



#FridaysOnTheFarm: An Orchard Becomes a Community's Jewel

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources, and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs, and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those 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, meet Maria Alonso, who began farming in 2010 in Ontario, California as part of a quest to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for her son, who was suffering from symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD.

Then, doctors were recommending either medicine or a change in diet. She chose the latter due to her available financial resources and her drive to garden.

Getting Started

"I was given two small plots at a nearby school, but quickly outgrew them," Maria said.

She recognized not only her son's needs but that of her fellow community members that did not have a quality source for healthful foods. Being located near Ontario International Airport, close to Los Angeles, the area is primarily commercial without many grocery stores and access to organic food.

After only a few short months, Maria realized she needed to start looking for more space. The city offered her to use an abandoned parcel of land adjacent to a public park and surrounded by homes as part of a larger public health initiative. The land was perfect for her because of its size, access to water, and visibility. It provided a safe space for kids, and, best of all, the land was free because the local city couldn't sell it and wanted it developed for public use.

Growing Better Health

"After a little while, my son's school asked me to come to talk, and I was worried there was a problem," Maria said. "They told me congratulations that I was able to get him his medicine to help him, but I told them no, that it was healthy foods, and they were amazed. It had only been a few weeks, and they had noticed a change. And the teachers thought it was wonderful."

Maria turned her community garden into a nonprofit called Huerta del Valle, or "The Valley's Orchard." She started applying for community assistance to develop the space. Thanks to a grant from Kaiser Permanente and the city, Maria was able to purchase needed supplies and equipment and pay a small staff and interns to support the program.



Since then, Huerta del Valle has been able to secure a community food project grant from USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture as well as other grants from other sources as well as others to support the nonprofit.

Conserving Natural Resources

Maria turned to USDA again for help with conservation projects, particularly for assistance with a [seasonal high tunnel](#), or hoop house. High tunnels are plastic-covered structures that lengthen the growing season.

USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) provided technical and financial assistance, enabling Maria to build a high tunnel on the land. With the high tunnel, she could grow more tropical crops like papayas.

NRCS has helped the farm implement a suite of conservation practices, including mulching, irrigation water management and nutrient management, which improve soil health and limit use of water and other inputs.

"Huerta del Valle is making a positive impact on their local community by producing food that's grown with practices that conserve and enhance the precious natural resources in their farm," said Tomas Aguilar-Campos, an NRCS district conservationist in Redlands, California.

Supporting the Community

Today, more than three acres are farmed with more than 150 diverse vegetables, fruits, and herbs, including edible cactus and sugarcane. The farm also offers a community supported agriculture program, or CSA, which provides weekly vegetable boxes.

Vegetable beds are rented out to community members for a nominal charge, and anyone can walk up and purchase crops for a mere one dollar per pound. The farm also sells at nearby farmers markets and restaurants.

The youth internship program provides hands-on farm experience, small business skills, and lessons on how to communicate with customers. With the help of NRCS conservation assistance, interns also learn about the fundamentals of conserving water, soil, and plants.

"I became interested in social causes growing up in New York City," said Arthur Levine, projects manager at Huerta Del Valle. "I volunteered in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and found my way to this farm because of my passion to help create an equitable and just food system. We are really supporting the community here and I believe in the mission."

What's Next



Maria and Arthur recently were approved to replace their old tractor with a cleaner-burning unit through NRCS National Air Quality Initiative. In addition, Huerta Del Valle is working to take over another nearby vacant lot to expand the community farm.

“I’m very, very excited because now I have experience growing food for more than just my son,” Maria said. “I get to help 60 families grow healthy food for themselves. I get to grow food for my community and it makes me very proud.”

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers build resiliency and weather ups and downs in the market. Visit farmers.gov to learn more.

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

Join the Conversation

Follow the [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) story series and other news you can use on farmers.gov and our social media channels: [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), [Flickr](#), and [Facebook](#).

Story Credit: Jonathan Groveman, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Photo Credit: Lance Cheung, USDA