

# UC Santa Cruz

## Cultivating A Movement

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# Roy Fuentes



Roy Fuentes Speaking on the Eco-Farm Tour, 2007. Fuentes Berry Farms. Photo by Daniel Anderson.

## Fuentes Berry Farms

*As president of Fuentes Berry Farms, Rogelio (Roy) Fuentes is one of many independent growers producing organic berries for Driscoll’s—a company that was initiated more than a century ago by two strawberry farmers on California’s Central Coast, and has since evolved into an international concern devoted to research, breeding, production, sales and distribution of conventionally and organically farmed strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. Driscoll’s CEO Miles Reiter and his brother Garland, CEO of Reiter Affiliated Companies, are the grandsons of Joseph “Ed” Reiter, who began growing strawberries in the Pajaro Valley with Dick Driscoll in 1904. The Reiters have a reputation for providing partnership opportunities for talented, hardworking, ambitious Mexican American farmers.*

*Fuentes was born in San Pedro Tesistan, Jalisco, Mexico, and came to Watsonville, California, as a teenager. He spent summers harvesting the berry fields his father managed. After graduating from Watsonville High School in 1979, Fuentes worked in banking for a while, but five years later returned to the*

fields. He began harvesting strawberries and rapidly worked his way up to management positions. Gradually branching out into blackberries and raspberries, he also became interested, in 1994, in organic cultivation. Since 2003 he has been producing organic berries exclusively. His growing company employs some 100 workers, providing health insurance and a small number of paid holidays.

Sarah Rabkin interviewed Roy Fuentes on June 16, 2009, at the Reiter Affiliated Companies offices in Salinas, California. That morning, the *San Jose Mercury News* had reported that an organic blackberry grower near Watsonville had lost twenty percent or more of his crop to a recent invader from Australia, the light brown apple moth—sending “a shudder” through the agricultural community. Local organic berry growers were engaging in concerted deliberations about how best to respond.

#### Additional Resources

Driscoll's Berries Website (feature on Roy Fuentes) <http://www.driscolls.com/growing/the-farmers-roy-fuentes.php>

## Beginnings

**Rabkin:** This is Sarah Rabkin, and this is Tuesday, June 16, 2009, and I'm in Salinas [California] with Roy Fuentes from Fuentes Berry Farms. I'll start with very basic early background: When and where were you born?

**Fuentes:** I was born in Mexico in 1959, in a small town in the state of Jalisco, San Pedro Tesistan.

**Rabkin:** And what did your parents do for a living?

**Fuentes:** Well, right now they're retired, but my dad was a strawberry farmer here in Watsonville and that's how I actually got involved with the crop.

**Rabkin:** When did your parents come to the States?

**Fuentes:** My dad came as a *bracero* back in the fifties.<sup>1</sup> He worked on the strawberry fields on San Andreas Road which was mainly where all the berries were at that time. At that point, he was going back and forth between Mexico and the US. Then in 1973, all the family was able to immigrate and we came to California.

**Rabkin:** Tell me about farming experiences you had when you were growing up.

**Fuentes:** Well, I was fortunate to enroll in school and I was able to graduate from Watsonville High in 1979. Every summer we would harvest strawberries and would help our dad take care of the acres he was managing. We also did irrigation, fertilization and picking, basically, we did the whole thing for him. My dad was always very responsible. If he didn't like the plot with runners or weeds, he would always take us on a Sunday and work. That's how we began to love the growing and managing of strawberries and we became proud of our strawberries.

**Rabkin:** How did your dad make that transition from having been a *bracero* to managing acreage himself?

**Fuentes:** Well, it was an opportunity that came to him. The Tomasello family had some conventional strawberries, and they would give opportunities to people that had big families. Since I am the oldest of four, my family was given approximately five acres to grow. It was kind of a family thing going at that time.

**Rabkin:** You're the fourth of how many?

**Fuentes:** Eight of us, seven brothers and one sister, and she's the youngest one.

**Rabkin:** So you graduated from Watsonville High in 19—

**Fuentes:** Seventy-nine.

**Rabkin:** Then did you do any schooling after that?

**Fuentes:** Actually, see, what happened at that time is that while going to Watsonville High in my sophomore year, I started to get into business and I wanted to become an accountant. My dad told me, "Go for it. Just continue." I joined a banking opportunity at Wells Fargo [Bank], and it was phenomenal because you deal with numbers and all of this, which I really enjoy. It's been my forte, you could say. It took a spin back because I took all the tests required by a Wells Fargo program, where they would train you in-house and get you ready to

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take the last phase of testing you to see if you can become—what I wanted to be, which was operations officer. So, I was going to be managing the whole accounting department: the tellers and all that aspect on the other side.

I went to Mexico for two weeks and when I came back my operations officer told me that something had gone wrong at Wells Fargo. They had lost money, had made bad loans and things like that, so they cut the training opportunities for employees. So, I decided to go back to college to continue my business education with the goal of still becoming an operations officer.

Eventually, I decided to go back to strawberries in 1984. I went back and I started from the bottom again. I began harvesting strawberries in Salinas. Immediately, the supervisor wanted me to move up to an overhead position. I was going to be a truck driver hauling the fruit out, but I decided not to take that opportunity.

**Rabkin:** Why was that?

**Fuentes:** Because I was going to get stuck and I wanted to continue moving up. I realized that there was not just one aspect of taking care of a plot; it also included managing a ninety to one-hundred acre ranch. That opened up my eyes. But also I wanted to explore other opportunities, so I applied at the postal office. Three of my friends went and applied and I got a ninety-two percent score. They called me the same year, but I turned it down. They put me at the bottom of the list and they called me back at the end of the year. They wanted me to go to San Jose at

three o'clock in the morning to start working. I said, "No, I don't want to do that." So I stayed in the strawberries, and that's where I've been since.

