



# SPADE & PLOW

## SIZE:

26 acres

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

4

## PRODUCTS:

Diverse vegetable crops, including artichokes, swiss chard, tomatoes, and garlic.

## MARKETS:

CSA, farmers' markets, restaurants, wholesaler

## COUNTY:

Santa Clara

**Spade & Plow, a small farm operating out of San Martin, is a family run business with a focus on serving Santa Clara County.** It was started in 2015 by three members of the Thorp family: brothers, Sam and Nick, and their father, Mike. Each of the founders brought experience with a different aspect of agriculture to Spade & Plow. Mike Thorp's expertise is in organic production. Having become a certified organic farmer in the early 1980s, Mike spent most of his career working for organic companies such as Cal-Organic and Earthbound Farms. Sam had prior experience in wholesale and distribution, while Nick specializes in equipment design and construction. The Thorps' different skill sets and their ability to work together has been one of Spade & Plow's greatest assets.

Although they grew up farming in Monterey County, the Thorps "really wanted to be in Santa Clara County" because, as Sam says, "we saw an underserved need for organic and local produce" here. Yet finding land in Santa Clara County was harder than they anticipated and has remained Spade & Plow's biggest challenge. In 2015, they were able to rent a 10-acre plot just off the side of Highway 101 in San Martin. They added another 27 acres in 2017. Since then, their landlord has taken back 17 acres from the second leased field, reducing their acreage by nearly 50%. Two-year lease terms also create considerable uncertainty for this growing business and make it too risky for Spade & Plow to invest in certain types of farm technology, infrastructure and some crops, such as fruit trees, berries, and perennial flowers. In a few more years, they hope to be in a position to purchase farmland of their own within the county.

# “CREATING A STRONG INDUSTRY HERE AROUND AG WOULD CREATE MORE INFRASTRUCTURE, AND CREATE MORE INTEREST, AND HELP BRING OUR COSTS DOWN AND OUR SALES UP.” —SAM THORP

Spade & Plow runs a popular Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that delivers boxes of fresh, certified-organic produce to about 220 customers. The Thorps were attracted to the CSA model because of the opportunities it provides for personal interactions with their customers and to grow a wider variety of crops. Their CSA boxes are highly customizable: customers can select different share sizes, different delivery schedules, and they can pick from a variety of seasonal, organic fruits and vegetables. Spade & Plow has also developed partnerships with local businesses like Pasture Chick Ranch in Hollister and Chromatic Coffee in San Jose, which enable customers to receive other local products in their CSA box. Having diverse market outlets is important to Spade & Plow, which also sells its products at farmers' markets in Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Santa Cruz counties, to restaurants, and to a local distributor.

**Although the road to building an environmentally and financially sustainable small-scale farm in Santa Clara County is by no means an easy one, farms like Spade & Plow show that it is possible.** Yet despite their successes, there have been challenges along the way. In addition to the struggle to find a place to farm, it was also challenging to get into farmers' markets. The Thorps knew that to gain entry to highly competitive local farmers' markets they would need to offer something that set them apart from other vendors. Initially, they were given access to one farmers' market to sell a unique variety of artichokes. When they expanded their produce offerings, the farmers' market manager pushed back until Spade & Plow explained that they were selling produce that had

been grown in Santa Clara County. In this case, being a Santa Clara County farmer did not help them gain access to the market, but did enable Spade & Plow to sell their full range of produce there.

When asked their advice for new farmers, Sam emphasized the importance of connecting with other farmers. Good relationships with other farmers help create access to resources, such as land, equipment, and information. But they also see a strong community of farmers as integral to the future of farming in Santa Clara County. As Sam says, “creating a strong industry here around ag would create more infrastructure, and create more interest, and help bring our costs down and our sales up.” Spade & Plow also prioritizes building community. One of the ways that Spade & Plow has engaged the broader community is through their use of social media. Their active social media presence has connected them to new customers and highlighted the importance of fresh, locally grown food from Santa Clara County. Partnering with chefs is another way Spade & Plow works to create a community that is excited about regionally-grown food. Ultimately, Spade & Plow sees a well-informed and engaged community as essential for increasing the viability of Santa Clara County farms as a whole. Sam expects that if customers were more aware of the importance of having agriculture in the community--the agricultural benefits that go beyond food to include economic diversity, ecosystem services and climate change mitigation--they would be more likely to spend their money on local food and vote for policies that support small farms.





