

Organic farmer uses cover crops for soil health

Jolene Lau, USDA NRCS

Chris Robb is an organic farmer from Hawai'i County who began Robb Farms in 1993. Historically, he used compost because it kept the soil fertility up and worked well with his system of vegetable cropping. Now, Robb is experimenting with different cover crop mixes. A lot of research has been done for the subtropical lower elevations, but Robb Farms is almost a sub-temperate climate with definitive seasons. The soil temperatures are cooler, and the variety of plants that can be grown are quite different. The soil max builder Robb likes is a combination of cayuse oats, bell beans, Austrian peas, and purple vetch that work very well. The resulting compost is a stable form with a longer residual effect.

In addition to cover cropping, Chris says that he could not have afforded to update his irrigation system alone. Re-doing the entire main line was a big undertaking, and when he started out he had a shoe string budget. "Without the assistance from NRCS, there's no way I could have pulled it off."

The Natural Resources Conservation Service helps Robb Farms and others to utilize composting and cover cropping to build soil health. These conservation practices allow Chris to improve soil fertility, reduce chemical inputs and increase microbial activity in the soil.

The feedback Chris gets from his customers is that they really like Robb Farms products because they get a better shelf life. "We have a shelf life that conventional vegetables just doesn't have," he said. For Chris, healthy soil equals a healthy populous.

He is proud to say that his farm does not have the chemical residues that can result from traditional farming methods. Instead of spraying for pests, Robb Farms attracts beneficial insects such as wasps, lacewings, hover flies, and lady bird beetles. In addition, his crops do much better than conventional farms with increased carbon and living microbial activity in the soil.

Soil Health is more than a philosophy to Chris, it's how he farms. "It's better for my workers, it's healthier for my consumers, and, I like to leave the land better than I find it," he said. To learn more about soil health and the NRCS in the Pacific Islands Area, visit www.pia.nrcs.usda.gov. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



Chris Robb, Robb Farms