

The following questions were posed to each Master Farmer following a series of workshops held in summer 2012. Questions are general in nature, and offer insights into each farmer's background and keys to success. Additional insights related to each Master Farmer's specialty can be found on Oahu RC&D's website.

Question 1: How did you get started in farming?



Paul (and Charlie) Reppun: Our father who was a doctor was able to receive a small piece of land from a patient of his. Being jobless and young we took this as an opportunity to start our own farm. This farmer gave us papaya seedlings to grow and since papaya seeds are three year crop we became stuck on the land. We approached another farmer about taro huli and that led to another piece of land. Later we ended up working three parcels.



Dean Okimoto: My father had a farm since 1953. Though I didn't grow up liking farming since it meant going into the fields to weed for hours, I decided to farm in 1983 with my dad.



Fred Lau: We have been growing ornamentals in our nurseries since 1976. In 2010, we decided to begin growing produce aquaponically.



Kylie Matsuda-Lum: My parents are farmers, my grandparents were farmers and my great-grandparents were also farmers. Farming is in my blood and I feel very blessed to be a part of our long-standing family business.

"Farming is in my blood and I feel very blessed to be a part of our long-standing family business."
- **Kylie Matsuda-Lum**



Ed (and Jonas) Otsuji: In 1970, land became available and we jumped on it. Got a loan through the USDA for \$40,000 and went for it.

Question 2: How can new farmers get access to land?

P&CR: Showing an interest in farming will convince people that you are a hard worker. If you spread the word that you want to farm and take any opportunity that comes along, one thing can lead to another. Once farmers will be convinced that you're serious about farming, many will help you along your interest. Paying taxes, filing schedule F, helps to give you a track record and prove that you are a farmer.

DO: It is very difficult, but joining Farm Bureau might give you some info on land availability. The Hawaii Agricultural Foundation manages some land and they put the word out through Farm Bureau.

FL: There are thousands of acres of accessible farm lands on O'ahu and the other islands. Short term leases are available all over the islands and even for very reasonable lease rents. Long term leases are more difficult, but with some diligence, a new farmer should be able to find land to farm. The underlying problem is that there are not enough farmers with enough capital to enter into a farming enterprise. Having access to land is just step one, the land needs to have sufficient infrastructure (access roads, water supply, etc). Also, a novice farmer would need equipment to farm, a facility to process, an office to market and trucks to deliver his produce and labor.

KM-L: Contact Senator Donovan Dela Cruz's office to inquire about the state's recent purchase of former Galbraith Estate land in Whitmore.

E&JO: Look and apply for it.

Question 3: What three resources do you recommend for beginning farmers?

DO: I would recommend meeting with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), check with Department of Agriculture (DOA), Hawaii Farm Bureau and Oahu RC&D, and even UH- College of Tropical Agriculture (CTAHR).

FL: Surround yourself with experts. Here are three great resources.

1. University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR) has resources in biochemistry, plant production, entomology, aquaculture, horticulture, organic plant production, food safety, etc.
2. State Department of Agriculture (DOA) has resources in aquaculture, financing, agricultural marketing, grant opportunities, etc.
3. Most importantly, speak with farmers who are producing the crops that you are thinking about growing. Farmers are not the easiest people to talk to, but once you have them talking about the products that they are growing, most are very willing to explain the process and the difficulty in growing those crops.

KM-L: The 3 most important aspects of farming along with their resources are:

- 1) Knowledge: CTAHR, Hawaii Agriculture Research Center (HARC)
- 2) Land and Water: Partner up with the right land owners to attain a lease that works for you.
- 3) Capital: An example is Farm Credit Services

E&JO: Other farmers, UH Extension agents, YouTube, and Google.

Question 4: What kind of training is needed to be successful in farming?

P&CR: Unless you are handed a nice piece of land with the equipment to farm it, or have money saved up to live on while you figure it out, it is going to be very difficult to survive. We started without equipment or money. The landlord called our farm a birdnest. It is more likely that a new farmer is going to need an outside job. Our wives both work on and off the farm. Other farms are an important resource and source of training. Be observant and ask for advice. Get to know the extension agent. Call up the Master Gardeners hotline. Look things up, read a lot, get to know the old time gardeners in the community, and find retired farmers. Keep a journal to keep track of what you planted to know what and when the conditions were and the variety of seed and how much fertilizer and what was the weather like. Most of us didn't grow up farming and so we didn't inherit generations of knowledge. It's not passed down to us, so we had to put it down on paper. We often joke the most valuable training we could have had would have been a course in automechanics. Actually, it's not a joke and it's probably more important to have mechanic friends than farmer friends.

