

#FridaysOnTheFarm: A Sailor and His Dragon Fruit

Each Friday meet farmers, producers, and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This week we travel to Fallbrook, California, where Leonardo Aguila grows avocados, dragon fruit, and cherimoyas across his six-acre farm. Before becoming a farmer, Leonardo served in the U.S. Navy for 17 years.

From Service to Farming

Born in the Philippines, Leonardo immigrated to Guam – a United States territory – as a young man and promptly enlisted into the U.S. Navy. After his service, he dedicated another 17 years as a civilian employee for the U.S. Department of the Navy.

After his retirement, an orchard of avocado trees on a sunny hillside near San Diego caught Leonardo's eye. The orchard reminded him of the life he remembered as a child, growing up near orchards growing mangoes, coconuts, and bananas in the Philippines.

But in the Philippines, there was plenty of rainfall to nourish plants. In California, farms need efficient irrigation to help the trees stay healthy. And, due to the orchard being on a steep hillside with erosion concerns, something had to be done to prevent the soil from being washed away when it rained.

The orchard needed some tender, loving care, and Leonardo knew he was the one to provide it.

Overcoming Challenges

"The greatest challenge I have is during the summer," Leonardo said. "On average, I paid \$800 per month for irrigation water. Even if I do not use a drop, I still get charged a minimum of \$200 per month. So, I need to conserve and use as little as needed."

Leonardo discovered USDA's [Natural Resources and Conservation Service](#), where he met Soil Conservationists Daniel Holtz and Axel Sanchez. Together they came up with a conservation plan, and eventually applied for financial assistance through the [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#).



Leonardo has worked with NRCS to address gully erosion with an underground outlet pipeline, install a new, efficient irrigation system, and begin an irrigation water management regimen across his operation.

Expanding the Orchard

Leonardo has now diversified his crops with dragon fruit and cherimoyas. He propagates the plants himself, producing three varieties of dragon fruit: American Beauty (red flesh), Delight (white flesh), and Physical Graffiti (light purple flesh). In the future, he plans to begin selling these potted plants to help him cover operating costs while the orchard matures and recovers from a prolonged drought.

Leonardo remains committed to learning more and more about farming. Recently, he planted 100 more avocado trees and enjoyed his daily work of watering the potted dragon fruit, removing hungry snails, building more trellis, and various other projects. He is also working to establish local Asian markets for commercial customers.

“The best advice I can give to other farmers is to ‘get your hands dirty,’” Leonardo said. “Don’t depend on one crop. Try to diversify as much as possible. And, conserve resources as much as possible as well.”

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster assistance, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States weather ups and downs in the market and recover from natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

For more information about USDA programs and services, [contact your local USDA service center.](#)

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