# FRANTOIO GROVE

## SIZE:

30 acres

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

14

## PRODUCTS:

Olive oil

## MARKETS:

Retail stores, online

## COUNTY:

Santa Clara

**When Jeff Martin, the owner-operator of Frantoio Grove, first purchased his property in San Martin, he was envisioning houses, not olive trees.**

Zoned rural residential—a zoning designation which requires a 5-acre minimum lot size—the 97-acre property can accommodate 19 houses. But as Jeff explains, 5-acre zoning is an awkward size, leaving homeowners with 4 acres to maintain perpetually. Instead, he opted to apply for a zoning permit that allows for a denser development, with smaller lot sizes, in exchange for maintaining part of the property as a permanent open space. Out of this process, 30-acre Frantoio Grove was born.

When deciding what to grow on the 30 acres destined to be open space, Jeff knew he wanted a product that would stand out in the marketplace. His first thought was to plant grapes, but he quickly realized that there was too much competition in the grape industry, given the popularity of vineyards in California. California is home to only about 40 olive mills, so Jeff selected this niche product instead. Even then, he wanted to distinguish his product, leading him to plant Frantoio olives, a Tuscan variety, rather than the more common Spanish varieties that make up the majority of olives grown in California. From there he threw himself into learning everything he could about his new crop.

# WHEN DECIDING WHAT TO GROW ON THE 30 ACRES DESTINED TO BE OPEN SPACE, JEFF KNEW HE WANTED A PRODUCT THAT WOULD STAND OUT IN THE MARKETPLACE.

Like other orchard crops, olives take time to bear fruit and mature. Jeff planted his olive trees in 2005, but it wasn't until 2010 that he pressed his first 12 tons of olives. By 2013, his harvest had grown to 25 tons, and it reached 100 tons in 2017. Unlike the more common Spanish Arbequina olive variety, which is harvested mechanically, the Frantoio variety is hand-harvested. As a result, Frantoio Grove's labor costs are much higher than many other commercial olive oil producers in California. Jeff estimates that it costs him \$600 per ton to harvest, compared to \$20 per ton for large-scale mechanically-harvested groves, a difference that is carried over into the cost of the finished product. Consequently, consumer education is part of making single-variety extra virgin olive oil, like Frantoio Grove's, economically viable. Customers need to appreciate the difference in taste if they are going to buy a more expensive bottle of olive oil.

Jeff's goal was to make a distinctive product, and Frantoio Grove olive oil has won awards at national and international competitions. Gradually, he has purchased his own milling and bottling equipment, enabling him to process all his fruit on site the same day that it is harvested. He primarily sells to retail stores and his olive oil has also been sold under San Francisco-based Bi-Rite Market's private label.

It has taken time for the olive orchard to mature and for Frantoio Grove's reputation and markets to develop. In fact, 2018 was the first year that Frantoio Grove was profitable. Part of the reason that Jeff could justify taking a loss for the business's first 13 years is that much of the value of the land remains in the development potential of the other 67 acres. Nevertheless, Jeff believes that Frantoio Grove has demonstrated it can be an economically viable business and it is on the path to being self-sustaining.





# SHUN-FAT NURSERY

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**SIZE:**

22 acres

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**YEARS IN BUSINESS:**

~20

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**PRODUCTS:**

Snow pea tips, bok choy, Chinese mustard, celtuce, edible chrysanthemums

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**MARKETS:**

Restaurants, wholesale

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**COUNTY:**

Santa Clara

**Jenny Li's family has been growing vegetables in Santa Clara County for more than 20 years.** They are one of roughly 80 Asian-American-owned farming operations that grow Asian vegetables and herbs here, part of a farming tradition that stretches back to the early 20th century.

The Li family specializes in snow pea tips, a high-value, specialty crop. This production system involves multiple plantings over the year, interspersed with rotations of bok choy, Chinese mustard, and other Asian leafy vegetable crops. Their primary sales are to wholesalers and restaurants in the South Bay, East Bay, and San Francisco. These marketing channels strike a balance between the smaller volume, higher price sales to restaurants and larger volume, lower price sales to wholesalers. Focusing on these specialty Asian crops, the Li's farm business has expanded steadily over the years, and the size of the land they farm has grown from 5 acres initially to a peak of 26 acres.

