

A new crop: farmers

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LAS LOMAS -- Jose Nuñez raked a hand cultivator between rows of beets under the warm sun Thursday morning.

For years after the Watsonville resident immigrated from Ixtapan, Mexico, he worked for local vegetable and flower growers. Now, he's working for himself, thanks to the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association, a Salinas-based program that supports aspiring farmers.

In addition to beets, Nuñez grows squash, tomatoes, peppers, celery, cilantro and marigolds on 2 acres leased at the training association's 195-acre Triple M Ranch above Hall Road.

"Now that I do it on my own, it's better quality," said Nuñez, his pride evident as he spread his arms to encompass the long rows of vegetables and marigolds thick with orange blooms.

ALBA, founded in 2001 after operating for 15 years as the Rural Development Center in Salinas, promotes entrepreneurship, organic agriculture and consumption, and conservation.

Nancy Bustos Porto, ALBA development and communications associate, said participants in its farmer education program spend six months in the classroom and in the field, learning about organic farming, business planning and marketing. There are also classes in computers and English. After passing the course, for which participants pay \$250 to \$2,500 depending on income and family size, ALBA leases them land at below-market rates for up to six years.

Nuñez was granted a half-acre lease when he finished the course two years ago. As he's proven himself, ALBA has allowed him to expand, Bustos Porto said.

Nuñez stopped working long enough Thursday to show visitors around his farm. He pointed to new growth above the wilted leaves of zucchini plants, damaged when temperatures dropped during the weekend. He'll be able to harvest a little longer, he said. But he's ready for a new season. Inside a greenhouse he built from lumber and heavy plastic sheeting, chard and cauliflower sprout, ready for transplanting outside. The farm is a year-round operation, which Nuñez tends solely on his own.

Farm class

WHAT: Nonprofit Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association helps aspiring farmers learn how to grow organically and run a business.

WHERE: Rural Development Center in Salinas and Triple M Ranch in Las Lomas.

WHEN: New class starts Dec. 1. Applications now being accepted. Space is limited.

INFORMATION: www.albafarmers.org or 758-1469.

He dreams of hawking his produce at farmers markets. For now he sells his crop to ALBA, which distributes organic produce to UC Santa Cruz and other institutional buyers, and his brother, Guilebaldo, who, after six years in the ALBA program, can be counted as one of the nonprofit's success stories.

At 34, Guilebaldo, a former strawberry picker, is a few years younger than Jose. He farms close to 8 acres along Hall Road and another couple of acres higher up the hill. Like his brother, he started working alone on a small plot. But during the past six years, he's not only increased his acreage, but also grown his work force to nine people, mainly relatives. He also distributes his crops, traveling to San Jose, San Francisco and Concord weekly to sell at farmers markets.

"Farm work is hard," said Guilebaldo. "So when you work for somebody else, you get paid. When you work for yourself, the work is still hard, but you get a little more."

Both brothers said though they've been farming since they were children, they've learned much from ALBA.

Guilebaldo recalled planting 10,000 lettuce starts in one of his first ventures and not being able to sell the entire crop. With advice from ALBA, he paid more attention to what markets were selling, diversified his crops and staggered lettuce plantings.

"Since ALBA ... I can see the way much better," Guilebaldo said.

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