DO: I think you need to know what will grow in the soil that you have. Nutrient management knowledge, being proficient in English, and the ability to obtain a market for your goods are all essential. Also, math skills for making sure that you are profitable is important.

FL: I come from a different background than the traditional farmer so my opinion may not be widely accepted. In my opinion today's farmer needs to understand the business side of farming before that person begins growing. A farmer is an independent entrepreneur. So understanding book keeping, record keeping, marketing, finances, business management and people management is important. Of course, being trained in the process of growing your product is important, but that learning curve will start once you start producing. Some knowledge in the fields of agronomy, biology, entomology, horticulture, etc. would be very helpful. Ideally, the farmer would have some educational background in agriculture and this would help to shorten the learning curve.

"A farmer is an independent entrepreneur." - **Fred Lau**

KM-L: To be a successful farmer, you not only need to be knowledgeable in land preparation and the science behind proper amendments to soil and water along with the technical knowledge of your crop, but you also have to be good with numbers and financing. You can be a great

farmer and grow a successful crop, however if you don't have the right tools of how to successfully take it to market and make a profit, you will not be sustainable.

E&JO: Learning from successful farmers, persistence.

Question 5: Are there major pitfalls that new farmers should be sure to avoid?

P&CR: Beware of grants. The only good ones are the ones you could do without. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Diversity creates resilience. Feed yourself.

DO: If you see a problem, fix it right away. A farmer can't afford to wait even one day. For example, if you see pests get rid of it right away or else you'll lose your whole crop.

"If you see a problem fix it right away" - **Dean Okimoto**

FL: Just as in any other business venture, do not assume that farming can be entered into with very little capital inputs. Do your homework and make sure you have sufficient capital to carry you until your farm becomes profitable.

KM-L: Three major pitfalls include: lack of capital; insufficient knowledge of the crop you are growing; and loss of commitment or passion to see your crop through to harvest.

E&JO: Avoid growing what everyone else is growing. If you're thinking of becoming a farmer first volunteer on a farm before signing a big lease to make sure it's something you want to do.

Question 6: What was your greatest failure? What did you learn from it?

"Failure to work out interpersonal relationships between family, friends and community kills more farming attempts than bugs and weather. Learn mediation skills." - **Paul Reppun**

P&CR: We have had many crop failures. Sometimes it is due to ignorance, sometimes weather but often as not, neglect. There is a saying; the best manure is the farmer's footsteps. Pay attention! In every aspect of farming, timing is critical. Especially it is important to keep an eye on a crop when it is close to harvest. Is the taro starting to rot or getting overripe? Get it out. Are the peanuts getting too much rain and starting to sprout in the ground? Harvest them already. Sweet potatoes eaten by rats? Should have put out poison or traps a month ago. Weeds demand attention. Hoe them when they are just sprouting and save plenty of work in two weeks. Walk around the farm, keep your eyes open and make lists. Failure to work out interpersonal

relationships between family, friends and community kills more farming attempts than bugs and weather. Learn mediation skills. I've learned to practice mediation to deal with the stress and failure.

DO: I started with hydroponic growing in 1984, and it was before it's time. I've learned that managing costs and finding a market are essential to success.

FL: I tend to "scale up" too quickly, putting too much at risk too quickly and assuming that an accelerated learning curve is the best way to achieve success. This business model may work if the system you are using has been developed to its full potential and you are just trying to build a better mouse trap. But if we are still trying to develop the perfect system, it would be best to start slow and run with smaller prototypes.

KM-L: My dad says that his greatest failure includes our first years farming in Opae'ula, Haleiwa. Not understanding the soil chemistry of this new farm site was the problem. Because we were not aware that the soil in Opae'ula was much different than the soil in Kahuku, we lost our entire crop of watermelon that first year. He worked hard to understand the soil science of the area and how to amend it properly.

E&JO: We planted Manoa lettuce on our entire farm and lost our entire crop due to spotted wilt virus. I learned to diversify crop selection to prevent disease from occurring.

*"I learned to diversify crop selection to prevent disease from occurring."
- Ed Otsuji*

Question 7: What has been your greatest success?

P&CR: Survival, with no diminution of the thrill.