# LOCALS PREFER LOCALLY GROWN PRODUCTS. THAT'S REALLY HELPED US FLOURISH.”

~JENNY LI

**On-site farm worker housing is a high priority for the Lis and other Chinese farmers.** Much of the cultivation and harvesting of Asian vegetables is done by hand by a population of farm workers who often do not drive. Yet, like most other Chinese farmers, the Li family leases their land and short-term leases often make it difficult to justify the financial investment in farm infrastructure, such as irrigation systems, greenhouse structures, and farmworker housing, unless it can be easily moved to another site when the lease is up. Language can also be a barrier to accessing external resources and other sources of farm support.

The Chinese community in the Bay Area has been an important source of support for the Li family and other Chinese farmers. Community connections have helped farmers find land to lease and have helped them to build relationships with consumers. As Jenny explains, “locals prefer locally grown products. That’s really helped us flourish.” The Bay Area Chrysanthemum Growers Association (BACGA), which was founded in 1956, has also been an asset for Chinese farmers. The BACGA runs a buyers cooperative, where the Lis and other Asian farmers with language barriers can purchase fertilizers, seed, greenhouse plastic, pesticides, and other supplies. It has also been an advocate on agricultural issues for the Chinese farmers.



## THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN THE BAY AREA HAS BEEN AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF SUPPORT FOR THE LI FAMILY AND OTHER CHINESE FARMERS.



# JSM ORGANICS

## SIZE:

~60 acres

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

7

## PRODUCTS:

Diverse crops, including strawberries, heirloom tomatoes, peppers, and cut flowers

## MARKETS:

Independent grocery stores, wholesale

## COUNTY:

Monterey

**Growing up in Mexico, Javier Zamora had close ties to farming.** His father farmed and Javier got an early start farming himself, beginning with a 600-yard plot in middle school where he grew carrots and chard. But after coming to Los Angeles in his twenties, Javier gave up farming to work in other industries. Then in 2009 he decided to go back to school, studying horticulture at Cabrillo College before enrolling in the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA). Being in school reawakened his love of farming. “It turns out I love soil, I love food production,” explains Javier.

Today, Javier owns and operates JSM Organics, where he grows a wide variety of berries, herbs, flowers, and vegetables. He employs more than 25 people, a third of whom work year-round, and he is committed to paying them a fair wage. Javier recognizes that his employees are the heart of his operation, “They’re the ones who make this happen every day, so I want to make sure they’re happy and they take ownership of what they do.”<sup>1</sup> His primary customers—independent grocery stores—are also invested in supporting sustainable food systems. Javier explains why that relationship is a good fit, “They understand what it really takes to grow the food and they are willing to pay us a really fair price.”<sup>2</sup> JSM Organics’ products are also sold to a few regional wholesalers and at a small number of farmers’ markets.

**“ IF A CITY HAS LAND AVAILABLE OR A WAY TO GET LAND AND MAKE SOMETHING AVAILABLE FOR MANY FARMERS TO BEGIN FARMING, THEY SHOULD DO IT... THE IMPACT WILL BE GREATER IF YOU ALLOW MANY OTHERS TO PURSUE THEIR DREAMS.”** - JAVIER ZAMORA

Since establishing his own farm in 2012 on 1.5 leased acres, Javier's business has grown steadily. As his customer base grew, Javier found that he needed more land: he expanded to 6 acres by the end of his first season, leased another 18-acre parcel in his second year, and leased an additional 30 acres in his third year. While Javier was enterprising in finding land to lease, it was a strain on his business to spread equipment and labor across three different sites. In 2016, Javier purchased the 195-acre Triple M Ranch in Aromas, providing long-term stability for his business and the opportunity to consolidate his operations. The ranch is protected by a conservation easement on 135 acres of the property, which was key to making the land affordable to a beginning farmer. **"If we didn't have an easement on this property, there is no way a farmer like me would have been able to buy it. That's the bottom line,"** says Javier. The terms of the easement also gave the easement holder a say in who purchased the property, so they were able to prioritize selling to a farmer.