**Rabkin:** So you turned down that truck driver job because it looked like a dead end. It looked like you couldn't move on from there towards the kind of management that you wanted to do?

**Fuentes:** Exactly. It's due to the structure of the company that gave me the opportunity to harvest the strawberries. I see now, with a clear vision, how they manage their ranches, and I could see that there was not going to be any upward opportunities up to that point. So in 1985, I started working with the Reiter berry organization.

### Working with Reiter Berry Farms

**Rabkin:** Tell me about that, how you came to work with them and what the opportunity was like.

**Fuentes:** When I found out about the opportunities with Reiter, one of my friends from back in the seventies, Roberto Vasquez, told me, "Hey, there's opportunities over here to become a truck driver."

**Rabkin:** Is this Vasquez of Vision Farm?

**Fuentes:** This is the brother. Then Salvador [Vasquez] came along, and he also played a role in my hiring, knowingly because my wife is their niece. So that's how the connection was made. So, they hired me. They interviewed me, and I asked them, "Well, I'll take the position of a truck driver, but I want to move up. I don't want to be stuck with that position." Richard Jose, the manager at that time, he told me, "You work hard, you do good, and I'll keep promoting you." I think what really helped me a lot was the language. I can translate, so I conducted the meetings for him with the overhead personnel—safety meetings, whatever the case was. He used me as his interpreter for the rest of the group.

**Rabkin:** Because you were fluent in both English and Spanish.

**Fuentes:** Yes, so that was phenomenal. Nineteen eighty-five, and that's when I started to move on.

**Rabkin:** So tell me, then, about Fuentes Berry Farms and how that was born.

**Fuentes:** Yes. Well, I started to move up. When you're willing to be better, you always spend time in the field, and take some of the classes that make you learn a lot. There're quite a few people that I really appreciate through my years of growing. I owe them a lot because they promoted me as I was growing. In 1985 I started, and then in '87 I became a supervisor at Aptos Berry Farm, which is another company [that is] Reiter-affiliated. Then in 1989, I took over the management of Aptos Berry Farms along with the operations of Reiter Berry Farms under the supervision of Tom Jones. Aptos Berry Farms is grown by



different entities—we call them *medieros*, but they're independent growers. Reiter operation is the commercial type of a business where we do all the hiring for harvesting. Tom Jones had a lot of faith in me because of my work ethic. He was the one promoting me. So that went on in the eighties and then early nineties—

**Rabkin:** I'm sorry, but how many acres were you managing at that point?

**Fuentes:** At that point, I was managing ninety acres in the Reiter operation and about 103 acres in the Aptos Berry operation. This was in the eighties. Then in the nineties, we started to grow more acres. We were doing well. In 1996, I was managing about 135 in Aptos Berry Farms and then about 125 in Reiter Berry Farms. I was doing everything by myself because Tom Jones got an opportunity to become his own business, so I was promoted to manage the whole strawberries operations, This was approximately in '93, '94, '95, '96, somewhere in there.

**Rabkin:** And is that what became Fuentes Berry Farms?

**Fuentes:** Well, in 1997 I found out that they were going to give more opportunities to become partners with the Reiters, and I put myself on the list and told them, "Hey, I'm interested in doing some of this as a partner, as a business partner." They said, "Okay, we're going to consider you." But there were some movements going on in the company [and] they wanted me to wait a few more years before I could start because they wanted me to train some of the youngsters coming in. So I did that.

So, '97 is when they started with the new partners, and then in 2003, my opportunity came along. I started in 2003. I sat with Garland Reiter, and Garland asked me if I was interested [in] doing organic strawberries, the future was there. I told him, "That's what I want to do. I don't want to grow conventional strawberries."

**Rabkin:** Why did you want to do organic instead of conventional?

**Fuentes:** When we first started the organics with the Reiters, I started from day number one along with Salvador Vasquez and Carmelo Sicairos. We were the three that started the organic program with the Reiters. We started to transition to become CCOF [California Certified Organic Farmers] certified, and we grew some strawberries organically. I liked the way the system was applied. I had always enjoyed releasing predators to work against the different bad bugs. I was also learning through the years with Tom Jones. So that's how I got motivated to move on to organics. In 2003, I planted my first twenty-six acres of strawberries and then six and a half acres of blackberries, also organic.

**Rabkin:** Was this the first time you'd moved beyond strawberries to another kind of crop?

**Fuentes:** Yes, that's the first year, and every year from 2003 up to 2008 I've grown more blackberries. Right now, it's forty-one acres of organic blackberries. 2008 was also the first year for me to plant organic raspberries, fifteen acres and then strawberries, thirty-seven acres.

**Rabkin:** Wow.

**Fuentes:** That's what I have for 2009.

**Rabkin:** And where is that acreage?

**Fuentes:** All my blackberries—thirty-eight of them are in Watsonville, and then my strawberries and raspberries and three acres of blackberries in north Salinas, here near Prunedale.

**Rabkin:** And who owns the land?

**Fuentes:** The land in Watsonville is [owned by] two different branches. Bruce Bruscia is the owner of sixteen acres, and then the Tynan, which is the other acres, is owned by Steve Garrett. He's the guy that leases the land to me. The Salinas ranch is owned by Mr. [Jose Ballin], which is 120 acres of rolling hills. I'm taking parts of the ranch that are good enough to be farmed and that's where I have the strawberries. It's going to be about 102 acres there.

**Rabkin:** Can you give me an idea of an average annual yield from your combined acreage? How many berries are you shipping?

**Fuentes:** Yes. Last year my strawberries were an average of about 5,200 crates per acre, and then my blackberries about 3,500 crates per acre.

**Rabkin:** Tell me about the challenges of berry harvesting and distribution. How fast do you have to pick them and ship them?

