



# North Hawaii News



## GROWING FARMERS

**Ku I Ka Mana**

farmer training program answers a call to recruit, train, and support at least 40 new Hawaii Island farmers in 2 years



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# Growing the farmers



**Josiah Hunt, founder and owner of Hawaii Biochar Products LLC ([hawaiiiochar.com](http://hawaiiiochar.com)), teaches one of two sessions on making biochar and its benefits to soil fertility.** COURTESY OF THE KOHALA CENTER

## *Ku I Ka Mana beginning farmer training program*

**BY MELORA PURELL**  
SPECIAL TO NORTH HAWAII NEWS

According to Jim Cain, program director for The Kohala Center's beginning farmer training program, growing food requires just three basic things: land, water, and people.

"Our island has plenty of land and water, but we are in need of more people who want to make a living as farmers," he said.

Named "Ku I Ka Mana," the farmer training program hopes to fulfill the intent of its name, translated from the Hawaiian, "to become like the one who fed you." This proverb sums up the Hawaiian way of learning: that by association, by following the lead of our teachers, we can absorb some of their knowledge.

The goal of the Ku I Ka Mana program is to recruit, train, and support at least 40 new farmers over the next two years. Program participants will develop business plans, secure farm leases, gain access to farm equipment and materials, and successfully produce, market, and distribute their crops.

"The first question beginning farmers always ask is, 'What should I grow?'" said Cain, who has been growing taro in Waipio Valley and producing poi for the past 20 years.

Part of the Ku I Ka Mana curriculum is helping farmers to answer that question for themselves, to find the best fit between their lifestyle, their land, their financial expectations, and the needs of the local food market.

"Instead, the question should be, 'What kind of farm do I want to create?'" said Cain.

The program helps each farmer to do a strategic analysis, to plan for the appropriate scale of farming, and to consider time commitments and the amount of family involvement, he said.

The initial focal region of the farmer training program is the Hamakua Coast. For about 100 years, ending in the mid-1990s, the land here was dedicated to a single crop: sugar cane. The sugar plantations not only shaped the economic and social climate of the small towns along the Hamakua coast, but also



**Donna Mitts, a participant of the Ku I Ka Mana program, holds an ulu, or breadfruit tree, that she plans to plant at her Paauilo farm.** PHOTO BY ANNA PACHECO | SPECIAL TO NHN

changed the land by compacting the soil and depleting nutrients.

"We have a lot of work to do to return fertility to this land," said Cain.

"I remember talking with an old Waipio farmer once who pointed to the lush forests on the hillsides surrounding the valley," said Cain. "He pointed out that the forest is in balance, it is self-sustaining. In farming, we are disturbing the cycle of nutrients, because we are taking away from the soil. We need to counteract that by building fertility on the farm."

The practical side of the program curriculum takes place at the demonstration farm that is being created by Cain and newly hired farm manager Patrick Codianne in Honokaa town, just down the road from the post office.

The first cohort of student-farmers took part in hands-on training workshops on the new farm, and learned ways to increase soil fertility by using local natural systems rather than inputs of expensive imported fertilizers.

Local expert Josiah Hunt came from Kona to teach the group how to create and use biochar as a soil amendment. Wood scraps and



**ABOVE: The first Ku I Ka Mana farmer training class poses for a photo with its compost pile at the conclusion of a series of classes taught by Bob Schaffer, a veteran soil fertility expert. Under his direction, the class learned how to make a hearty compost pile layered with clippings, wood chips, manures, biochar, etc. The class named the compost pile "Bob" in his honor. COURTESY OF THE KOHALA CENTER**

**LEFT: Jim Cain, director of Ku I Ka Mana, holds a shovel full of bio char, used in farming, one of the techniques that would be taught to beginning farmers. PHOTO BY ANNA PACHECO | SPECIAL TO NHN**

**FAR LEFT: Ku I Ka Mana students listen to lecturer farmer Bobby Grimes, owner of Living Soils Organics in Paauilo, who lectured on soil microorganisms and on how to make compost tea. COURTESY OF THE KOHALA CENTER**

agricultural waste are burned in a pit under low oxygen conditions, creating a porous charcoal that holds six to eight times its weight in water. These small chunks of charcoal are especially useful to break up the compressed soils of former sugar cane lands, and provide surface area to enhance the growth of helpful soil bacteria and fungi.

"I learned a lot about improving soil fertility," said Donna Mitts, a part-time farmer from Paauilo who was part of the first cohort of beginner farmers.

Mitts is not new to the business of agriculture; she ran an organic salad farm for 10 years. However, the chance to start a new farm with different crops led her to apply to the farmer training program.

"Marketing is a farmer's 'Achilles heel,'" said Mitts. "I wanted to know which crops to grow that will meet my income expectations, and fit with my lifestyle as a weekend farmer."

Mitts chose asparagus as one of her new crops. It has local demand, is easy to grow organically, and has a defined season for harvesting.

In her asparagus field, Mitts has already applied some of the methods she learned to enhance soil fertility. She planted a "cover crop" of peas, beans, oats and vetch that can be cut and tilled into the soil to improve fertility. She also accepts contributions from her neighbors of grass clippings and goat manure to add to her compost pile.

Cain and Codianne are making plans for the farm, with the vision of creating a "center for agricultural success." They will be building a fence to control feral animals, opening

up more fields, planting a diversity of crops, organizing a community supported agriculture program, and eventually raising animals, too. Plans include a piggery and chicken coops.

"We want to expose participants to a wide diversity of farming practices, and introduce them to the resources available," said Cain.

"The business side of farming can be intimidating," said Cain. "Farming has to make economic sense, but it is different for every farmer. It depends on their soil and their

crops."

Cain has seen an increase in interest in locally grown food, and even wholesalers, who had been resistant in the past, and are now more open to talking to local farmers.

University agriculture programs don't actually teach people how to farm, he said. The Ku I Ka Mana program plans to fill in the gaps, by teaching both practical farming techniques as well as solid business practices.

To assist new farmers, the program has the support of the University of Hawaii, the U.S.

Department of Agriculture, and the Small Business Development Center.

"By working together, we can help support small-scale family farms," said Cain, "and that will help this community."

The next cohort of beginner farmers will start in August, and applications are currently being accepted. Visit The Kohala Center's website to learn more about the Ku I Ka Mana program, and to download an application form at <http://kohalacenter.org/farmertraining/application.html>, or call 887-6411 for more information.