Although JSM Organics has thrived, there were obstacles to overcome in the early years: When he started, Javier had no land, no equipment, and limited resources. One of the keys to getting his new farm off the ground was connecting to people and organizations who assist and support farmers. Early on, he secured a \$10,000 loan from California FarmLink, which enabled him to start growing strawberries and hire his first few employees. Many farm support organizations also pitched in to help arrange the purchase of the Triple M Ranch, including California FarmLink, Kitchen Table

Advisors, USDA Farm Service Agency, and RSF Social Finance. Because of how important connecting to this network has been for JSM Organics, one of Javier's goals "is to help others, and show them how to access the people, programs, and organizations that are willing to help you."<sup>3</sup>

### **Giving back is at the core of Javier's farm business.**

"My goal has always been to better myself, caring for my wife and kids, and once I started feeling comfortable, giving back to the community, to make it easier for others to overcome the issues that you find when you're trying to have your own farm." As part of this commitment to giving back to the community, Javier leases small pieces of his property to six beginning farmers. As Javier says, "There are always people out there who need just a tiny piece of land to give it a shot: to begin farming, just to experience, figure out whether this is something they like to do, whether it will succeed or not." He also acts as a farm mentor, offering wide ranging advice on everything from where to buy fertilizer and sprinklers to which programs are available to assist farms. Two of his former leasees have gone on to start their own farm. After leasing 5 acres from him for several years, in 2018 they moved on to 40 acres of their own, where they now have 15 employees. He recommends this model of supporting the next generation of farmers to others as well: "If a city has land available or a way to get land and make something available for many farmers to begin farming, they should do it.... The impact will be greater if you allow many others to pursue their dreams."



1 "Meet a Farmer: Javier Zamora of JSM Organics," *California Grown Blog*, June 30, 2017, <https://californiagrown.org/blog/meet-a-farmer-javier-zamora-of-jsm-organics/>  
2 "In Their Words: Javier Zamora," *Organic Produce Network*, January 25, 2018, <http://www.organicproducenetwork.com/article/348/in-their-words-javier-zamora>  
3 Gary Peterson, "Javier Zamora breaks new ground with FarmLink land loan," *California FarmLink*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.californiafarmlink.org/javier-zamora-breaks-new-ground/>



# ROOT DOWN FARM

## SIZE:

62 acres

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

6

## PRODUCTS:

Chicken, ducks, turkey, and pigs

## MARKETS:

Farmers' markets, restaurants,  
grocery stores

## COUNTY:

San Mateo

### **Dede Boies started farming because she “loved the work and the simplicity of planting a seed and growing something that’s edible.”**

But it wasn't long before she discovered another passion: humanely raising healthy and happy animals. For the last six years, she's run Root Down Farm in Pescadero, where she raises poultry—chickens, ducks, and turkeys—and pigs in a pasture-based system that strives to integrate care for the animals with stewardship of the land.

Root Down Farm's products are primarily available at eight farmers' markets, from Santa Cruz to San Francisco. Dede knew early on that the face-to-face interactions with customers that can take place at farmers' markets would be important for her business. That's because the heritage poultry breeds she raises look different, taste different, and need to be cooked differently than the poultry breeds we typically find in the store. These varieties also grow more slowly. As a result, they're more expensive for the farmer to raise and for the consumer to purchase. For Dede, creating demand for her products has involved educating consumers about how to cook with heritage varieties and why buying a different breed of chicken makes a difference.

# CREATING DEMAND FOR HER PRODUCTS HAS INVOLVED EDUCATING CONSUMERS ABOUT HOW TO COOK WITH HERITAGE VARIETIES AND WHY BUYING A DIFFERENT BREED OF CHICKEN MAKES A DIFFERENCE.

**Being located in Pescadero, with strong connections to the local farming community, has been an important part of Dede's farm story.** Dede first came to Pescadero as an apprentice at Pie Ranch, a farming and food system education center on the San Mateo Coast. In addition to gaining lots of hands-on farming experience there, she was also immersed in the local farming community, which led her to subsequent jobs at other area farms, and ultimately to the property where she now farms. When she was ready to start her own farm, Dede had already been living in Pescadero for more than five years, giving her access to a support network that was instrumental in helping her navigate the early years of her farm business. Pescadero has another advantage as well. From a business standpoint, it's located just one hour from major urban markets.