**Fuentes:** The strawberries—we pick the ranch twice a week. We come in on Monday, and the fruit is going to have four days, and then we repeat the field again on Thursday, which is a three-day rotation. It's a four-day, three-day rotation for the week in strawberries. We come in and pick it and once we have two pallets, which is about 216 or 324 on three pallets, we ship it to the cooler, or we take it to the cooler and they receive it. They check for the quality, and they give us a grade. We then come back to the ranch and pick up the rest of the fruit.

**Rabkin:** Tell me about irrigation on your acreage: how much water you use, what sources you draw on, and if you run into problems with shortages or saltwater intrusion on this land.

**Fuentes:** So far, thank God, the three ranches, they have good quality water. There is well water within the property. I've always been really close with our provider, Victor Ramos, from Cypress Coast Irrigation. Every time I come into a ranch, I always get the ideas from the engineer about the irrigation and I'm always trying to have everything as close as possible to be efficient.

Water usage [is] different [with] the strawberries versus the blackberries. The blackberries take less water—I would say an average of one acre feet in a quarter, maybe one acre and a half cubic feet of water per crop. The strawberries, it's roughly about a good three and a half, because this is such a longer season than

the blackberries. This is because the plant is cropping more. So, we need to be more on top of it.

## Labor Issues

**Rabkin:** How about employment? How many people do you employ and in what roles?

**Fuentes:** Employment. We have an application process. We interview each person that wants to join the company. We always tell them, "Okay, you're a good candidate. You're welcome to the company," and we always tell them also to specify in the application if they have any other knowledge, not only the harvesting of strawberries or blackberries, but maybe they know electrical work or they know mechanical or welding. We want them to specify any other knowledge that they have on other things. Why? Because there have been cases where we find out that a lot of people coming from Mexico have gone through agricultural schools down there. It's good to know that because they might have ideas that can improve what we're currently doing.

And then once they get hired, we give them an orientation. We give them the company policy handbook that they can take home, read it, and if they have any questions, to let us know. They go into probation of a month, and in a month they have to perform to our expectations. So far, it's been good. On the strawberries I have, for the acreage that I have this year about thirty-five

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employees, and the blackberries, at this point, we're getting close to fifty-five employees. Our total for the company—it's getting close to a hundred.

**Rabkin:** Wow.

**Fuentes:** Maybe exceeding a hundred employees.

**Rabkin:** That's a big payroll.

**Fuentes:** Yes, it is. And it's going to get a little bigger. [Laughs.]

**Rabkin:** Do you have some people who are year-round and some people who are seasonal?

**Fuentes:** Yes, we have year-round personnel. There's always something to do now that I have the three different crops. There's always something to do in the strawberries, but then also in the raspberries and blackberries, so we do keep people on the ranch year round.

**Rabkin:** So what are the main tasks that you have employees working on, besides obviously harvesting, which must be a peak time for workers. What are the other jobs that need to get covered?

**Fuentes:** Well, irrigation, fertilization, bug vacuuming for the bad bugs, monitoring, which is a big thing right there, of course, with the scenario with the

light brown apple moth (*Epiphyas postvittana*), so we need to be *more* on top of the field, the surroundings of it, in the strawberries.

In the blackberries, also all that I have said, plus we have training to do and pruning. They go throughout the year and then maintaining the hoops and keep everything in place. So there are a lot of activities going on—spraying, any Bt's [*Bacillus thuringiensis*] that we need to do for the worm purpose.

**Rabkin:** Do you provide any housing or other non-wage compensation for your employees?

**Fuentes:** Not housing and I know it's a big issue. We live in a county or actually the state, where housing is really expensive. But compensations—I think we do the best we can with it. Our human resources sets up programs that benefit the people, some incentives.

**Rabkin:** Such as?

**Fuentes:** Such as bonuses at the end of the year. We pay some holidays to all the people, Fourth of July and Labor Day for this time, and we give them health insurance.

**Rabkin:** You provide health insurance.

**Fuentes:** Yes, we do. And we also provide an incentive: if there are no accidents in the field, we give them raffles or we give them a barbeque—things like this to motivate the people.

**Rabkin:** How much of your budget goes toward health insurance for your employees?

**Fuentes:** It's a big one. It's a really big one, but I think it's worth it. The people need it. They're pretty happy with it. They pay a portion of it. It's not big. If it's a single person, it's like twenty dollars a month. If it's a family, they pay, like, sixty dollars. They have whole coverage, vision, dental and medical.

**Rabkin:** Fantastic. Is that the norm among berry growers in this area, or is it unusual?

**Fuentes:** No, but actually, a lot of the Driscoll's growers, they do have health plans for them, yes.

**Rabkin:** That's great. What challenges do you see your employees facing in trying to raise families and establish themselves in the community?

**Fuentes:** The biggest challenge, I think, is buying a house, [which] is very expensive. That's the biggest challenge for them. If they don't have the opportunity to buy a house, they won't be able to be part of the community. They'll be coming in, back and forth, going back to Mexico and then come back



just for the season. The ones that are making that extra step to do it are our overhead personnel. They are committed to the company and are staying, and they're beginning to buy houses, too. This is a great opportunity for them this year, and I guess next year—that the houses are lower in price.<sup>2</sup>

**Rabkin:** Yes. As a grower and a former resident of Mexico, born in Mexico, and as an employer, tell me about your perspective on immigration challenges that face the people now.

**Fuentes:** It's a big challenge. We hope that our new president [President Barack Obama] can come in and do something about it. I would say permits; at least, something where Fuentes Berry Farms needs a hundred employees, and they can provide us with certain numbers that I can keep track of them myself and I'll be responsible for them. Anybody that works for Fuentes is always going to work for Fuentes. They can do some kind of a politics, towards that direction, but it's going to be a challenge if Obama doesn't do anything about it because we live in a farming community, and we need the employees. We need the employees to come through. And it's not only in our berries, but also the vegetables and peaches and cherries and everything. So it's for all of us.

