carbon source in our compost. We used to use a 46 HP tractor for vegetable production but shifted to a walk-behind tractor and a broad fork which increased our production capacity by 20% through spatial efficiency. At the conclusion of a crop cycle, beds are broadforked and composted, 8-2-4 Sustain, and coffee chaff is added before the next planting.



Pest Management: We have the usual suspects in terms of pests but we try to avoid planting when we know from past experience that pest pressure will be high e.g. spring plantings of soft brassicas when we know the pressure from bagrada bugs will be high. We generally take a hands-off/no-spray approach but if we do we have a suite of OMRI-approved sprays we use for mites and fungal diseases like powdery mildew. Our screened insect houses provide relief from pepper weevils and melon flies which allows these crops to produce high-quality, essentially flawless, fruit. Coffee berry borer has proven very difficult to manage and we are stumping all of our trees to try and reset our orchards.

Where do you market/sell your products?

Currently, we sell to two restaurants and the Maui Food Hub. We discontinued our CSA after 14 years of weekly production.

What does “sustainability” mean to you?

Sustainability to us means making the most of local fertility whether it is diverting the waste stream for compost or using leguminous trees for nitrogen fixation. Sustainability also means a workload that is manageable by the farmer.

Future vision for the farm: As we age we would like to transition to more perennial crops such as cacao which we think (naively?) would require less work than weekly vegetable production. Having renovated the farm from essentially a conventional desert into a diverse ecosystem we would like to keep it in that condition for as long as we can.



What advice would you give to young farmers? Make sure to take time off for yourself. Work-life balance is important for Hawaii farmers as we farm year-round with no seasonal downtime. Also, make sure to go all in your farming life; 60% dedication won't cut it.

KUPA'A  FARMS

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