

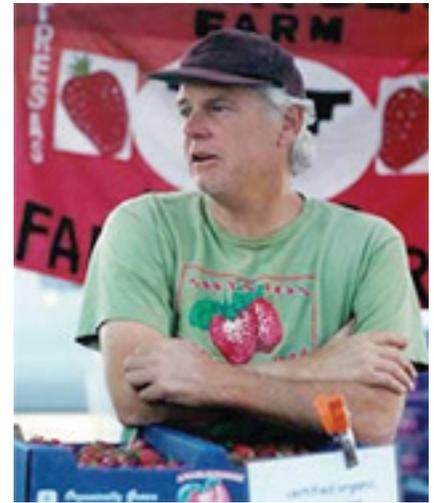
Stewardship Profiles in California Agriculture Meritocratic Organic Farming

SWANTON BERRY FARM

Swanton Berry Farm was founded in 1983 by Jim Cochran. Starting with a four acre half-organic, half-chemical strawberry farm, Mr. Cochran has worked tirelessly for the past 30 years to prove that organic strawberries can be commercially successful. With 200-acres of land leased on five ranches north of Santa Cruz, CA, Swanton Berry Farm has 20-acres growing organic strawberries that are cultivated to maximize flavor, as well as a mix of vegetables that helps to maintain the health of the soil. Mr. Cochran has been an organic pioneer in the strawberry field and continues his forward thinking innovation with unionized farm workers and farm ownership opportunities in the form of stock bonuses to career-oriented employees.

ORGANIC STRAWBERRIES

Exposure to pesticide and fumigants in 1981 left Mr. Cochran feeling sick and shaky and convinced him that organic was not only safer for the environment and consumer, but also safer for the farmer. As a pioneer in organic strawberry farming, Mr. Cochran had to learn by trial and error. With the use of traditional crop rotation methods and through maintenance of the land's ecological balance Mr. Cochran developed a successful system that uses broccoli and cauliflower in rotation with strawberries, combined with single row planting and organic fertilizers, pesticides, and fungicides. In 1987, the farm was certified by California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), becoming the first organic strawberry farm in California. Mr. Cochran's methods grew from intuition, but they were validated in 1989 when scientists from University of California, Santa Cruz conducted a scientific study that demonstrated the economic viability of Mr. Cochran's growing methods. Mr. Cochran not only chooses to grow organically, but sacrifices quantity of harvest for a smaller more flavorful berry that has a dedicated and growing customer base. Mr. Cochran has expanded his vision of farming far beyond organic methods to take into consideration the people and community involved in the farming process.



ACHIEVEMENTS

- 1987 – Swanton Berry Farm becomes the first organic strawberry farm in California with its certification from CCOF
- 1998 – Swanton Berry Farm becomes the first organic farm to sign a contract with the United Farm Workers of America
- 2002 – Swanton Berry Farm was awarded the Environmental Protection Agency's Stratospheric Ozone Protection Award
- 2011 – Mr. Cochran received the National Resource Defense Council's Growing Green Food Producer Award

“When I first started farming I was concerned not only about the environment ... it was just as important to me to be sure that I was treating the employees just as well as I was treating the environment.”

- Jim Cochran

UNITED FARM WORKERS UNION

Founded in by Cesar Chavez in the 1960s, United Farm Workers (UFW) is now the nation's largest farm workers' union and is active in 10 states. In 1998, Swanton Berry Farms became the first organic farm in the country to join with UFW. Employees receive benefits like health and dental insurance, a pension plan, paid holidays, and vacation pay. Furthermore they are treated as professionals and have rights derived from this. Cochran admits that unionizing is not cheap. He spends about \$2.50 per hour, per worker, more on health insurance and other benefits, which comes out to more than \$50,000 a year. That number is always changing and in leaner years he works with the union to scale back benefits, and when the berry business bustles, he offers his workers more

PROJECT DETAILS

PROVING THE VALUE OF ORGANIC

Mr. Cochran worked with, Steve Gliessman and Sean Swezey, researchers at the University of California at Santa Cruz, to perform randomized studies of organic versus fumigated crops. This culminated in a study published in 1989 that showed that Mr. Cochran's organic growing practices were economically sustainable. Demonstrating that the premium charged for organic berries makes them a viable crop created interest in the practice of growing organic strawberries. Mr. Cochran has been a vocal advocate for the sustainability of his practices and, in 2009, he testified before a committee of the California State Assembly, saying that it is perfectly possible to produce strawberries without either methyl bromide or methyl iodide and make a profit. In fact, the previous year, Swanton Berry Farms was one of the most profitable strawberry companies in the country. Mr. Cochran's testimonial did not fall on deaf ears, and the California Strawberry Commission, composed of the states 500-plus strawberry farmers, is funding research on alternatives to methyl bromide and methyl iodide.

EMPLOYEE STOCK OWNERSHIP PLAN

In 2005, Mr. Cochran formed his farm's stock ownership program, where workers not only get a financial stake in the farm (and are promised to have their stock bought back if they leave), but play a key role in all on-the-farm decision making. Thus far, eight employees have taken advantage of this program and more are expected to join. The stock plan was formed out of a flaw Mr. Cochran saw in the farm cooperative system. This system gave equal voice to all members of the co-op regardless of the work they put into it. Only employees who show a willingness to work hard and be involved are asked to be a part of the stock option program.

MERITOCRATIC FARMING

Mr. Cochran aims to create a highly decentralized "meritocratic" farm, based on the Roman principle that any person can rise to the position of leader. Swanton Berry's contract with the United Farm Workers Union and the employee stock ownership program are part of this vision. Farm workers are rotated through various physical tasks to limit the physical and mental dangers of repetitive physical work. Additionally, workers are paid an hourly rate, rather than piece rate, to discourage dangerous fast paced work that is physically damaging. Workers are given unlimited time off to take care of their children's needs and low-cost employee housing is provided, with more than 75% of employees taking advantage of this benefit. These practices allow Swanton Berry Farms to have a very high worker retention rate, more than 50% of the crew has worked for 5 years and some have been there for over 10 years. In 2003, Swanton Berry Farm was the single farm in the US selected to undergo a pilot audit of labor practices, toward the goal of establishing international labor standards for small farms.



PROJECT PARTNERS

California Certified
Organic Farmers

French American
Charitable Trust

National Resources
Defense Council

Santa Cruz Community
Credit Union

United States Environmental
Protection Agency

United Farm Workers of America

University of California
at Santa Cruz