

## Feature Farmer

Sakda and Usa Meephol  
Sakda Farm  
Koloa/Moloa'a/Lihue, Kaua'i HI  
*Interview in Thai; translated  
by Emilie Kirk*



### Area under production:

20.6 acres in Moloa'a

31.5 acres in Koloa,

14 acres in Lihue where land was recently cleared and planted with fruit trees

**How long have you been farming in Hawai'i?** I came to Hawaii from Thailand as a farm worker in 2004, and I started my own farm in 2011 in Moloa'a. Originally I was under a farm labor contract, but the conditions were terrible. Eventually the government helped with the visa process in 2008 so I could get a proper work permit. I knew I wanted to farm—it is good work with no boss and no need for strong language skills. It was good luck to find land and a company (Grove Farm) that cares about and helps their tenant farmers. The Kauai County Farm Bureau has also been very helpful.

**Crops grown, animals raised, other products/services:** Pineapples, bananas, mango, rambutan, longan, watermelons, other tropical fruit and a wide range of mixed vegetables

**Number of employees and/or family members involved:** I do almost all the farm work myself. My wife Usa joined me in 2012 and helps with running the market stands. Often I work in until after dark with a headlamp to get everything done. It is especially hard work with frequent rain, but it is very difficult to find reliable workers to help.

### Production System Fertility management:

I use pelletized chicken manure every time between planting and compost when I can, but compost is very expensive (\$900 for a large truck load). I also use 15-15-15 or 16-16-16 mineral fertilizers during fruiting or pre-plant. The organic fertilizer is slower releasing and longer lasting than the mineral fertilizer, so I use it when planting young trees.

### Pest Management:

For pest management I talk with Cooperative Extension and follow their recommendations. Fruit flies are a big problem in my tree crops, so I do fruit fly trapping. It is important to start the trapping early enough in the season to avoid crop damage. I also like neem oil – it is expensive but very useful and much safer to apply than stronger chemicals like malathion. Neem helps control ants and some diseases.



### How have you been impacted by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic?

This was an expensive year: the economy was not good and markets were not good. This is the worst economic downturn I have ever seen. The travel restrictions have also made it hard to take a break and visit family, and my children are studying online without the benefit of interacting with their teachers like they normally would. If I were the only one impacted it would be difficult to accept, but this is affecting everyone around the world. All we can do is persevere and keep working—every year is different, and we don't know what the future will bring.

### Food Safety:

Food safety is an important thing to understand what practices are correct and what laws to follow for our health and the health of our customers. Food safety training from the university was helpful to learn what is actually clean enough. We might have thought our produce was clean before, but now we can do even better. This gives me peace of mind knowing that our produce is safe and clean.

**Cont. Pest Management:** It is a different kind of “pest,” but this year I lost thousands of dollars of young fruit trees that were planted in 2020 to a neighbor's cattle. The cows get out where fences are broken, and they completely stripped my young mango, avocado, and many other grafted fruit trees. The only ones they didn't eat were the citrus trees, probably because of the strong taste they didn't like. I am hoping to find a grant or other support to invest in fencing for the orchard since the rancher is not taking responsibility for confining their animals. I continue to see cattle loose in the area despite reporting the issue. In addition to the cost of replacing the trees, this is a significant set back because there is limited availability of grafted trees for sale on Kauai. It will likely be one year before there is stock available to replace what was lost, plus the time they had been in the ground, making this a 2-year set back in establishing this new orchard.





**Conservation Practices:**

The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service has worked with us in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to improve our drip irrigation systems, establish windbreaks, and incorporate cover crops in our production system. Cover crops are very helpful to protect and improve the soil. I have used many cover crops and mixes including daikon, sunn hemp, and different beans and grasses. They help aerate the soil deeply, especially the daikon.

**Where do you market your products?**

Currently we are selling at three farmers' markets across the island and providing a small number of weekly CSA boxes through Malama Kauai. We also have a fruit stand by the highway that we open five days a week where there are enough tourists on the island to justify it. In the past we sold to restaurants and hotels, but those have closed due to COVID. Between the pandemic and the wet weather, we have reduced our production so we grow just enough to sell.

**Pricing:**

Right now we are selling our produce at much cheaper prices than usual because the market is so limited. Selling cheap is better than letting it go to waste.

**What does 'sustainability' mean to you?**

Sustainability means agriculture that is permanent or able to persist all the time. This means being able to weather challenges and adapted to changes as they arise.

**What advice you would give to other aspiring farmers?**

Young people are very clever and learn faster than our older generation, but they don't have the experience that we do. If they are genuinely interested in farming, I think they can do even better than us because of technology. If they study hard, they will find ways to farm smarter and easier, while the older generation struggles to make changes beyond what they are used to and are slower to adapt or adopt new ideas. Farming is heavy work and uncertain, but young people have skills to use technology and access more information that can help them make good farm plans. Making good farm plans and seasonal harvest plans will allow them to expand markets and get a better price.

Not so many youth are interested in agriculture because of the economics, but farming is a great occupation. What we earn is sufficient to live on, and if you make a good life for yourself if you understand the market. Farmers grow the food that people eat all around the world. Without farmers there is nothing to eat, and people need to eat every day. You can't eat money. We work hard to make sure there is food for others. In this way farming is the most important work.