



Gary Maunakea-Forth of Ma'o Organic Farm

Waianae Farm Strives to Produce Food and Cultivate Future Hawaii Leaders

For Gary Maunakea-Forth and Ma'o Organic Farm in Waianae, there's more to farming than just growing food for Hawaii consumers. Ma'o Organic is also cultivating young leaders for Hawaii's future.

"Our goal is to co-produce food to eat and the culture in which food is produced," said farm manager Maunakea-Forth, speaking at a conference on sustaining Hawaii agriculture Sept. 23-24 in Kona.

Maunakea-Forth said that what one typically sees in Waianae are "off limits" signs for gated communities and the military. But Waianae, located on the leeward side of Oahu, has the highest 'food insecurity' in the entire state, making it essentially a rural community – and an ideal venue for farming.



Gary Maunakea-Forth

"How does a rural community be rural if it's not in agriculture?" he asked. "When we first started farming in the Waianae community, nobody wanted to farm, so we had to make farming sexy. We've tried to change the conception of agriculture in the community."

Ma'o Organic Farm was launched as a nonprofit in 2001, raising \$400,000 in capital by 2003, when it leased and certified organic 5 Waianae acres. The farm is now expanding to a total of 16 certified acres and it has nearly doubled its sales, striving to connect with purchasers via farmers markets and on-farm sales.

"We won't sell to anyone who does not come to our farm," says Maunakea-Forth. "You have to come to our farm."

The farm's goal is to develop a diverse system dedicated to sustainable agriculture. Maunakea-Forth, a transplanted New Zealand farm boy, cited examples of Ma'o Organic's quest for achieving sustainability, including growing sunn hemp as a cover crop, rotating crops and searching out locally sourced products like manure.

In the process, it is also fulfilling its mission to co-produce leaders – 27 youth have been supported at college, more than 600 have been involved directly in the school program and hundreds more have visited the farm to get a taste of agriculture.

Ma'o Organic Farm's organic farm apprenticeship program provides interns with a stipend, experience co-managing an organic farm, full tuition at Leeward Community College and education in culture, communications and finance.

Maunakea-Forth said every kid is physically involved in all phases of the farm, and the farm empowers and rewards its staff in every way it can.

He described for conference participants three big-picture challenges for Ma'o Organic and perhaps others in agriculture:

1. How do we get land? Maunakea-Forth noted that his operation has approached people and organizations representing 400,000 acres and were offered nothing. It provided the farm's financial plan, but nothing would move them.
2. How do you create an environment where young people want to farm? The average farmer's age is over 60, and young people see Hawaii being full of gentlemen's estates and industrial farms.
3. How do we cultivate agriculture, not industrial agriculture?
"Hawaiian's fed themselves. They were food secure," he said.
"We've lost our ability to grow, cook and share food. The question is how can we reconnect to our food and our culture."

Despite these apparent roadblocks, Maunakea-Forth sees some pathways to a successful agricultural future. For example, he said, some of Hawaii's large landholders are climbing aboard the agricultural train. And, through improved farming techniques, Ma'o Organic Farm is learning how to improve its productivity, potentially doubling revenues per acre.

For more information, visit Ma'o Organic Farm's website at www.maoorganicfarms.org.