**Rabkin:** Has your ability to keep hiring good workers been affected by immigration policies?

**Fuentes:** So far at this point, no. It's been good. But if they do an enforcement, it could be a bad one.

**Rabkin:** Is that something you worry about?

**Fuentes:** Yes.

**Rabkin:** How about unions? What's your relationship to the whole idea of a union contract?

**Fuentes:** [sighs] I know it's—I've been around for a long time, and union is good, but when there's an understanding— That's what I have with my people—okay? We have our own union.

**Rabkin:** What do you mean, you have your own union?

**Fuentes:** We have our own union: myself communicating to them all the time, having meetings. Any questions that they may have, I can answer them at that time. If I can't, I'll find it and bring it to them. So that's the kind of union that we have, with ourselves. We talk about wages, and some of the employees ask me about them, and I'll tell them. Keeping good communication is good. Now, the other part of the union, it did some good back in the years, the UFW [United Farm Workers], I can say that. They brought some good things to the people in unemployment benefits and things like this, medical. It did some good. But I think overall, in berries that I've been involved with, we have always been at our maximum in providing benefits to the employees and keeping everything in line, to our knowledge. People don't like the union because they know that they have

to pay fees for it. They work really hard to earn their paycheck, and they want to keep it. They want to keep it all.

**Rabkin:** So the idea of a UFW contract isn't appealing to your employees.

**Fuentes:** I don't think so. I don't think at this time, no. I don't think ever, because I have employees that are still with me since I started in 2003. They go back to Mexico and they come back and work for me. I guess they're pretty happy.

### Growing for Driscoll's Berry Farms

**Rabkin:** So like a number of other berry farmers in the area, you grow for Driscoll's or for the Reiter Company.

**Fuentes:** Yes.

**Rabkin:** So tell me about how that relationship works.

**Fuentes:** The way it works is that I'm the farmer. Driscoll's provides me with the plants. I take care of them, and when the crop comes, I use their label, the Driscoll label and package. Then I pack all my fruit and I take it to the Driscoll cooler. Driscoll's does all the marketing, the sales, and they pay us for that. But we pay a fee also to do all of it. That's how it works between the farmer and Driscoll.

**Rabkin:** So they provide the plants and the packaging—it's their label, their packaging.

**Fuentes:** Yes.

**Rabkin:** Are you responsible for equipment, inputs, all those other expenses of the farm?

**Fuentes:** Yes, all the equipment that I have is dedicated for my farm. Any equipment that I need, I'll try to buy it and have it available.

**Rabkin:** What are the benefits of this arrangement for you?

**Fuentes:** Driscoll is one of the berry companies that are always innovating. Driscoll grows its own plants. They have a test plot. We work really close with them. They have their research department where they feed us with information on new varieties coming on the pipeline. So we go take a look at them, and from that point we can decide ourselves which variety best fits our own ranches, so we can plant on a percentage basis. We keep really good communication with them and we're always welcome to look and see the test plot. It's really phenomenal working for them.

**Rabkin:** Are you doing actual field trials of these varieties they provide to you, or have they already been trialed by the time you get them?

**Fuentes:** I did two years in a row, last year and the year before. Not this year. I pretty much knew which of the varieties to grow in my place, and I learned a lot from them by looking at them. So now it's on a bigger scale, more acres. But maybe this season I can request to be included. If we want to do a trial at our ranch, we need to request it. I still see that it will be the same variety, so I might skip it for another year and look upon it in the future.

**Rabkin:** When they have new ones coming down the pipeline.

**Fuentes:** Exactly.

**Rabkin:** What's involved in conducting a field trial?

**Fuentes:** We have to prepare, if it's a half an acre or one-quarter of an acre or a full acre, to satisfy their needs. They do all the picking, and we just take the fruit. They give us a credit, because I know they know that it's not going to produce the same as my other fields, so they don't want me to lose money. But I think it's not a loss because the learning—it's greater for my future and of the company by looking at the varieties at my site, at my ranch. So it's a win-win situation.

**Rabkin:** So if somebody else were trialing them on their land, you wouldn't have as clear an idea of how well this particular variety does on your soil, in your conditions. Is that why it's advantageous for you to do it?

**Fuentes:** Exactly. Yes, you said it. There're so many microclimates, and that plays a big role. So having it at the ranch, it's a winner.

**Rabkin:** Do you trial just strawberries or also blackberries or raspberries?

**Fuentes:** Both of them. The blackberries—we have also some of the new varieties that they had at that time. Every year it tends to change, more so than the strawberries. So it's also for my benefit and learning. It's working out. It's working out, having them around.

**Rabkin:** Driscoll's advertises the fact that their berries are grown on family farms, and that seems to be the case with you. Tell me how other members of your family are involved in your business.

### A Family Business

**Fuentes:** It's been really good. Ever since my first son reached the age of seven, eight years, I brought him into the field so that he would get to know where the money was coming from and how he was getting all his toys. I did this early, at his young age, so that he could appreciate what I was doing. Right now, my oldest son is twenty-two, and he is finishing up at Hartnell [College], and he's going to move on to Chico [California State University, Chico] to pursue an agricultural business career. My other son is twenty-one—he's also pursuing an agriculture career, but he's going to be more of the bug man. He's going to be in the field. I got both of them involved. Every summer they work for me, and they

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keep learning. The very little that I have learned through the years, I pass on to them. I told them, “You make them better than what I have done so far, so you make it better.” They like it. They enjoy it. Sure, they get tired, and they can strike if they want, because I pour the hours to them, but, I mean, that’s hard work, and if you don’t work hard, you won’t succeed here. Agriculture—if you don’t spend the time in the field, looking and doing, you’re just not going to be able to come through with it. I think they have it through their minds.

**Rabkin:** Do both of your sons see themselves as continuing to work with the family business?

**Fuentes:** Yes, that’s what’s phenomenal about working with the Reiters. Hopefully [when] I hit retirement, my sons can pick up the business and run with it. That’s why I always tell them, “Get educated because your challenges are going to be different than mine.”

