

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

A passion for fruit: Organic grower finds niche farming with nature

He began his career in the fields – picking asparagus alongside dozens of other workers, month after month, in the relentless summer sun.

nature’s tools, not man’s chemicals, to grow his own produce.

A decade later, he’s the owner of about 200

Then he learned to drive a tractor – hauling chemicals, equipment and bins of fruit throughout the seemingly endless rows of apple and cherry trees that spread across the hills and throughout the Yakima River valley near Prosser, Washington.

In time, Adolfo Alvarez became an orchard foreman and then a manager.

At every step along the way, Mr. Alvarez thought about how he would do things differently if, by chance, he ever owned his own orchard. He would do things differently, he vowed, “for the kids.”

But not just his own kids. Mr. Alvarez did not want anyone’s children – especially the children of his workers – exposed to the array of chemicals and sprays that are used in many commercial orchards, and he vowed to use



Ten years ago, Adolfo Alvarez purchased his first 80-acre orchard. Almost immediately he began the process of becoming an organic grower. Through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Mr. Alvarez also improved his water management efficiencies by converting to sprinkler irrigation.

acres of orchards – and a certified organic grower.

It wasn’t long after he bought his first 80-acre orchard in 1998 that Mr. Alvarez began his move toward organic certification.

“But it was costly,” Mr. Alvarez recalls. “Back then the buyers didn’t want organic because they thought the fruit wouldn’t sell,

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Adolfo Alvarez
Adolfo Alvarez Farms

but I kept insisting that organic doesn’t have to be ugly.”

“When we began growing organic fruit,” Mr. Alvarez says, “there was no premium for it. We did it just because it was the right thing to do.”

Today’s consumer understands the importance of organic farming, Mr. Alvarez says. Eco-friendly farming techniques and “tastier fruit” are driving premium prices for organic produce around the globe. “And,” he says smiling, “I guarantee that once you taste my fruit, you’ll never taste anything better.”

And there are scores of consumer fans across the Atlantic who agree. Grocery stores in England and other parts of Europe ask for Mr. Alvarez’s produce by name. “My buyers in England tell me they can taste the difference. The fruit is just better,” he says.

But Mr. Alvarez says that those who make the decision to farm with nature must be willing to pay the price of diligent management and constant vigilance. “When you don’t farm organically, you farm by a system – using chemicals according to the calendar. But organic farming requires constant monitoring of field conditions and pest traps,” he says. “It’s very intense work. You can’t rest. You can’t get behind.”

He refers to his biological controls as “an army” in his fight to produce delicious, pest-free fruit. “There are good soldiers and bad soldiers,” Mr. Alvarez says, referring to both the insects he must control to avoid infestation and the others

he relies upon for controlling potential pests. “You have to protect the good ones, if you’re going to be successful.”

Studying the intricacies of the orchard’s ecosystem has become Mr. Alvarez’s purpose. And learning from his observations has yielded his passion. “Everything you need is right here – provided by nature,” he says sweeping his hand toward the canopy of overhanging, dense green foliage in his orchard.

In the past, he’s even made trips to Chile to learn from other growers. Today, growers from all over the globe come to visit the Adolfo Alvarez Farm – to learn directly from its namesake.



Mr. Alvarez and NRCS Resource Conservationist, Amanda Ettestad review the farm’s conservation plan while walking amid rows of organically grown apples.

Always looking for ways to work with nature, Mr. Alvarez grows nitrogen-generating clover as a cover crop between the rows of his apple and cherry trees. The clover provides a natural source of fertilizer while protecting the soil quality he relies upon for producing the quality of fruit his buyers have come to expect.

Protecting the land and the soil is the centerpiece of Mr. Alvarez’s farming philosophy.

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Cherries, like those seen here, are among the organic produce grown on the Adolfo Alvarez Farm.



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“Years ago, you could see tons of soil being washed away from the orchards – it was terrible. But thanks to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, things are much better today.” Working with the NRCS through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), many growers like Mr. Alvarez have converted inefficient, erosion-inducing rill irrigation systems to water and soil conserving sprinkler systems.

“Those NRCS programs are there to help the next generation,” he says, “not just our own. And I certainly want to leave this land better than when I bought it.”

It is his keen sense of protecting the next generation that drives his intense passion for land stewardship and for farming organically. Mr. Alvarez has five children, five grandchildren and another grandchild on the way.

“I have a great, great concern for farm workers’ kids,” he says. “I’ve been trying to educate workers for 30 years. We have

to keep our kids away from the residues,” he says.

It is that deep-seeded commitment that continues to sustain him today – even while facing adversity.

Reeling from the worst spring frosts in 30 years, Mr. Alvarez estimates that he will lose at least a third of this apple crop, and two thirds of his cherry crop, even though he invested thousands of dollars in propane fuel – trying in vain to stave off the crop damage. “I just had to try,” he says. “I care too much not to try.”

Despite the impending loss – and the insuing threat to his business, Mr. Alvarez remains optimistic. “As a farmer, you just go year-to-year. That’s nature,” he says. “But I still have faith. I still believe.”

*Written and photographed by
Ron Nichols, NRCS
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