Root Down Farm is located on 62 acres that are owned and protected by the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST). Dede's time on the property has coincided with POST's increasing engagement in farmland and rangeland conservation. As a result, POST has helped to create a lease agreement that's

favorable for a new farm business and invested in essential infrastructure like rebuilding the barn on the property. Now that Root Down Farm is established, Dede is subleasing some of her land to three other farmers: Fly Girl Farm, Steadfast Herbs, and LeftCoast GrassFed. The collaborations with other tenants feel like a natural continuation of Root Down Farm's story—Dede knew there were other small farm businesses that needed support, just like she had, and she is happy to be able to give back to the farming community in this way.

After six years in business, Dede remains passionate about humanely and sustainably raising meat. One of the things she's learned along the way is how important it is to understand the business side of farming, for the simple reason that farmers can't keep farming if their businesses aren't doing well. Recently, Dede's focus on financial viability has become even greater. She and her wife welcomed their first child, and Dede wants to ensure that she will be able to maintain the farm, so they can raise their family there.





# VEGGIELUTION

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**SIZE:**

6 acres

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**YEARS IN BUSINESS:**

11

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**PRODUCTS:**

150 varieties of fruits, 40 varieties of vegetables, and various herbs

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**MARKETS:**

Fresh produce sold at farm stand; Prepared food distributed through food truck, commercial kitchen, food carts, and at educational programs

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**COUNTY:**

Santa Clara

**Veggielution was started in 2007 by three San Jose State University students who hoped to create community through farming and food.**

Initially they grew food in the front and backyards of homes around the University. Then in 2008, Veggielution moved to half an acre of land at the City of San Jose's Emma Prusch Park, where the farm has since expanded to 6 acres.

Like many other farming nonprofits, Veggielution sees growing food as a way to achieve broader social goals. Veggielution's mission is "to connect people from diverse backgrounds through food and farming to build community in East San Jose." As a result, engaging the community is at the heart of the programming that Veggielution offers. Veggielution hosts volunteer programming and a farm stand every Saturday of the month. On the first Saturday of each month, Veggielution holds its Community Engagement Farm Day, where attendees can participate in farm tasks, cooking classes, yoga, and kids' activities. Veggielution also works with local food system advocates through its Eastside Grown program, which provides resources, assistance, and the opportunity for participants to advocate for the changes they want to see in the food system. Another program, Eastside Explorers, offers field trips to middle schoolers in East San Jose, who visit the farm to learn about agriculture, cooking and nutrition, and the local environment.

# VEGGIELUTION'S MISSION IS "TO CONNECT PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS THROUGH FOOD AND FARMING TO BUILD COMMUNITY IN EAST SAN JOSE."

Veggielution currently grows 150 varieties of fruits, 40 varieties of vegetables, and various herbs. The different crops grown on the farm are sold through their farm stand, used in various foods prepared in their commercial kitchen and food truck, and served at community engagement events on the farm. As a non-profit farm, Veggielution does not rely on sales of its produce to support its operations. Instead, the farm and Veggielution's other programs are funded by grants, individual donations, and the Farmer 4 A Day program, which offers corporate employees the chance to participate in a wide range of projects on the farm.

Located in the heart of Silicon Valley, one of the challenges that Veggielution faces is the cost of staffing. It is hard to find and retain skilled labor, and equally hard to pay them living wages in such an expensive labor market. The costs of salaries, health insurance, and workers compensation quickly

add up for their staff of nine people. As a non-profit farm with an annual budget of \$750,000, fundraising is their main source of revenue, and it can be a challenging process. Having a full-time staff member dedicated to fundraising and increasing name and brand recognition has helped them to fundraise successfully. Some of the challenges of being an urban farm such as vandalism, homelessness, and lack of community access to the farm (via public transportation, and bike and walk paths) have also been opportunities for the organization to engage with the local city government to help find solutions.

Over the next five to ten years, Veggielution plans to improve and increase both the infrastructure and programming on the farm. They would like to highlight the diverse agriculture in the county by bringing people together to share their food and farm stories. In the longer term, they hope to become a nationally recognized cultural gathering space.





