



OYA ORGANICS

SIZE:

20 acres

YEARS IN BUSINESS:

7

PRODUCTS:

Diverse vegetables, including heirloom tomatoes, summer squash, fennel, and leafy greens

MARKETS:

CSA, farmers' markets, and wholesale

COUNTY:

San Benito

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Marsha Habib didn't initially see herself becoming a farmer, though she had agricultural connections.

When she was younger she visited her grandparents' subsistence rice farm in Japan. Later, she took a gap year before enrolling in UC Berkeley, volunteering at Hidden Villa and traveling to Switzerland and France with the WWOOF program (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). These experiences, along with her agroecology and conservation studies at UC Berkeley and abroad, led her to understand the struggles faced by small farmers and rural communities. After graduating, Marsha was a farm apprentice at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Farming Systems at UC Santa Cruz, an AmeriCorps volunteer at Santa Clara University's BUG (Bronco Urban Garden) program, and a student at ALBA (Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association) in Salinas. It was through these farming programs that Marsha learned how to operate a farm. She sub-leased a 1-acre plot of land in San Benito County, growing food while bringing together college students and local farm workers to share conversation, meals, and field trips. The food from this small farm was donated and sold to underserved populations at a farm stand at a community center in San Jose.

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After the AmeriCorps project ended, Marsha continued farming, founding Oya Organics, a small diversified organic farm in Hollister. Currently, she works with 4 employees, growing mixed vegetable crops on a 20-acre plot. Though she grows over 50 crop varieties, Oya Organic’s main crops are tomatoes and squash in the summer and fennel and leafy greens in the winter. Marsha markets produce through a CSA program, wholesale clients like Coke Farms, and at Bay Area farmers’ markets. After all these years in agriculture, Marsha’s focus remains on farming at a small scale. As she says, “I don’t want us to get big and just keep growing and growing. I want to be at a scale where I know every acre of the farm and have a personal relationship with the plants and employees.”¹

When asked what has helped the most, Marsha quickly points to her supportive network of neighbors, farm organizations, and access to land. She started Oya Organics with next to nothing. Neighbors loaned her equipment and taught her how to operate it. She was able to purchase her first

tractor secondhand from another farmer for \$5000. The security of a 10-year lease has permitted her to build out infrastructure that would have been difficult if she feared losing her land. Finally, it has been helpful to have access to small farm loans through the Farm Service Agency and business advising from Kitchen Table Advisors.

Though Marsha is clearly a successful farmer, and one of the few women running her own farm business, farming is tough. Long hours and long commutes are exhausting and stressful, particularly with a new baby and toddler in tow. There is always more work to be done and never enough staff. Marsha acknowledged that being closer to her markets in the Bay Area would make her farm operation more efficient and safer, with less time spent on the road, but she would miss out on the benefits of living in a more rural region, such as supportive farm services, the base of farming knowledge in the community, and more affordable costs of living for her workers and family.



¹ Sarah Torney, “Oya Organics Cultivates Family and Food Justice,” CUESA, April 21, 2017, <https://cuesa.org/article/oya-organics-cultivates-family-and-food-justice>