

“We’re reaching out to the people who have experienced working the land, but have never had the opportunity to actually own their own farm,” Yasher said.

ALBA offers a six-month educational program, available in both Spanish and English, that covers all topics related to what it takes to start a farming business. At the end of the course, the students graduate and they complete a farming business plan.

Executive director Brett Malone said that ALBA reaches out to immigrant farmers, Latino farm workers and families with limited resources. The tuition fee — which is based on income — ranges from \$250 to \$2500.

Grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and from foundations are used to financially support the educational program.

“We want to allow low-income families an opportunity of economic advancement, a chance to support themselves and their family,” Yasher said. “We’re an economic opportunity organization as well as an educational organization, teaching people how to take care of the land and farm organically using sustainable practices.”

What makes it extra difficult for the farmers is that in order to keep ALBA’s land certified organic, farmers have to comply with many requirements regulated by the USDA.

“It’s hard,” Canto said. “If you see the weeds in the land, you can’t use the herbicides. It’s just with hands or with tools. It’s a lot of physical work. The weeds grow so fast, and we have to hand pick the weeds because we’re not using herbicides.”

ALBA’s local certified agency is CCOF, California Certified Organic Farmers. One of the basic tenets of organic agriculture is the building and maintaining of soil fertility. Certifiers look at crop rotations and types of inputs used on the soil.

Yasher explained that the main difference between organic farming and conventional farming is conventional farming relies heavily on chemical inputs to manage issues like soil fertility, pests, and weeds, whereas organic farming finds natural solutions to control those problems. For example, organic farmers will use insects that eat the pests instead of using a chemical poison. They rely upon nature’s own controls so pests and weeds do not get out of hand.

There are certain pesticides and herbicides that are accepted as part of organic management, but organic inputs cannot be synthetic and they are not toxic like conventional inputs are.

“[Organic farming] requires an understanding of ecology and natural systems,” Yasher said, “and these farmers are really scientists, to a certain degree.”

Proponents of organic farming cite several negative repercussions for chemical usage in farming to support sythetic-free herbicide and pesticide use. Hash chemicals impact all the plant and animal life that on that land and the farm workers who are applying them, as well as the consumers who buy foods with pesticide residue.

Luckily for farmers enrolled in ALBA’s training program, the organization provides technical assistance with pest management and organic certification. For farmers who are just starting out, ALBA teaches the new farmers how the organic certification process works. The new farmers maintain their own paperwork, supported by ALBA. During this three-year “incubation period,” ALBA’s involvement provides physical and moral support. This allows the new farmers time to become familiarized with how that process works before they have to go into it on their own.

“The idea of the incubator is that these farmers are prepared once the incubation period ends to do this on their own,” Malone said. “We try to be along with them every step of the way because we want to give them an opportunity to sort of catch up first.”

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