**Rabkin:** Do you see other Mexican-American children of your kids’ generation getting into farming?

**Fuentes:** I would think so, definitely. Why? Because farming is going to continue to be [full of] challenges. We have the water situation. That is the biggest one. But I think government is going to come through. Why? Because we need to feed ourselves, and even though the berry category is kind of secondary to vegetables, still I can see my grandkids becoming farmers. This is kind of the starting point.

What am I, second generation? My kids will be third generation. So I'm hoping it continues to grow within the family. It's a good thing.

### Successful Latino Farmers with Driscoll's

**Rabkin:** A number of growers for Driscoll's are Mexican immigrants who have ascended from the role of farm worker to management and ownership positions, largely, I gather, with assistance from Miles Reiter. I'm wondering what you see as the keys to those success stories.

**Fuentes:** Well, it's really good and it all goes back to how much effort you put into the opportunities given to you. The Reiter brothers—they've been very innovative. They're always pursuing to be the best. And when you grow in that type of environment, you're always pursuing that. You're always trying: Okay, if I produce 5,000 trays, how can I do 5,500 next year or 6,000? And how? And then creating all this history of last year and this year, and how we can predict the following year. It plays a big role. A lot of my peers become partners because they work hard like I did, and we deserve an opportunity. It's been good. It has been good for us.

### Pest Challenges in Organic Berry Growing

**Rabkin:** We talked before we turned the recorder on a little bit about organic and conventional, and I want to touch on that. Were there difficult aspects to leaving



behind conventional growing? You were saying you sort of have the arsenal at your fingertips in conventional.

**Fuentes:** Yes, indeed. It was hard at the beginning. Why? Because, like you say, you have the arsenal in the conventional, but also the arsenal can be bad because if you don't do your right timings of applications, you disturb a lot of the activity going on in the plants in the fields. So timing of chemical applications plays a big role in looking for thresholds on two-spotted mite [*Tetranychus urticae*], aphids, lygus [*Lygus hesperus*] when the time comes. If you don't time it, you don't pay attention to them, you can disrupt a lot, and you end up causing more trouble than doing good.

**Rabkin:** Did you have experience with that, with poor timing of applications?

**Fuentes:** Yes. Yes, I had experience, especially at the beginning when I first was learning. Two-spot mite—when you don't have a lot of rain in the winter, they tend to stay around and grow. If you don't monitor the field and you don't do something about it, you end up having more of a pest pressure earlier than what you anticipate on a yearly basis. That was the case my first year. Okay, two-spotted will be my first challenge. So I released a lot of predators called [*Phytoseiulus persimilis*], and by monitoring the field, I have a clear picture of where are they going to be starting and where I should be releasing the predators early enough. So that plays a big role, the *persimilis*. That first year, it went really smooth because we did really well on monitoring, and we released, I would say about 50,000 predators per acre.

**Rabkin:** Wow.

**Fuentes:** And that was good enough to take care of the problem.

**Rabkin:** What are the most challenging pest problems you have to deal with, in strawberries and in blackberries and raspberries?

**Fuentes:** In strawberries, we have a good handle of the two-spot mite. Lygus bug has been the one that has been the worst to keep under control. We have the bug vac. We come in and vacuum our fields.

**Rabkin:** Are you using trap crops to attract the lygus bugs to a particular place and vacuuming it there?<sup>3</sup>

**Fuentes:** Yes, I use alfalfa. We use it as a trap, and we monitor and vacuum it. We keep it at two different growth levels. Lygus don't like—when the alfalfa is too old, they tend to move out. So if we trim it, half of it, at different spacings, they will move to the young alfalfa.

**Rabkin:** Interesting.

**Fuentes:** Then we can come in and trim the old alfalfa and take it away, off the field. Once the other re-grew, then we keep doing that through the year. Then I like to release predators: lacewings, ladybug beetles—and then some parasites. They go after worms and then eggs of the lygus. That's kind of the approach I

take for lygus because it has been the most challenging one so far for my operation in the strawberries. And blackberries—not really a lot [of pest challenges]. Maybe worm has been the case, but using Bt's, it's been a good thing to do.

### Light Brown Apple Moth

**Rabkin:** So this brings us to the article I read in this morning's *Santa Cruz Sentinel* about a Watsonville organic berry farmer who has had some economic losses because of the light brown apple moth.<sup>4</sup> This is the first public report that I know of, of actual economic damage in agricultural fields by the moth, so tell me about that situation.

**Fuentes:** We knew since last year that there was this new moth that was infesting the area. I believe it started in San Francisco. That was the breaking point, San Mateo County, and then it kind of moved south, Santa Cruz, and now in Monterey also they have some findings. But it goes back to spending the time in the field, checking it out.

There's another moth that looks similar to it. It's called the orange tortrix. It's very similar to the light brown apple moth, so unless it gets sent out to a lab to be checked and see if it is—

**Rabkin:** They look so much alike that you actually have to send them out to the lab.

**Fuentes:** Yes, to confirm. We're always hoping that it's the orange tortrix. But you can really have huge economic losses in organics, and that's where the biggest challenge is now, with this new pest in the area. If we don't continue to monitor and find different bugs that we can introduce to the fields, hoping for the best, organics could be the one that's going to take the biggest loss because of the lack of arsenal.

**Rabkin:** Do you have any weapons in the arsenal against the light brown moth?

**Fuentes:** We have a few: the Bt's, DiPel and Centari. We have this other product called Entrust, which is a spinosad, mainly, and some other products that are insecticides, but they're more so for aphids, which won't have a lot of huge impact.

**Rabkin:** These are organic-approved insecticides.

**Fuentes:** Yes, all organic-approved materials.

**Rabkin:** I remember when there was a big controversy in the county, in Santa Cruz, about spraying residential areas because they were worried about light brown apple moths in the commercial nurseries. There was some concern that some of this spraying they were doing might actually contaminate organic fields. Are you worried about the prospect of some kind of government-sponsored spraying that might injure your organic certification? Is that an issue?

