

María Morales

“I can’t go back, but I can bring it with me.”

María’s father didn’t drink or smoke or go out with friends or even sit down. He was too busy farming. Many people in Paracho, María’s hometown in Michoacán, are master craftsmen—especially of guitars and shawls—and pass their skills down from generation to generation. María’s father, though, was a master of farming, and from him she inherited agriculture.

Before completing ALBA’s PEPA program, María worked for a major conventional strawberry grower, like many other immigrants from her home region. “It wasn’t great to work there. The foremen always yelled at us for speaking [our native language] Tarasco... Plus my skin always burned from the sulfur in the fertilizer—it’s in the dust around the strawberries and gets on you while you’re working.”

María came to ALBA in 2007, just after the drought had dried up all the strawberries. Initially, she thought it was just a place where she could make a little extra money working for friends rather than foremen, and without the irritating chemicals. She worked from 6:30-2:00 at Driscoll’s and then came immediately to ALBA for the rest of the day, until finally she met an older woman farmer who inspired her to give business ownership a try: “She had quite a bit of land. I wondered how she could have all that, and I asked her. And she said I could do it, too.” Within a year, María had quadrupled her acreage and begun experimenting with various crops.

“Organic [produce] is pure gold for me, because it doesn’t have any chemicals. It’s healthy. My kids can pick anything and eat it—like back home.” María’s two youngest sons love to run around the farm together. “It’s good for them—they’re growing up with the crops. They want to buy a big tractor when they grow up, to help me.” The older children, three girls who stayed behind in Mexico and joined María later, are also interested in helping their mom: one studied agricultural engineering and plans to help with the business in the future.

“Agriculture is the most important thing I have. I can’t go back, but I can bring it with me.”