



search for keywords and/or zip code

Need more? Try a [personalized search](#).

A service of the
National Agricultural Library, USDA

About the BFRDP

Program Impact

Awarded Grants

Success Stories

[Home](#) / [About](#) /

[About the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Program](#) /

[Success Stories](#) /

[Sweet Onions and Beginning Farmers: One Mentor's Work](#)

Sweet Onions and Beginning Farmers: One Mentor's Work



Whether they know it or not, many organic farmers getting their start on California's Central Coast owe a whole lot to ten acres of sweet red onions planted in the Central Valley back in 1974. It was with those ten acres that Jim Leap began his first foray into vegetable farming, and he hasn't looked back. Now Leap is able to share his four decades of organic farming knowledge with a new generation, thanks to a program called [Building a Foundation for New Farmers: Training, Resources, and Networks](#). Funded by a Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant awarded to CASFS in 2012, the program offers Leap the chance to do the work he loves most: mentoring new

farmers who are trying to negotiate the many challenges of getting an organic farm up and running.

After establishing one of the first organic operations in the Fresno region, Leap spent two decades as the farm manager at the [Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems](#) (CASFS) at UC Santa Cruz. There, he taught hundreds of participants in the 6-month [Apprenticeship training program](#), instructing them in the foundations of organic farming techniques and earning the Agricultural Educator of the Year award from the University of California's Cooperative Extension program in 2009. He also became a *de facto* advisor to the many Apprenticeship graduates who continue to reach out to him for guidance.

The mentors who have meant the most to Leap are those who have been on call for all of the unexpected twists and turns that a young farmer runs into, and that's what he strives to be for beginning farmers in the Central Coast region, including those at [Pie Ranch](#), [Fogline Farm](#), Everett Family Farm, [Vegielution Community Farm](#), [Branch Out Farm](#), [ALBA Organics](#), and [Oya Organics](#). For these farmers and many more, Leap is the go-to source for information on everything from how to weld a tractor implement from scratch to whether the soil is too wet to begin cultivating, and the farmers are grateful to be able to learn from someone with his years of experience.

Fran Grayson, who started Branch Out Farm in Soquel in 2013, reflects on Leap's mentorship: "He's not just giving farming recommendations. He's really working with the individuals and their personalities, to help them be able to be strong through the process and feel safe, because they're taking this huge leap." David Evershed, who farmed for three seasons at Everett Family Farm and has just launched a new operation near Pescadero, adds that Leap "feels like the one source for pointing us in the right direction."

Workshops, classes and conference presentations serve as additional platforms for Leap to share knowledge and advice. He has given guest lectures for a sustainable agriculture class at Cabrillo Community College and recently made presentations to standing-room-only crowds at the annual [Ecological Farming Conference](#) in Pacific Grove, where he also held one-on-one "office hours" for beginning farmers.

Although adept in the classroom or conference hall, Leap is most at home in the field offering hands-on advice and demonstrations. This past August and September, a group of farmers gathered at the 14-acre Pie Ranch farm on the coast just north of Santa Cruz on Friday afternoons for a set of workshops dubbed "The Jim Leap Series."

During the workshops Leap took his audience through the basics of topics critical to

beginning farmers: how to select a tractor and tractor implements, create straight, evenly spaced planting beds, control weeds, set up an irrigation system, optimize water use, and choose and use cover crops. One of the attendees, Darryl Wong, is a long-time beneficiary of Leap's knowledge. He explained that one of the things that makes Leap so valuable is "not only is he a great farmer, but he's a great teacher."

Throughout each workshop, participants were encouraged to discuss the topics with each other and ask questions freely, creating a collaborative learning environment that small farmers can't always access easily. "It's how much knowledge he has," Wong explained, "and how willing he is to share it, and how able he is at explaining it. Those three things together are rare, which is why he can't really retire."

Thankfully, Leap shows no signs of slowing down. Besides workshops and on-farm mentoring, the Building a Foundation grant also supports his writing time as he helps revise a manual developed specifically for agricultural educators. Originally published by CASFS ten years ago, the updated and expanded *Teaching Organic Farming and Gardening: Resources for Instructors* curriculum will be offered for free online, and for a low cost in print, making many of the lessons offered through the CASFS apprenticeship accessible to farmers and educators worldwide.

Leap's continued participation as an educator will have a lasting impact on beginning farmers, both locally and well beyond Central California. Grayson sums it up by saying Leap "just goes so far beyond what he needs to." Thanks to the BFRDP's support, many more beginning farmers will benefit from the knowledge he began cultivating in an organic onion field 40 years ago.

To learn more about the Building a Foundation for New Farmers program and the Apprenticeship in Ecological Horticulture training program, see the [CASFS website](#).

Author: Heather Griffith

Photographer: Liz Birnbaum, Ecological Farming Association

Related Program

[Building a Foundation for New Farmers: Training, Resources, and Networks](#)

[Web Policies and Disclaimers](#)

[Site Map](#)

[FOIA](#)

Notice of Funding: This Project is supported by the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program of NIFA, USDA, Grant 2009-49400-05879