# OYA ORGANICS

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**SIZE:**

20 acres

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**YEARS IN BUSINESS:**

7

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**PRODUCTS:**

Diverse vegetables, including heirloom tomatoes, summer squash, fennel, and leafy greens

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**MARKETS:**

CSA, farmers' markets, and wholesale

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**COUNTY:**

San Benito

**Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Marsha Habib didn't initially see herself becoming a farmer, though she had agricultural connections.**

When she was younger she visited her grandparents' subsistence rice farm in Japan. Later, she took a gap year before enrolling in UC Berkeley, volunteering at Hidden Villa and traveling to Switzerland and France with the WWOOF program (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). These experiences, along with her agroecology and conservation studies at UC Berkeley and abroad, led her to understand the struggles faced by small farmers and rural communities. After graduating, Marsha was a farm apprentice at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Farming Systems at UC Santa Cruz, an AmeriCorps volunteer at Santa Clara University's BUG (Bronco Urban Garden) program, and a student at ALBA (Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association) in Salinas. It was through these farming programs that Marsha learned how to operate a farm. She sub-leased a 1-acre plot of land in San Benito County, growing food while bringing together college students and local farm workers to share conversation, meals, and field trips. The food from this small farm was donated and sold to underserved populations at a farm stand at a community center in San Jose.

# “ I DON’T WANT US TO GET BIG AND JUST KEEP GROWING AND GROWING. I WANT TO BE AT A SCALE WHERE I KNOW EVERY ACRE OF THE FARM AND HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLANTS AND EMPLOYEES.” –MARSHA HABIB

After the AmeriCorps project ended, Marsha continued farming, founding Oya Organics, a small diversified organic farm in Hollister. Currently, she works with 4 employees, growing mixed vegetable crops on a 20-acre plot. Though she grows over 50 crop varieties, Oya Organic’s main crops are tomatoes and squash in the summer and fennel and leafy greens in the winter. Marsha markets produce through a CSA program, wholesale clients like Coke Farms, and at Bay Area farmers’ markets. After all these years in agriculture, Marsha’s focus remains on farming at a small scale. As she says, “I don’t want us to get big and just keep growing and growing. I want to be at a scale where I know every acre of the farm and have a personal relationship with the plants and employees.”<sup>1</sup>

When asked what has helped the most, Marsha quickly points to her supportive network of neighbors, farm organizations, and access to land. She started Oya Organics with next to nothing. Neighbors loaned her equipment and taught her how to operate it. She was able to purchase her first

tractor secondhand from another farmer for \$5000. The security of a 10-year lease has permitted her to build out infrastructure that would have been difficult if she feared losing her land. Finally, it has been helpful to have access to small farm loans through the Farm Service Agency and business advising from Kitchen Table Advisors.

Though Marsha is clearly a successful farmer, and one of the few women running her own farm business, farming is tough. Long hours and long commutes are exhausting and stressful, particularly with a new baby and toddler in tow. There is always more work to be done and never enough staff. Marsha acknowledged that being closer to her markets in the Bay Area would make her farm operation more efficient and safer, with less time spent on the road, but she would miss out on the benefits of living in a more rural region, such as supportive farm services, the base of farming knowledge in the community, and more affordable costs of living for her workers and family.



<sup>1</sup> Sarah Torney, “Oya Organics Cultivates Family and Food Justice,” CUESA, April 21, 2017, <https://cuesa.org/article/oya-organics-cultivates-family-and-food-justice>



# PINK BARN FARM

## SIZE:

1.75 acres

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

2

## PRODUCTS:

Diverse vegetables, including heirloom tomatoes, lettuces, and scallions

## MARKETS:

Distributor, restaurants

## COUNTY:

Sonoma

### **Rose Madden, the farmer behind Pink Barn Farm in Sebastopol, learned to farm in Santa Clara County.**

After graduating from Santa Clara University, she got her start farming at the former Full Circle Farm in Sunnyvale. From there, she took a position as the garden manager at Santa Clara University's ½-acre organic garden and then as a farmer at the 6-acre O'Donohue Family Stanford Educational Farm. Rose enjoyed teaching students about sustainable agriculture at these educational farm sites, but her dream was always to start her own commercial farm. Now that she has begun her own farm business, the nearly 10 years of farming experience she gained in urban agriculture has been invaluable.

For two years, Rose and her husband Gavin looked for land to start their own farm, everywhere from Salinas to Santa Rosa. As they searched, they knew they really wanted to be able to live on the farm. They also prioritized purchasing, rather than leasing, because they wanted to be able to make long-term investments in their business. In 2017, Pink Barn Farm was born, when Rose and Gavin bought 2 acres with a house in Sebastopol. While owning their own land provides security—there's no worry that the owners will suddenly decide to sell to developers—having a monthly mortgage payment is a source of pressure for this new business.

