

Misael Morales

“When I wanted to go play ball, they would say, ‘Nope—you’ve got things to do here first.’”

Misael learned a lot growing up on a farm. His mom taught him to “earn things by the sweat of his brow.” His grandfather, a farmer, taught him to work the soil: “If you water this peach, it will grow. If you let it suffer, it will die... and when you work with the soil, you’ve got to give it love and care, and it will respond.”

“It was true,” Misael says. “We had way too many peaches!” They had an abundance of many crops, including *quelites*, a diverse group of delicate, low-growing, half-wild greens that are either foraged or encouraged to grow in empty fields and among existing crops. *Quelites* are a delicacy in Santa Ana Hueytlalpan in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, where Misael grew up. Because they are fragile and labor intensive, people sell them at a high price.

And today they are rarer than ever. The government launched a rural assistance program in the 1990s, distributing chemical fertilizer to small-scale farmers to help them increase corn yields. Now, unlike before, corn hardly grows at all without fertilizer. Neither do the *quelites*. And even if they do grow they are unsafe to eat, because they are ground-level and sensitive to chemicals.

Organic farming, for Misael, is about “not destroying the planet” and “not losing ecological diversity.” It’s also about tradition and family values: “When I picked strawberries before coming to ALBA, my kids didn’t know what a strawberry plant was. Now they eat strawberries off the plant... They see me working and they say, ‘You’re a good farmer, Dad,’ and ‘Wow, Dad, you work hard for a dollar!’... They know how to value the work that goes into putting food on the plate... They have seen me sweat, and I have seen them become more responsible.”

Misael hopes his kids will aim for careers in agriculture, too—maybe agricultural engineering. But like *quelites*, kids can only be encouraged to grow. Anyway, he isn’t sure how well his hometown’s *quelites* would do in the field or on the market locally. His vision is to “apply the principles of his grandfather” to 30-50 acres, probably of celery and strawberries. But, Misael says, “diversity makes America great”—“... maybe I can plant more things... I have the urge to plant *quelites*.”

