

## Farming in focus

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Apr 28, 2013 LAST UPDATED: 04:09 a.m. HST, Apr 28, 2013

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Cultivating the land holds enormous potential for young people, advocates say, but it is often overlooked

By Mary Vorsino

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HONOKAA >> Jim Cain doesn't sugarcoat it: Farming is tough work.

Profits can fluctuate from year to year, making long-term planning both vital and next to impossible. It's not a 9-to-5, and it's rarely five days a week. It requires commitment and passion and a joy for working outdoors.

In short, farming is not for everyone.

But Cain believes that farming can be made appealing to some of today's young people, especially given the growing popularity of efforts to live sustainably and buy local -- and the demand for opportunities that allow youth to remain on the island.

As they're thinking about their futures, many young people don't even consider farming as an option, Cain said.

And that, in his view, has got to change.

\$127,000 Sales of Hawaii island taro

50 Acres used to grow wetland taro on Hawaii island

100 Acres used to grow dryland taro on Hawaii island

535 Acres of taro grown in the state

Sources: State Department of Agriculture, State of Hawaii Data Book

"It is hard work, and you do have some skills and you do have to have the support, but it's certainly an opportunity for young people to be able to stay home and make a living," Cain said on a recent morning during a break from making poi.

"It's the type of job where you have to be into it. You have to be into working. You have to be into being close to the land," he said.

Cain, who produces King Lau Lau brand poi, has become a leading voice in the campaign to grow a new generation of small-scale farmers on Hawaii island.

This year he partnered with The Kohala Center to launch a hands-on program to attract young people to a career choice they often overlook.

Ku i ka Mana, the beginning farmer training program, aims to give participants both the farming skills and the entrepreneurial know-how needed to farm for a living. The 16-week training program, funded with about \$637,000

THERE IS AN URGENCY to the effort, said Betsy Cole, deputy director of The Kohala Center.

Many of today's Hawaii farmers are older (that's true nationally, too). And in Hawaii, she added, farming has often been negatively associated with plantation life.

There are also bigger barriers to farming in the islands because of the high cost of land. The Kohala Center is helping with that by assisting prospective farmers in finding affordable lease properties.

"We really need to revive our farming population," she said.

The beginning farmer training program, Cole said, could serve as a model for helping to do that.

The program's first cohort started earlier this year, and participants -- there are 12 families in all -- range in age from their 20s to their 50s.

Cole said while the Ku i ka Mana program is targeted at younger people, it's not realistic to have an age cap. She also said she believes the program will attract more younger people in subsequent cohorts as the center links up with high schools.

Hawaii island has about 63 percent of available farm land in the state, and about 40 percent of its farm employment, according to a 2012 report prepared for The Kohala Center.

Cole said while farming might not be for everyone, the farmer training program, in part, is meant to show that the challenges of farming are worth it.

"It is hard work. If you grow up on a farm, you go, 'Do I really want to do this, or do I want to be a lawyer?'" she quipped.

Back in Honokaa, as he prepared poi for packaging, Cain said he's determined to share with the next generation what he's learned over his 20 years of farming in Waipio Valley.

Lesson No. 1: Farming is more than just a job.

"I have found ... the economic side is part of it, certainly you have to pay your bills," he said, "but it also builds such a strong connection to the community."

On a recent morning, Cain was adding water to pureed taro and mixing it by hand. He then transferred the completed poi into bags, which are sent to stores, hotels and families.

"When you provide poi to a family over years and years, whether it's the first time that baby has eaten any food, they eat the poi, the last foods the kupuna eat before they pass and all the spectrum in between ... these connections are, you can't buy that," he said. "They're very powerful and it feels good. That's what encourages us to go on, because it's the right thing to do."

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