# PINK BARN FARM SELLS TO NINE CHEFS IN ADDITION TO FEED SONOMA, A MICRO-AGGREGATOR AND DISTRIBUTOR SERVING SONOMA COUNTY FARMERS, WHICH ACCOUNTS FOR MORE THAN HALF OF ROSE'S SALES.

One of the main selling points of Sebastopol and Sonoma County was the strong market for locally grown fruits and vegetables and the proximity to buyers. Pink Barn Farm sells to nine chefs in addition to Feed Sonoma, a micro-aggregator and distributor serving Sonoma County farmers, which accounts for more than half of Rose's sales. "The distributor has been amazing," says Rose. As the one person doing all the cultivation, harvesting, marketing, and sales, Rose does not have time to sell at farmers' markets. By working with restaurants and a distributor, Rose only harvests produce that has already been sold, unlike a farmers' market where farmers harvest without knowing how much they will sell. This is important for Pink Barn Farm

because as a small operation, efficiency is of utmost importance, and as Rose explains, harvest labor is the most expensive labor on the farm.

Rose stresses that the hardest time for a new business are the first few years. For Pink Barn Farm's first year, Rose continued to hold a full-time off-farm job. Now in the second year, she has shifted to full-time farming. As they build Pink Barn Farm, Rose and Gavin are developing their systems and investing in equipment and infrastructure, like a new packing shed, to make their operation more efficient. Starting with just a small area under cultivation has been good, since Rose is the only person working on the farm. Ideally, as their business grows, Rose and Gavin would like to have 10 acres.





# BLUMA FARM

## SIZE:

¼ acre rooftop farm in Berkeley, 2 acres at Sunol AgPark

## YEARS IN BUSINESS:

5

## PRODUCTS:

Flowers

## MARKETS:

Grocery stores, florists, special events

## COUNTY:

Alameda

### **Bluma Farm, founded and run by Joanna Letz, specializes in growing sustainably raised, organic flowers.**

Flowers are a lucrative crop that typically earn far more per acre than most vegetable crops. In 2014, Joanna began Bluma Farm on one acre at the Sunol AgPark. Despite a steep learning curve initially, Bluma Farm has been profitable since its first growing season, with sales increasing considerably each year. Joanna first started selling her flowers at farmers' markets before expanding her markets to include grocery stores and florists. She also offers a range of flower design services for weddings and events. By 2018, Joanna was farming two acres at the Sunol AgPark and her gross sales were approaching \$100,000 per acre.

Joanna is a first-generation farmer, but her interest in farming was inspired from an early age by time spent in her grandfather's garden. By the time she was in college, she knew she wanted to try working on a farm. Beginning in 2008, she apprenticed and was on staff at several regional farms, including Green Gulch Farm and Zen Center and Slide Ranch in Muir Beach. She also completed a 6-month farm and garden apprenticeship at the UC Santa Cruz Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (CASFS). These training experiences

# FLOWERS ARE A LUCRATIVE CROP THAT TYPICALLY EARN FAR MORE PER ACRE THAN MOST VEGETABLE CROPS.

helped Joanna to build a supportive network of farm friends and mentors. At Sunol AgPark, she also received business advising and mentoring that was provided with support from a Beginning Farmer Grant. In 2017, Joanna began working with Kitchen Table Advisors, a local non-profit company which offers business coaching to beginning farmers. Joanna says that since starting her own business, her farm mentors, Kitchen Table Advisors, and FarmLink have been invaluable. She notes, "I've had a lot of that mentorship because I've been in the farming business for a long time. Some who get started and didn't have all these connections, they're left not knowing where to turn."

Some key steps in the successful development of her business have been establishing a relationship with an independent grocery store in her first year; getting into a really good farmers' market

in her second year; and securing much needed equipment--a cooler she installed in her second year, and a refrigerated truck she purchased in her third year. Farming flowers is very labor intensive and having help has been critical. One of the challenges with labor, particularly in an urban area, is finding people with agricultural experience.

In 2019, Joanna shifted the majority of her operation to a 1/4 acre rooftop farm in Berkeley. In this transitional year, Joanna is adjusting her business and production model to her new, smaller farm, but is excited about the possibilities that come with this new space and working closer to home. By farming in the city, she hopes to work less than 80 hours per week and spend less time commuting. Being in an urban setting also offers new opportunities to engage with the community through events and workshops.

