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Farmers ed program now recruiting students

The sharp, bitter aroma of Froylan Bucio's acre of cilantro wafts toward the field workers starting to work on next season's strawberry fields. Bucio irrigates his fields as the sun dips toward the horizon, an acre he has cultivated for the year since his graduation from the nonprofit Agricultural and Land-Based Training Association's Farmers Education Program or Programa Educativo para Agricultores (PEPA).

Bucio entered the program in the hopes of one day running his own farm.

"I came from an agricultural background and wanted to depend on myself and my own business," Bucio said through an interpreter. "Wherever I go, I know how to start a farm."

ALBA works to support farm workers and aspiring farmers as they establish or build their organic farm businesses. Taught in both Spanish and English from January through October, PEPA covers five main modules: crop planting, marketing, business planning, record keeping and organic production technique.

"Our course is very much focused on the fundamental, practical aspects of farming and running a farm business that the students need to know to get started," said Nathan Harkleroad, Farm Incubator Program Manager. "It is very hands-on, learn-by-doing. "

The program consists of lectures, farm visits, and a shared, one-acre farming experience. The culmination of the program is an individually designed future Farm Plan, which students present to industry experts, ALBA staff, and experienced farmer for critic at the end of the course.

Moving from the Farm Plan to working his own acre still presented challenges.

"I learned you have to be responsible for everything — the produce around you and the papers that are involved in having your own business."

Although the program also welcomes people interested in second careers and organically farming their own land, farm workers, who otherwise would not have many opportunities to move beyond fieldwork, make up about half the class.

"For the typical participants in PEPA, the only other options for agricultural education are undergraduate programs at San Luis Obispo, Cal Poly, or other big state schools," said Jim Leap, local agricultural educator. "But, they're four-year programs, and they don't necessarily teach you to run your own farm. ALBA is unique in that regard."

PEPA designed the program with non-traditional students in mind. Students' ages and educational backgrounds vary greatly and many students spend all day working the fields or already saddled with a full-class load so the core schedule adapts to the students' commitments.

"The most important thing is that someone is serious about this idea of starting their own farm business. And, that someone wants to do this as a career," said Harkleroad.

ALBA continues to support students after graduating from PEPA with half of the graduates continuing onto ALBA's Farm Incubator Program. The Farm Incubator Program leases 90 acres just south of Salinas and 60 acres in northern Monterey County to developing farmers for up to five years at subsidized rates. ALBA provides the new farmers with guidance on production, financing, and business planning.

"This is a community learning environment," Harkleroad said. "Farmer-to-farmer learning is so effective, and, sometimes, that can really slingshot someone ahead in how well they do producing crops and how well their business does."

Most important, ALBA allows them to market their produce through ALBA Organics.

"Most people choose to market their produce through us initially because they're really struggling to figure out production. They don't have time to chase down markets," Harkleroad said. "They can focus on production and, over time, develop the skills to go and look for other markets."

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