

How did you start farming and what do you grow?

I grew up with an understanding of the importance of native crops and eating with the seasons.

Farmer: Celia Ortega

I started about 25-29 years ago, I don't really remember. As an adult farmer in the US, I began with ALBA

Farmer: Maria Catalán

When I began I just wanted to be an independent woman, own my own business, make enough to support my children and feed my children. As well as have the chance to spend time with my kids. I also want my grandchildren to grow up free, to have a carefree and liberated childhood like I did, as well as have a lot of food.

Farmer: Maria Catalán

"I started [farming] because of need"

Farmer: Rigoberto Bucio

When I got to this country I started working in agriculture. I heard about ALBA in 2009 and started my own farm. ALBA helped me start and realize that it's complicated but not impossible.

Farmer: Rigoberto Bucio

For many this was a continuation of their lifestyle from Mexico

In general, this is something they are tailored towards culturally and something that comes to them naturally

ALBA played a role in everyone's journey

They grow different things - we could say that all four farmers we spoke with have their speciality and differ from each other

We could also say that there is a mix of "I want to grow this" and "I know how to grow this". So, they are in somewhat of a loop, but seem to be ready to consider new things if they will be profitable AND easy to manage.



What do you do to protect soil and farm organically?

COMPOST

"I use coverage and compost. I use 3 tons of gypsum and 2 tons of gypsum."

Farmer: Rigoberto Baco Tools Compost

In ALBA for compost, you can pick different types of compost, and yes I would prefer to use 10 tons/acre but they limit you to 5 tonnes of compost per acre.

Farmer: Yadira Mendiola Tools Compost

I compost 3 acres, as well as use cover crops on those 3 acres.

Farmer: Celsa Ortega Tools Compost Cover Crops

COVER CROPS

I use the provided grass and green beans because I am restricted.

Farmer: Celsa Ortega Cover Crops

I plant Ejeos (green beans) and fava beans, and the frequency is about 1x a year since it is required. I'm thinking I need to plan more in the future.

Farmer: Yadira Mendiola Tools Cover Crops

BIODIVERSITY

Pollinators: I use two small flowers and zuzlandro to attract the good insects so they can eat the bad ones. I keep some separate but also dedicate some rows in between.

Farmer: Celsa Ortega Tools

FERTILIZER

In terms of fertilizer I use 422, 442, vitamin fish and sometimes nitrogen and calcium when the plants need it

Organic Farmer: Celsa Ortega Fertilizer

TILLING SOIL!

It's been good for me, as the soil can be easier to manage and workers will want to work with you if your soil is easy to deal with while picking. I work with mostly surface crops, not many with roots.

Tools Farmer: Celsa Ortega Tillage

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Tools Farmer: Celsa Ortega Tillage

If I don't use the tractor the soil is hard and workers complain. If the dirt is hard, crops are also compromised.

Tools Workers Farmer: Celsa Ortega Tillage

They [at ALBA] don't let me reduce tillage, I have to use a tractor. We're very limited in what we can do

Tools Farmer: Yadira Mendiola Tillage

They have a general understanding that cover crops are good, but they don't seem to know how they work

Same goes with compost.

Tillage is practiced. Sometimes out of necessity. They seem to know that this is bad for the soil in the long term.

How did you learn to farm?

ALBA. So far all 4 farmers one way or another received knowledge from ALBA.

Additional learning happens, but it doesn't seem to be organized. When they here of a good course or webinar (some), they listen.

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Farmer: Egoizoa Euse

How do you decide what to grow?

"You're doing well in this crop and it looks good, so we'll take those and make a market for you with this crop."

Market
Crops Farmer: Celia Ormaiztegui

I also grow celery, but that I spend less time growing and more time harvesting and planting. It just takes a big chunk of time to do.

Crops Farmer: Celia Ormaiztegui

"If you're so that you cannot eat it, for example, when others are growing it so well - forget it. There isn't enough food in the world. Plant what you want to plant."

Farmer: Yohana Mendizola
Market
Crops Farmer: Yohana Mendizola

I decide based on weather, temperature, and season. I aim to grow seasonally things that do well in the cold weather and grow during winter, some for summer.

