

**Feature Farmer
Gabe Sachter-Smith
Hawai'i Banana Source
O'ahu, Hawaii**

**Interviewer
Megdalena Perkins**



Area Under Production: 30 acre parcel Waialua

Years in Production in Hawaii: I started studying bananas 20 years ago and started growing them agriculturally 15 years ago, and I became a full-time farmer 6 or 7 years ago. This farm has been in banana production for only about 2 or 3 years.

Crops grown, animals raised, and other goods and services? We were growing

vegetables. We had a value-added vertically integrated kimchi and kraut business primarily. So we were growing veggies, turning them into value-added fermented food products. But I always wanted to do bananas. My business partner wanted to do kimchi and kraut. And finally, we were able to figure it all out. And now we just grow bananas.

Number of employees and/or family members involved in the operation?

Currently, we're a team of 3 including myself. Would like to get up to 4 to 5 tops and but add people as we grow as we need to.

What is your pest management strategy?

Mostly through rotation and roguing. For Bunchy Top Virus, one of our biggest issues pest-wise, we make sure to plant clean plants. If we see diseased plants, we take them out, and we're always vigilant about it. Things like corm weevils and nematodes, we always try to be vigilant about making sure we're

planting plants that aren't infested with them. That's a big key thing and not having plants remain in the field that are too old and getting infested. And then for different leaf diseases such as Sigatoka in the winter, we make sure that we do a lot of leaf pruning and have good airflow and good ventilation, which reduces the prevalence of that disease.

What's your production system and fertility management?

We plant 500 plants at a time. That's 500 plants per acre. I have some custom tractor implements I made so first we rip and disc the soil, we'll add all amendments, such as compost, manure, and things like that, and then we'll make trenches in the ground. I put potted banana plants in the ground that are fully rooted and ready to grow. And then we have another custom tractor implement that pushes all the soil back on the plants and closes the trench. We use drip irrigation to irrigate.





Our main source of fertility is compost and chicken manure. Occasionally tankage. Occasionally some other little things like boron supplementation if needed, but mostly manure and compost.

What's your process for complying with Food Safety Regulations?

For food safety, fortunately, we haven't needed to really do much yet. It's something a lot of people talk about but not something that we've had to deal with. But that being said in our wash and pack area, I have taken training courses on it, and we're ready to be certified if we need to, just in terms

of how we have it set up and what our procedures are. But other than that like actually, on the ground I do make sure that we don't take fruit that's like, really covered, you know, in bird droppings. Or if we have bunches that maybe fell on the ground, and they've been eaten partially by wild animals, we don't harvest that, we try to keep things clean and keep it sanitary the best that we can and make sure that we're following our guidelines as far as when we're using manure. I mean it's pretty easy with bananas, but it's many months after application that we harvest so things like that we make sure to pay attention to.

What are your strategies for controlling costs? Efficiency. Labor is the number one cost that we have. And so doing more with less people is the name of the game. We try to make everything we do as efficient as possible which means not wasting time on things that we don't need to do, no going back and trying to fix things that aren't fixable. We try to move



forward and think ahead on everything. And try to have as few movements as possible, as few touches on our products as possible and always have a plan. We're always trying to plan out and I have an idea of what we're doing the next day, the next week, the next month, the next year. And so everything is thought out as best that we can. And so we get in there and we just know what to do

and hopefully we do it well.

Places you sell your products: Right now the bulk of our bananas are sold through Farm Link Hawaii. It's an online produce distribution, sort of like online farmers market of sorts. We also sell wholesale direct to some other customers such as Banan, Piko Provisions, a baby food company, a couple of banana bread companies, and smoothie shops, but I really prefer wholesale. We used to do farmers market, but it's a lot of work. And with bananas, people always want ripe fruit, and it's hard to bring that much ripe fruit in a day, and then if you don't sell it, then you don't have much shelf life left, so it actually kind of leads to a lot of loss, and it's overall a pretty challenging thing to do so, I'm kind of shying away from farmers markets at the moment.

What are your plans for future new products/services? There's been a casual interest, of course from mostly





people, who want tours. It's a really, really hard thing to do, but I'd like to maybe play with it one day in the future. Also, a lot of people want to come buy fruit on the farm, that's another really challenging thing to do, logistically. So, no, we're not planning on doing those anytime soon, but if we were to add a major thing in, it would be that. Or one day if we can generate excess plant material

that we don't need for planting our fruit crops then I'd like to get more into selling plants to gardeners or other farmers. I hope for a lot more bananas. We're really trying to just grow as much as we can while staying sane and staying happy about it. I really like to try to maintain a simple straightforward operation where we just grow bananas and try to do it well. I hope that we can keep growing into the future as long as I'm able to cause I really do love it and I can't think of a better job.

What advice would you give to aspiring farmers? If you want to start a farm, probably don't. Go get as much experience as you can working on other functional farms, as many places as you can, in as many diverse situations as you can, and learn all you can. And after a number of years of that, you either know that you want to farm, you just don't want to own a farm, or that you don't want to farm at all. You may say to yourself, I need more experience before I go out on my own. So it's really all about experience and I think that's the number one best thing you can do.

Mahalo to Gabe for such a great interview



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