

## Case Study of CSA Farms:

### Soil Born Farm

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By David Hess

Soil Born Farm was founded in 2000 by Shawn Harrison and Marco Francioso. In college Harrison did an internship with Oscar Carmona of the Gildea Resource Center, which ran low-income community gardens in the Santa Barbara area, and he subsequently completed an apprenticeship in ecological horticulture in the Agroecology Program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he met his business partner Francioso. For Harrison and Francioso, urban agriculture brings together various values. As Harrison described, "It brought together the environmental activism side of it, working with your hands and having the feeling of creating something healthy and positive. Tied in with that, Marco and I had seen that people were very disconnected from their food: how it was grown, where it came from, what it does for your body, how it affects your health and state of mind, and how it affects your community as well. So we decided that this was something we wanted to do in a very formalized way: to start a farm and do things that would reconnect people to food." The farm has four main goals: developing a permanently protected urban farm with responsible land stewardship, develop education programs, address food security needs, and bring people together. In 2004 it received non-profit status.

The main farm is a one-and-a-half acre site located next to the Jonas Salk Middle School in the city of Sacramento, where a landowner generously allowed them to utilize the space in return for fresh produce. In addition, the city has allowed Soil Born Farm to use about 25 acres of a larger site, located on the American River Parkway, which includes former farmland and a barn. Harrison and Francioso are confident that they could have achieved success as a for-profit farm, but they wanted to go the non-profit route because of their environmental, educational, and antipoverty goals. Financially, the farm is supported by sales to farmers' markets, restaurants, the food coop, and about forty CSA (community-supported agriculture) subscribers, but because it is a non-profit organization, the farm also obtains support from grants and donations. Harrison made clear that many of the goals could have been achieved as a for-profit farm, and that their non-profit status interacts positively with for-profit farms: "We feel that our work in the city as a non-profit organic farm and education center complements and enhances the ability of for-profit organic farms to increase their markets and presence in urban environments. Being a non-profit gives us more flexibility to address many of the social, educational, and environmental issues on a programmatic level. This does not suggest, though, that for-profit farms are not able to do these things well. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are plenty of organic farms that are doing all of these positive things in various forms and at varying levels."

Given the proximity to the middle school, the farm has generated considerable excitement among the teachers for various educational programs. Although the school

collaboration was still in a pilot stage when I visited in 2005, Harrison and Francioso were developing plans for a garden-based curriculum program called “Food, Health, and the Environment.” Planned projects included: a garden on the school grounds, teachers’ training workshops, use of fresh produce from the farm in cooking classes and the cafeteria, and an after-school market stand. They will also develop an “edible schoolyard,” which involved planting trees and shrubs that produce edible fruits and vegetables, following the model of Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. “It’s an integrated approach to food systems,” says Harrison. “Schools are cutting after-school programs, and this school is a low-income school, so about 70% of the kids are on free lunch programs, which are horrible.”

Another educational program is for apprentices, who come to the farm from across the country based on listing posted at the web sites of ATTRA, the USDA’s National Sustainable Information Service, and California Certified Organic Farmers. “We specifically look for people who want to go into organic agriculture, whether it be in education or farming,” said Harrison. “It’s a really good way to learn. Our farm in particular is so small and integrated that they can see every piece of what’s involved in growing food, and they also can also tap into the more social, educational, and environmental pieces as well.” When I visited the farm, there were three apprentices working full-time.

### Equity and Sustainability

One of the main projects of the farm is Project FEED (Food, Education, Equity, and Diversity). The project is aimed at recent immigrants and refugees in Sacramento who have agricultural backgrounds in their home countries, but it includes people who grew up in California and have an interest in agriculture. As Harrison noted, “We want to create growing opportunities for them—whether it be in a community garden setting, on small farm, or even a larger farm—by giving them the appropriate training and marketing opportunities to that they can grow their business.” With support from the Health Education Council, which is a collaborator on a grant with the California Nutrition Network, the project will develop a fresh product market for the low-income community of Del Paso Heights, where the supermarket produce is second-grade: not fresh, overpriced, nonlocal, and not organic. The project also trains backyard and community gardeners in organic production and marketing. “We want to create the opportunity for that community and accomplish some other goals at the same time: the economic, capacity-building focus; the food access focus; and then the education piece. So the market will be a place where local growers can sell food and people can come and get educated to cook food.” Their plan is based on research of other examples that combine local food access and economic capacity building.

Many of the low-income growers, especially the immigrant and refugee groups, have a background in horticultural and agricultural techniques that do not use synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. Although in Sacramento some have adopted the synthetic inputs, Harrison added, “For the most part, they are very receptive to trying not to use those things, so I have not gotten a lot of resistance from them. They do use Triple 15 (15-15-15) fertilizers, and some use Miracle Gro, but most don’t use a lot of pesticides

and herbicides. It's definitely a learning process, but our goal is to get them to farm 100% organic."

#### Policy Issues and Recommendations

One policy issue facing small, educational farms is the decision to spend the money to become certified organic. "We went that route," Harrison says, "but we may or may not go that route on our second farm. At least in our formative years, we could sell to all of the high-end restaurants and stores. They want that guarantee. We've had great success in having local businesses support us in terms of cost sharing opportunities to pay for certification. We believe in the certification process because we feel that customers should have the guarantee of knowing how their food is grown. Obviously, the more connected they are to the farm, the need for that becomes less and less. The problem is that most people aren't connected to the farm, so having the guarantee and knowing that there are other people looking at it is positive. But the original intent of most of the organic farmers, in terms of what they were trying to do with their land and how they were trying to treat their employees, is not necessarily reflected in the USDA standards to the extent that they wanted them to be. So now people are looking at standards beyond organic and different types of branding that are giving the guarantees above and beyond organic. And so we have mixed feelings about it, and we think it is a good thing because right now there are so many people who are not educated about it, and this is a way to bring the consumers into the fold." He notes that with some of the small, low-income gardeners and farmers whom they are training, organic certification may not be necessary if they are growing for a small customer base and not selling to restaurants or the coop.

Another issue that Soil Born Farm faced was liability insurance. "Typically, if you do a thirty-kid tour with some activities during the day, most funds are charging \$5-6 per head." The non-profit status gives them more flexibility and the ability to solicit donations to cover insurance coverage.

At a more general level, Harrison would like to see cities and counties reserve ten percent of their land for agricultural use. "Within that would fall community gardens, small farms, and a couple big farms. They would be for producing fruits and vegetables for local consumption. If we could do something like that, this country would be in so much better shape. Even on a more basic level, it would be good to have cities and counties create doctrines that say, 'We support local agriculture and the activities that are associated with it, such as environmental education.' Here in Sacramento they wrote a food charter, and now we're trying to get the county to do it. If every city and county had a food charter that said we want to feed our hungry population and we want to create opportunities for community gardens and small farms, that would be a good start."

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Sources:

Interview David Hess of Shawn Harrison, March 18, 2005.

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