Crops Farmer: Maria Celeste

Some of us are closed off to change. For example, how to grow squash. I will always grow squash and I will not change. I will not be open. There has to be someone who will open to the market, we need to identify the market and figure out the demand and planting in a new location of things, but it will have some adjustments.

Farmer: Maria Celeste
Market

I have tried asking the buyers what they need but price, plague, climate and available workforce influence what I grow and plan to sell.

Farmer: Egoizoa Euse
Market

"If I could know what they want, it would help but I need to consider if the workers would want to grow and pick that crop."

Farmer: Egoizoa Euse
Market

They have connection with the market, and they try to establish their specialisation.

But at the same time it is not evident if they are in fact picking "the most profitable crops."

That conclusion is supported by the fact that they do request more knowledge about how markets work and what consumers want.

Who do you rely on for workers and support?

(Other farmers) need me and I need them. They have a lot of experience in places where I can learn. I have a good relationship with farmers.

Farmer: Celsa Ortega
Community

When I need something, that's when I contact people. From bad experiences, I don't help unless it's convenient. It depends on the situation and people are so thin.

Support
Farmer: Rigoberto Bucio
Community

I was working alone until I worked with Celsa, telling myself that I needed to learn how to ask for help, the help I need.
Celsa encouraged her to work with others, like others, but it was more that Celsa considered for the women in her area, she should learn, buy vitamins, there are resources available, and to order to learn and grow as a business owner.

Support
Farmer: Yadira Mendola

Right now I'm getting a loan from El Pajaro CDC and they're helping me (obligating) to think about how much I actually need to have a stable home. I like that because it helps me plan.

Financial Support
Farmer: Yadira Mendola

We know there's help & organizations that can help but we need the words and language.

Support
Farmer: Yadira Mendola

We are farmers, but we need technological help from organizations like you all. We can administer the land, but you are way more aware of what farmers need.

Support
Farmer: Yadira Mendola

As ladies, it is difficult to give and receive help from other people. We are distrustful of others due to being a marginalized community, and feeling used.

Farmer: Maria Cristina
Community

ALBA seems to have some influence, but at the same time their services are far from ideal

Support?

ALBA seems to have some influence, but at the same time their services are far from ideal

Some farmers cooperate and support each other with advice (Yadira and Celsa example)...

... while in Rigo's case, he only seem to rely on himself

Maria noted CAFF and other organizations, but she is actually the support leader herself

Farmers expressed the need to learn how to reach out.

How do you pay for farming?

I need money. I need a lot of support because there's a lot of competition, whether that's industrial-sized operations or with certain crops.

Financial Support
Farmer Elyse and Ruth

I might need 1x or 2x. Sometimes all the labor gets true earnings, so then I don't have any left over. It stresses me out because my kids need something or an emergency comes up.

File Income
Farmer Cole and Omega Financial

Right now I'm getting a loan from Elyse and Ruth and they're helping me budgeting to make sure I know how much I actually need to have a stable home. I like that because it helps me plan.

Financial Support
Farmer Yvonne Mendez

How do you keep records of your cash flow?

I keep track in both formal and informal ways. I keep track of the times things are planned and harvested, and when these things should be done.

Farmer Cole and Omega Financial
Bookkeeping

I have a document/sheet with all of my numbers including time, cost and I look at the current market. I do the math based on these numbers/estimates.

Farmer Cole and Omega Financial
Bookkeeping

That I don't have a good system for someone to understand. Sometimes I don't have enough money and put admin work aside. My farm is still not established and stable.

Support
Farmer Cole and Omega Financial

I have someone who I give my receipts to during tax season.

Support
Farmer Cole and Omega Financial

I have someone who prepares taxes and takes my forms. I only see her once a year. She offered to be my bookkeeper but for 150 a month seems like a lot to me.

Financial Support
Farmer Yvonne Mendez

"My brother is my accountant and helps me with all the paperwork"

Financial Income
Farmer Elyse and Ruth

Many farmers have a bookkeeper whom they seem to use only once a year, when taxes are due.

Some try to use Excel, but in general that doesn't work. The reason we've been told - lack of time. And we can assume - lack of knowledge on how to fill that Excel most efficiently.