**Fuentes:** It's a concern. It takes three years to get your ranch certified organic, and the worst scenario that we can have is to lose that certification. But we might lose everything. We've got to think really hard and see what the benefit is for the area where we're farming. If light brown apple moth is having such a huge impact for the area, we just have to come in and do what we have to do to eliminate this problem that we have. The worst scenario that can happen is that some of the other states—you're producing the fruit and all of this, and they're finding out that we have this pest, this new pest aboard, and they don't want to take our fruit. That's going to be the biggest impact of all. If the government can come in, or we can help ourselves do the best application possible—in my surroundings we can use the Bt's, keep monitoring, release some of [these] parasitic wasps and do whatever we can to minimize the impact of light brown apple moth.

**Rabkin:** Are local growers deep into conversations and meetings about this question now? Are you all talking with each other about how to deal with it?

**Fuentes:** No, we're working together with Driscoll. Driscoll is calling the meetings. They've been informing us, and they've been educating us. Driscoll is playing a big role with the farmers and helping us the best we can to be in a good position. Driscoll is playing a big role in that.

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## Agricultural Advisors and Other Resources

**Rabkin:** When questions and problems like this come up, clearly Driscoll is a source of enormous support, information and help. Are there other sources of information or support that you turn to when you have growing-related questions or you need assistance?

**Fuentes:** Yes, the Santa Cruz County Ag, Monterey County. They're also being helpful. A specific question goes to the specific person, if it's the ag department or if it's Driscoll. We work both directions. We know our sources, where to go if we have a specific [question]. Mark Bolda from the ag department in Santa Cruz [Santa Cruz County Ag Advisor in Strawberries and Cane Berries]—he's a really good contact to work with, a very knowledgeable person.

**Rabkin:** Any other particular people you've been especially helped by?

**Fuentes:** Different sources. Richard Smith [Santa Cruz County Farm Advisor] is also a good person to work with, very knowledgeable on cover cropping. And other sources. We have good people, good people to work with. If we have questions, we rely on them.

**Rabkin:** We talked about your alfalfa trap crops and the bug vacuuming for the lygus bugs. We talked about a bunch of your predatory insects that you use. Are there other organic techniques you use: hedgerows, cover crops or anything that have been important?

**Fuentes:** Yes. I believe I was the first one that planted a hedgerow with this organization called CAFF [Community Alliance with Family Farmers], and Sam Earnshaw.<sup>5</sup> Sam Earnshaw was the person that came and asked me, through Amigo Cantisano<sup>6</sup>, and we did in fact plant this hedgerow with different plants blooming at different times. It brought a lot of beneficial insects, which I really, really like. So, in my operations and all of them, I have hedgerows. Sam Earnshaw has been the one that has helped me. I like them. There are also these seeds, a bunch of different seeds that they have: alyssum; they have California poppies, they have cilantro and other plants. It's called the Good Bug Blend.

**Rabkin:** [Laughs.]

**Fuentes:** So, I use that also.

**Rabkin:** Who provides that?

**Fuentes:** That I get through this seed company.

**Rabkin:** The Good Bug Blend.

**Fuentes:** Good Bug Blend, yes. It's different, different ones.

**Rabkin:** Have you been affected by the current wave of food safety concerns at all?

**Fuentes:** Not at this time. Driscoll has in place just a phenomenal program on food safety, and we have in place, I would say, one of the best in the area. Primus Labs set up the program for us, and we keep good management to it. They work really close with us. We get a couple of inspections through the growing, harvesting time, and so we've been good on that.

**Rabkin:** Good. You mentioned Amigo Cantisano before. What has been your connection with him and with the Ecological Farming Association?

**Fuentes:** Yes, Amigo Cantisano. The first time I met him was back in the eighties, when we first started using compost in our fields. Of course, we fumigate the fields and then we want to activate microbial activity in the soil. With good compost you can achieve that, after the fumigation gets done. We learned from him what temperatures the compost is done, and what it takes and what will be a good blend to use. He taught us a lot of these things. He also told us about some instruments to use: Cardy meters to check nitrogen in the petioles of the plants—potassium in the fruit, and just different things which should be part of our growing season. Between him and then Sam, we created this phenomenal thing that I really like, and paid attention to it. That's why I was saying I want to do organics because I have all this knowledge: hedgerows and releasing compost in the fields. It's been something that is part of my program.

**Rabkin:** It sounds like a really big intellectual challenge as well as a physical challenge, running an organic berry farm intelligently. There's a lot to think about.



**Fuentes:** Definitely. I mean, you can't fall to sleep on organics. That's why we're always asking for that extra premium in our product. All the different questions about nitrogen fertilizers—the different ways of processing the fish, which is my favorite one—using fish products. Different companies do different things with their fishes, but it's always been a challenge. Prices reflect. If you pay a little more, it should be a better product. You pay less for it, it should be maybe not too good of a product to use. But you go from taking care of your fields, your fruit to Driscoll, all the food safety, and then the less that you spray, even the organic—and that's the question I have. When I go get my permit from the county, they tell me, "Okay, you use pesticides." Any materials that we have for the use of organic, of course, they code it as pesticides. That's always been my question.

**Rabkin:** This is when you get a permit to run the farm, or what is the county permit for?

**Fuentes:** It's a county permit for the use of the pesticides.

**Rabkin:** I see. And you have to apply for a permit to apply these things that are certified organic products.

**Fuentes:** Organic. Yes.

**Rabkin:** But they're still classified as pesticides.

**Fuentes:** Exactly, yes. I know there's some extracts of oil—neem oil, rosemary oil—

**Rabkin:** That's classified as a pesticide?

**Fuentes:** Exactly. (laughs)

**Rabkin:** Because literally it kills pests.

**Fuentes:** Exactly, yes.

**Rabkin:** So the question is: Where do you draw that line, and why should certain things that are not harmful to human health be classified as a pesticide the same way that an agrichemical might be?