DO: I believe marketing and branding 'Nalo Farms is by far the best thing I could have done. Of course making sure the brand is always great is a big challenge.

FL: My wife and I have managed to raise two sons and a daughter and so far they are not in jail!

KM-L: We are still working at it...

E&JO: Farmers Markets, value added products, and media.

Question 8: What kind of networks/associations do you belong to? What networks/associations would you recommend for new farmers?

P&CR: We belong to Onipa'a Na Hui Kalo, an association that once or several times a year engages in a work project to help taro farmers. Ideally the project works on infrastructure that benefits several farms. Taro farming day to day is not hard. Building the lo'i and the irrigation

system to begin with is hard and was traditionally done by many people. Like the Amish build barns. This laulima idea does not need to be hundreds of people; it can be a group of friends, extended family and community. It is a great way for everyone in the community to be connected to farming.

DO: I do all lot of things in the community. I am on the advisory boards of CTAHR, Leeward Community College Culinary Program, Kapiolani Community College culinary program. Also, I'm on the boards of HARC, Good Beginnings Alliance, Hawaii Agricultural Foundation, Pacific Century Fellows, and Hawaii Marketing Association. I'm currently President of the Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation and formerly served on the boards of Hawaii Chamber of Commerce and Iolani Alumni Association. I think a farmer absolutely needs to belong to Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation, and any marketing or food organizations.

FL: I am a member of the Landscape Industry Council of Hawaii (LICH) and the Business Industry Association (BIA). Sorry no farming networks and associations at this time.

KM-L: We are members of the Hawaii Farm Bureau and Agricultural Leadership Foundation which are both excellent organizations to be a part of. They can point you in the right direction when you need guidance and can provide great networking opportunities.

E&JO: Best networks are Hawaii Farm Bureau and talking to other successful farmers.

Question 9: How do you recruit and train labor (employees, volunteers, etc.) for your farm?

P&CR: Our farm is small enough that we can do all the labor ourselves. We can call on family and friends occasionally to help with big projects such as rebuilding dams in the river after a big flood. It is difficult to afford an employee on a small farm. The salary we would be able to offer to an employee would not be enough for someone to live off on. We can because we live on our own farm. We have low rent, don't commute and grow a lot of our own food.

DO: We have a core group of managers in different areas that are responsible for training. We try to hire from word of mouth within our organization, as it is important for us to establish a family type of organization.

FL: My present companies have been in operation for over 25 years so most of our recruiting has come from friends or relatives of our existing workers. Training is done on the job.

KM-L: We have always used the strength of "word of mouth" and referrals for all our hires.

E&JO: Our best workers found us through articles and the web. The best ones are the ones that have farming experience.

Question 10: What do you think the future holds for farming in Hawaii?

P&CR: We are all pretty familiar with the problems facing large scale agriculture. The time will eventually and inevitably come when Hawaii has to feed itself by using local resources. We are going to have to replace fossil fuel energy with more human energy and ingenuity. As the food chain shortens, the relationship between farmer and community will strengthen. Anyone who grows food will be important, there are many part-time farmers and a lot of our food will be grown in home gardens. We think part-time farmers are the future for many reasons. Ideally a farmer can live on the farm but landlords are often afraid to allow this because they fear that it will be difficult to evict a farmer and his crops especially long term crops. So living off the farm requires renting living space and commuting which is hard to afford just farming alone. Lets not forget medical insurance. So having another job pays essential bills. It is easier to find smaller pieces of land, short term leases maybe even multiple mini-farms in different locations. There is more risk but less to lose. Having that backup job gives time to learn, practice, experiment and make mistakes.

DO: I think if we are able to secure land, water and labor the future would be great! It is securing these things in a political world that is the difficulty. There are many opportunities in agriculture today.

FL: I see great things on the horizon for farming in Hawaii. With the final purchase of the Galbraith lands and the Ag Development Corporation (ADC) moving toward plans of developing 1200 acres into an agricultural facility is just one of the exciting visions for future farming in Hawaii. The movement toward "Buy Local" and Hawaii's sustainable future is a major driving force for the industry. I hope that these visions are successful, sustainable and grow in proportion for many decades to follow.

KM-L: With the proper passion, drive, knowledge and business sense the future is enormous.

E&JO: It never looked any better. People are becoming more aware of the importance of buying and supporting local. As demand increases farmers will become more successful.

Mahalo to our 2012 Master Farmers!

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