In general, records are not kept. And we could test that by asking farmers about profitable crops

What plans do you have for your farm?

Right now it would be to learn the markets and make that capital to gain peace and tranquility.

Farmer Celsa Ortega Financial

I want around 8 acres to enjoy and not worry, reach that level to be a good stable business with different branches of income.

Farmer Celsa Ortega Financial

For now I'm learning from 4 acres. I can't say I'd succeed with 10 acres because I wouldn't know how to manage them. I would also be going loan to loan. In this moment I'm trying to find success in what I have.

Farmer Celsa Ortega Risk

I want to expand because the more production you have, the more income you get to keep and have.

Financial

Farmer Yadira Mendola

Having more variety of crops means that if one crop makes more it can help cover the costs of the rest.

Financial Insurance

Farmer Yadira Mendola

My goal is to be an owner of my own farm. Not massive but have the capacity to employ others and have a good/stable home.

Farmer Yadira Mendola

I've thought about canning and that would also be a part of my dream.

Farmer Yadira Mendola

In general, they want to make it more stable...

But while some (Yadira) think of expansion, others (Celsa) think of optimization of current practices.

Rigo seems to be in the most difficult situation as he is constrained by finances.

What do farmers need (as described by them)?

Stability

Understanding of market demands

Learn how to do bookkeeping and make financial decisions

Funding, access to loans and resources

Knowledge how to voice their requests and be heard

Knowledge about advanced agriculture practices

Basic knowledge in agriculture on certain topics (soil nutrients as an example)

How should we help these farmers?

Highlight regenerative practices that would improve their bottom line the most

Highlight regenerative practices that would help their soils stay resilient to climate change

Help these farmers understand market dynamics so that they can plan their seasons better

Help these farmers adopt most simple yet effective bookkeeping techniques so that they have better understanding what works and what not

Help these farmers find more opportunities to loan money...

... and help them manage these loans

What should we be teaching them about regenerative agriculture?

Basics of soil science and soil health

Knowledge how and when and why to use Cover Crops

Knowledge about compost practices and how to make your own compost

Topics of biodiversity, pollinators, beneficial insects, and fighting with insects

Possibly: Crop rotation principles

Possibly: knowledge about conservation tillage (minimal tillage) and no-till approaches

Possibly: niche crops and how to approach their introduction to crop rotations

What else ought to be covered?

How to access more financial help

How markets work and how they should work with markets

Climate change and its effect on agriculture

Bookkeeping and what can be achieved with it

Possibly: Trends in small-scale agriculture and agriculture in general

How should we teach them?

Practice should prevail over theory

Gradually increase complexity of knowledge being passed to avoid intimidating farmers with advanced topics right away

Yadira also told us that for her ZOOM lecture (and we assume recorded webinars) are a good option because she could listen to them while in the road.

Possibly: let farmers teach each other

Possibly: have a session together with coolers, distributors, and consumers

What is left to be discovered

Agronomy:

Talk more about yields, quality of the product. We need to hear stories of successful application of various soil management techniques as well as stories of encountered problems. My hope is to better understand what they need to learn first as well as explain that to them through stories.

We should assess their basic knowledge of Reg Ag by asking basic questions about soil health etc. General question about reg ag is important as well. We need to understand how much they are interested in helping reversing climate change trends and how much they are aware about soil health.

We could quickly check the hypothesis that they do not know about proper composting...

... and how to deal with cover crops

and I also want to find out how good they are with crop rotation

Markets:

How exactly these farmers work with distributors / coolers. We need agreement formats and stories of successful and unsuccessful cooperations.

Financial and bookkeeping:

It would be important to know where these farmers get their starting capital from and whom they rely on today for extra money if they suddenly need it?

We need to talk more about bookkeeping and ask them to show us their records to see what they track, how, and how often. In addition to that

To test what they actually do and don't do with bookkeeping and budgeting, we should ask them about their most profitable crop and least profitable crop. That said, we should continue the conversation by asking "how can you tell?" Because in reality, they might be wrong in their assumptions.

Other:

It would be interesting to find out from them how they define different "levels" of farming and where do they find themselves in that ladder