**Fuentes:** Yes. Well, I mean, that's work that they need to do, but in the meantime, ourselves—in Fuentes, we always try to use predators and try to use as less of this little arsenal we have for my farms.

**Rabkin:** What about fumigation for strawberries? How do you handle that on an organic strawberry farm?

**Fuentes:** Fumigation.

**Rabkin:** Of the soil? You were talking about having to fumigate before you can plant.

**Fuentes:** Yes. Well, that's the standard, conventional [method]. They come in and work the ground and they fumigate to kill all the pathogens in the soil, and then they also kill the good and the bad pathogens.

**Rabkin:** Right, right.

**Fuentes:** But with good compost, you can restore some of your good pathogens, microbials in the field. With organics, you come in with the best compost that you can find and use it on the farm.

**Rabkin:** And what do you use to kill the soil pathogens in an organic berry farm?

**Fuentes:** We don't have anything.

**Rabkin:** So you're hoping that the compost and all of that control of the composition of the soil will do the trick.

**Fuentes:** Exactly.

**Rabkin:** I see.

**Fuentes:** The conventional strawberries fumigate because there's *Verticillium* in the soil. Strawberry plants cannot tolerate *Verticillium*. That's why they need to fumigate. So when we are finding an organic place, the first thing that we do is take soil samples and send them to the lab to check for *Verticillium*, *Verticillium* wilt, nematodes and any viruses that it may have. Then from that point, we can determine if it's going to be suitable to plant strawberries. If not, we'll let it go, because it's a huge risk.

**Rabkin:** So you just have to be very selective about what soil you'll plant strawberries in.

**Fuentes:** Yes.

**Rabkin:** We talked earlier about where you turn for information assistance. I'm wondering if there are any gaps in that availability that you'd like to see filled, or do you feel like the services are there that you need.

## The Challenges of Changing Conditions

**Fuentes:** I think the gaps are filled at this point, but there's always new things happening all the time, and that's why we cannot say we have everything on hand as sources. We just have to continue to keep our eyes open for anything new that is happening and that can benefit our operations in the area, or especially for Fuentes. So, yes, we're always keeping our eyes open to anything that it's new.

**Rabkin:** It's not a static business. It's always changing.

**Fuentes:** It's always changing.

**Rabkin:** There are always surprises.

**Fuentes:** Always changing. For instance—I'll give you an example. For weed control—okay, my farm—it's on rolling hills, so I have to think about two things. One, erosion control. I know how critical that is, so what do I do for it? I try to do a contour type of rows so that I slow down the flow of the water coming down. Plus, we seed the ditches and the furrows so that when the rain comes, it slows also the water coming down, plus any erosion occurring.

**Rabkin:** What do you seed it with?

**Fuentes:** Seed it with grass, turf grass. So the challenge with that—you do your control on your erosion, your water and your erosion, but how are you going to mow it down? In the winter we use the weed whackers.

**Rabkin:** Just the hand-held?

**Fuentes:** The hand-held type. And now we are going into the technology of creating some kind of a four-row mechanical, so that we can come in and keep the weeds down. So we're looking into some innovation for weed control.

**Rabkin:** Backing up to look at the big picture, are there aspects of running an organic berry farm that keep you awake at night?

**Fuentes:** Right now, it is light brown apple moth. Pests have always been the case. The second aspect has been the sales part of it. Fourth of July has always been the biggest challenge on strawberry sales. Why? Because there are a lot of different fruits becoming available to the consumers. Driscoll sales department does the best that it can to pre-sell the fruit so that we don't end up having some freezer or juice. But every year, that's what keeps me awake: sales and then the bugs, especially this year with the light brown apple moth.

**Rabkin:** How about timing of the seasons and how that changes from year to year? You were mentioning something before we turned on the recorder about how this is a relatively late season.

**Fuentes:** Yes. In strawberries winter plays a big role. If it's a rainy one, or if it's really cold, or even if we have some freeze, the plant growth changes. This year, up to this time, which we're knocking at summer, it's still pretty cold, and we've been having some sprinkles. And that slows down the way the strawberry plants work, because they need more heat units. They need more sun in order for them to make photosynthesis and create more flowers, more fruit. So this year has been very different from last year or the year before that. We had such a late start that our production is less this year than it was last year. By how much? I would say at least thirty-five to forty percent less crates per acre this year versus last year.

**Rabkin:** Wow. I noticed just our little front-yard garden is growing so much more slowly this year than it did last year. There just isn't enough sun.

**Fuentes:** Exactly, exactly. Everything is affected.

**Rabkin:** You, I think, have some techniques that you use to prolong your growing season: tunnels and hoops and that sort of thing. Can you talk about that, how that works?

**Fuentes:** Yes. Well, the tunnels started as being for rain protection mainly. That was the purpose of them. But through the years, we found out that there are other uses for these tunnels. For example, we can extend the crop in order to extend the season and avoid heavy peaks. This is where the innovation starts. We have all this huge investment in tunnels. Now, what else can we take a benefit from it? In raspberries we do a lot of different things. We let certain percentage of our plantings come in and do its normal thing, which is our production coming in, so that's where we first started. Then we leave another percentage as a set-back, which anything that blooms at the same time as the other ones, we take off the blooms, and then where it breaks, then another one comes out. So that delays the crop down the road, so that we don't get all this high peak and then low production. So we go up and then kind of cruise. Then we have another system called mow down, where we go all the way to the ground, and it starts sprouting again and we get the new canes—that should be even later than our set-back. So we are extending our production that way.

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And strawberries—it's kind of a similar thing. We know we're going to get our first crop through July, and then August will be kind of a recuperation time for the plants, the new roots and everything, and then we'll start going up again in production by September, to finish up to October more or less.

