

Cooperatives can help gardeners and farmers

by Melanie Bondera
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Though we all probably love spending time working solo in our gardens or on our farms, we usually arrive at a point where we realize we might benefit from a little support. Then it's time to "hui up."

Working together can accomplish many goals. Maybe you want some organic gardening supplies that are too expensive to buy locally. Perhaps you'd love to be able to use a piece of equipment occasionally that you can't afford to buy on your own. Having the use of a sugar cane juicer or an avocado oil press would allow you to create new products and increase your income. Possibly you're interested in going commercial with your jam making and you need a certified kitchen. If your garden is producing more than you can use, you might want to consider opening a booth at a farmers market or starting a roadside stand. If you don't really have enough produce to afford going it alone, you could consider forming a cooperating hui with other small producers.

Putting together an informal group may be enough to meet these needs. But, if money will be involved or your group is more than five people, it might make sense to consider forming a co-op. With a cooperative business structure, you can work out your operating rules to prevent conflict, while keeping your finances in order and even get a tax break on your earnings.

Knowing some steps for forming a cooperative can help you decide if that structure can work for you. The scope of your particular project will dictate how much effort goes into each step.

First, select members and meet with them. A cooperative is only as good as the people in it. One person's great idea will probably mold and change to meet the members' collective vision. Working effectively in a group means considering the needs of the group over individual ideas and desires. Spending time brainstorming and hammering out a plan can help clarify your collective needs. Voting at each stage can help determine if you should continue to move forward. It's also helpful to iron out any possible wrinkles early in your formation.

Once you have a clear idea of your project plan, do some research. How much does the equipment your group needs cost? Determine the cost of ordering your supplies in bulk. Do shipping costs negate the savings? Decide where equipment will be housed and how it will be maintained. Establish rules for using collectively owned items. In a marketing co-op, will you trade off market days or can you afford to hire a person to staff your booth? For those looking for certified kitchen space, locate existing kitchens to determine the real need in your area. Can the use fees for a commercial kitchen be covered by the proposed cost of your products? Maybe a formal market survey or feasibility study is in order.

Once you've established goals and ground rules, you'll want to put together a business plan. The Small Business Development Center can help you write a professional business plan for free. This will help get your ideas into one document and crunch your numbers. If you need to raise money, having a business plan will let people know you are serious. Next, you need to register as a cooperative. You will need to edit a boilerplate sample of bylaws or write your own. These will be a concrete reminder of how you plan to operate.

At this point, you may realize you need more members for your cooperative to achieve its goals. If so, start a membership drive. Once you have enough members to proceed, you might want to capitalize your business by each contributing to a startup fund. You can also apply for grants or loans now. Grants are easier to get as a cooperative since the grantor knows they are benefiting more than one person.



The adult sweet potato weevil looks like an elongated ant with a metallic blue-black body. If you find them in your sweet potatoes, destroy them. - tamu.edu and infonet-biovision.org



Click Photo to Enlarge

The grub of the sweet potato weevil is small but extremely destructive. - tamu.edu and inonet-biovision.org

Once membership, rules and your funds are in order, you are ready to move ahead. You can order supplies, buy equipment, procure and staff a booth at a farmers market or you can start processing your fruit in your new kitchen.

At the end of the year, any extra money in the bank is divided equally between the cooperative members as dividends. Cooperatives are member owned, member based and the members benefit.

For help forming a cooperative, e-mail the new Laulima Center at mbondera@kohalacenter.org or call me at 640-7076.

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Tropical gardening helpline

Diane asks: What is the grub that I find in my sweet potatoes and how can I keep it from ruining my crop?

Answer: The grub you find in your sweet potatoes is the larval form of the sweet potato weevil, probably *Cylas formicarius*. No quick or easy fix is available against this weevil's damage.

Good sanitation practices are important, including cleaning fields after harvest, moving sweet potato beds every year and planting with new, clean cuttings annually.

So much information is available about this weevil and the growing of sweet potatoes in order to avoid their damage that the topic deserves an entire column. Watch for it in early April.

Gardening events

- **Saturday:** "Revitalizing Ulu from Root to Fruit" is held from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Amy B.H. Greenwell Ethnobotanical Garden in Captain Cook. Presenters include Ian Cole from the Breadfruit Institute as well as Craig Elevitch and Andrea Dean. Food share and brown bag lunch are planned. The fee is \$40 per person or \$70 for two. Call Pedro Tama from Hawaii Homegrown Food Network at 938-5618 or write pedro@hawaiihomegrown.net for more information or to register.

- **Ongoing:** Plant advice lines -- consult with master gardeners and tropical gardening advisers from 3 to 6 p.m. Mondays at the Kona Outdoor Circle at 331-2426 or 9 a.m. to noon Thursdays at the University of Hawaii Cooperative Extension Service at 322-4892, and Tuesdays and Fridays at UH CES in Hilo at 981-5199.