**Rabkin:** How is the current economic crisis affecting your business?

**Fuentes:** That's a good question. I know the prices of the fruit—they've been fine, but less than what it was last year. Of course, it has to do, partially, with this economy. A lot of people are unemployed. They probably stick with oranges and bananas and apples instead of looking at the berries. We hope that the turnaround is going to be quick. But it's affecting [us].

**Rabkin:** What advice would you give someone who's interested in pursuing berry growing as a career in this area?

**Fuentes:** Look at the economics. The economics of growing plays a big role. Knowledge, of course, is another part of it. Then your shipper comes along. If you're going to be growing berries for Driscoll, you have a decent opportunity to make it come true, but you have to work hard. And then, of course, all the elements, all the principles—good ground, good water, good communication—play a big role. Those [are] things that I'm telling my sons, and if someone asks me, "Hey, Roy, I want to become a strawberry farmer. What can you tell me?" I'll tell him the same basic stuff. Go with the basics: ground, water, what varieties you're going to be growing, whether you're with Driscoll or if you are with



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another institution. And then keep a good eye on the plants, because that's where the product is coming and that's where you're recuperating your money.

**Rabkin:** That's come up many times in this interview, this whole idea of having your eyes on the acres and monitoring, noticing what's going on in the fields. That sounds like it's really one of the key principles.

**Fuentes:** I think so. It is. That's why the different chemical companies provide personnel, pest advisors that can come in. They work together with you and they give you the best advice possible.

**Rabkin:** What do you think about the idea of providing organic transition subsidies to growers? Of course, if other growers receive those transition subsidies, they'd be in competition with you. Do you think that's a good idea, just in terms of the evolution of organic?

**Fuentes:** Subsidies. Is that—

**Rabkin:** For transition.

**Fuentes:** For transition. The cost of doing a transition, it's really high. It costs you a lot of money and it's very hard to make a sale on a transition product. If we want to grow organically and we want to pick up good ground, we have to do this, anything can help. In my situation, Driscoll helps a lot with it. We'll be

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managing the crop like if it was an organic product, but they still need to sell it as a conventional fruit.

**Rabkin:** This is during the three years while you're transitioning a piece of ground.

**Fuentes:** Yes. But we're finding out more about federal help on it, not only for that purpose but also for erosion control. NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service]—they are helping me to have a good diagram of the ranch so that we have very good engineer by the government to have the best possible way of having less erosion in the fields, and then having in place a format that is going to be suitable for that particular place. So that comes from fed aid.

Also, since my ranch is dedicated to organic, I created a rotation where I can do a lot of cover cropping before I do my plantings, and NRCS also [helps]—and CAFF. They can provide some of the seeds and things like this. So, there are institutions that they help you with some things, but anything in that perspective, it's a plus.

**Rabkin:** For new farmers, how easy is it to find access to farmland in this area?

**Fuentes:** For organics it's very tough.

**Rabkin:** Is it?

**Fuentes:** It's really tough. Conventional, you might have pieces here and there with big lettuce companies. They want the fumigation because it's a benefit for them. If they have enough ground, it's not disturbing their rotations, you might be fortunate to pick up ground from them and sub-lease it.

**Rabkin:** Not so easy for an organic grower to find land.

**Fuentes:** No. Not so easy, not so easy. Organic land is becoming a little tougher. You need to take a cruise around and look at the rolling hills. That's where you're going to find some of it, but some of those places might not have water, and you have the issues of that.

**Rabkin:** So you're saying the bottomland is pretty much taken.

**Fuentes:** Yes.

**Rabkin:** What are your visions and hopes for the future of your farming business?

**Fuentes:** Continue. I want to continue. This is my life. This is where the bread and butter, as they say, it's coming from, and I want to be part of it. I want to be the organic farmer, and hopefully my kids can pick up the role and make it better than what I have done so far.

**Rabkin:** What do you like most about this career?

**Fuentes:** The challenges. They keep you awake at night. They keep you thinking, always aware of new things, new challenges, and teaching my personnel. When I see that everything is running smoothly and that we're harvesting and we have beautiful fruit and all of this, I tell them, "It's not only myself, it's you guys also that make it happen." It's like a teacher teaching you, and then if you grab it and take it with you and make it better—there's a saying in Spanish that the student turns out to be better than the teacher.

**Rabkin:** How does it go in Spanish?

**Fuentes:** In Spanish it's "*El estudiante es mejor que el maestro.*" Yes. And that's what I hope that my kids will be.

**Rabkin:** Roy, is there anything we haven't touched on that you'd like to add?

**Fuentes:** I just want to add that living in this area since 1973 has been phenomenal. I thank God that my parents made the choice of coming here to the Watsonville area and that I went through school, and I was fortunate to do that, and then seeing my kids growing in this area. It's been a blessing. I feel good about it.

**Rabkin:** Well, thank you very much.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Bracero Program (from the Spanish word *brazo*, meaning arm) was a series of laws and diplomatic agreements, initiated by an August 1942 exchange of diplomatic notes between the United States and Mexico, for the importation of temporary contract laborers from Mexico to the United States. After the expiration of the initial agreement in 1947, the program was continued in

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agriculture under a variety of laws and administrative agreements until its formal end in 1964.”— [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracero\\_Program](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracero_Program)

<sup>2</sup> This drop in housing prices was due to the recession in the California and national economy—Editor.

<sup>3</sup> See Sean Swezey’s oral history in this series for more on alfalfa traps and lygus—Editor.

<sup>4</sup> See “Vigilance Urged After Moth Find” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 6/22/09  
[http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/localnews/ci\\_12661783?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/localnews/ci_12661783?nclick_check=1)

<sup>5</sup> See the oral history with Sam Earnshaw in this series.

<sup>6</sup> See the oral history with Amigo Bob Cantisano in this series.