Javier Zamora once worked for others but now operates his own business growing fruit, flowers and vegetables.
A Colorful FUTURE

Nurturing diversity is as essential in the people as it is the plants

By Mary Helen Berg

JAVIER ZAMORA RISES MOST days at 4:30 a.m. and works well past dusk. The long days can be tough, but when he gazes over his fields in the rolling hills of Monterey County, Calif., he feels blessed. As a child growing up in Michoacán, Mexico, Zamora picked strawberries for someone else. Today he owns 200 acres, grows his own berries, flowers and vegetables, and employs dozens of workers.

Part of his goal as a successful Latino farmer is to recruit and train a diverse crew to ensure the industry’s future, he said.

"I think farming and food production need to reflect what America is," said Zamora, 53, owner of JSM Organics.

Industry advocates agree: If the U.S. agriculture industry expects to thrive and innovate to meet future demands, American farmers need to be as diverse as the crops they grow.

"Increasing diversity among farmers and other agriculture professionals will play a key role in driving the innovation, creativity and determination that will be needed to increase feed production, reduce waste and improve infrastructure in order to sustainably feed 9 billion people by 2050," said Jennifer Sirangelo, president and CEO of the National 4-H Council, the agricultural youth development program that has helped create a pipeline of future farmers for more than a century.

U.S. farmers are a homogeneous CONTINUED »
bunch. Of the country’s 3.2 million farmers, nearly 96 percent are white, and out of all farmers, 70 percent are male, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture conducted by USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service. A little more than two percent are Native American, less than two percent are black or African-American and less than one percent are Asian. And while 43 percent of agricultural field workers are Hispanic, only 3 percent of farmers are, 2012 government statistics show.

There are signs of progress. For example, the number of minority-operated farms increased 6.9 percent from 2007, and Teresa Romero, a Mexican immigrant, will be United Farm Workers’ first female president. But if the industry is to conquer future challenges, “engaging all of our potential talent is essential,” Sirangelo said.

REPLACING RETIREES

The average age of a farmer, which has been rising for decades, is 58, according to the 2012 USDA agriculture census. New farmers aren’t joining the field fast enough to replace older workers — the number of farmers entering the industry dropped 20 percent between 2007 and 2012. And there’s a shortage of available young people who are training to fill openings — only 35,000 graduates were estimated to be available for 58,000 agriculture and environment jobs through 2020, according to the USDA.

“There’s just a crisis with the aging farming population,” said Patricia Carrillo, executive director for the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA). Funded in part by the USDA, the nonprofit operates a 100-acre organic farm incubator in California’s Salinas Valley and provides agricultural education for aspiring farmers on a sliding scale and subsidizes land for socially disadvantaged farmers and people of color.

Up to 90 percent of ALBA students are Latino, said Chris Brown, development director for the group. Many are fieldworkers who dream of farming their own land.
To fill the boots of those who are retiring, the industry will need to attract more farmers from diverse backgrounds, Carrillo said.

“There are very low entry rates for beginning farmers, so really what (ALBA is) doing is training the new farmers that are going to come in and hopefully take over all of the farmland that is becoming available,” she said.

**BREAKING THE ‘GRASS CEILING’**

While the benefits of diversifying crops and operations is a common topic within the agriculture industry, few are talking about the need for more diversity among people, according to Kendall Lamkey, chair of the agronomy department at Iowa State University.

The male-dominated field needs the perspective of more women to build resilience and move the industry forward, Lamkey said, and his department actively recruits female students to introduce them to agronomy.

“I think if we get more women out on the farm, they’ll think differently about farming,” Lamkey said. “I don’t know how they’ll think, but they’ll think differently than white guys; I’m pretty sure of that. And they’ll do different things, and they’ll care about different things, and it’ll change agriculture.”

Lisa Kivirist agrees. She’s doing her bit to break the “grass ceiling” as an advocate for female farmers and co-founder of Soil Sisters in southern Wisconsin. Kivirist left Chicago and a “normal job” in advertising for rural life in 1996 and opened the solar-powered bed-and-breakfast Inn Serendipity with her husband. Feeling isolated living in the country, she invited local women to a potluck, a gathering that evolved into a network of 225 female farmers who share resources and host an annual event to showcase women-owned farms.

Women are natural stewards of the land, and their focus is to protect it for future generations, said Kivirist, 51, author of *Soil Sisters: A Toolkit for Women Farmers*.

From left, Jen Riemer, Lisa Kivirist, Cara Carper, Peg Sheaffer and Kriss Marion are part of Soil Sisters, a group that connects women farmers. Kivirist started the organization after opening the Inn Serendipity bed-and-breakfast, above, with her husband. The movement also spurred a book.
“Women have an intuitive talent for nurturing — be it kids, be it soil, be it plants,” Kivirist said. “We also have a shared desire for education, and if you combine those things of caring for our land, of cultivating healthy food and providing a means to share that information, that’s powerful. That can transform not only what’s on our plate, but I’d argue the health of our country.”

Farmers should reflect Mother Nature, she said. “Nature is diverse. Nature doesn’t just one seed, and we need our farming base to reflect that.”

GROWING THE GRASSROOTS

Diverse growers bring wide-ranging experiences and backgrounds that will ultimately strengthen the food system and ensure that fresh, healthy food is widely available to every community, said Leah Penniman, author of Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land.

“By not having the voices of many cultures — immigrant communities, Asian communities, Latinx, black, indigenous communities — we’re creating a really narrow sense of what it means to produce food,” said Penniman, 38, who is also co-director of Soul Fire Farm. “And that can undermine ultimately our food security because we know by emulating ecosystems that diversity equals resiliency.”

Located northeast of Albany, N.Y., Soul Fire Farm provides an immersive program each summer for black, indigenous and other people of color to learn basic farming and healthy food preparation skills. The cost of the session is offered on a sliding scale, and the waitlist is yearslong, Penniman said.

“There’s no scarcity of black and brown farmers who want access to land and want to do this work,” Penniman added. “But we’re shut out because we don’t have access to capital and land because it was taken from our families, and it’s not easy to get back. It’s part of the healing of a racially charged past for our nation to figure out how to correct those harms.”

ACCESS IS KEY

Nonprofits like ALBA, grassroots groups like Soul Fire Farm and Soil Sisters, government programs and national support organizations all provide resources to help farmers like Javier Zamora gain a foothold in the industry.

When Zamora came to the U.S. at age 20, long before the success of JSM Organics, he lived “the whole American Dream” and had a career in the restaurant industry, he said. But during the economic downturn in 2005, Zamora lost his job and his home. Because of his low credit rating, he couldn’t rent an apartment for his family.

“We went from the penthouse to the perros (dog) house,” he said.

Zamora earned a GED and returned to school to study horticulture and organic production. Then he attended ALBA’s 10-month training program, where he learned crop planning, marketing and other helpful information. He completed the program in 2012, leased an acre and a half and began to farm.

Zamora acquired more land through a patchwork of assistance that included help from ALBA, California Farm Link — a nonprofit that supports independent farmers with loans and matches them with available land — and a low-cost $300,000 loan from the Farm Services Agency (FSA).

USDA provides a variety of resources to assist historically underserved communities — women, African-Americans, Alaskan Natives, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. For example, in 2018,
the department dedicated $9.4 million in grants for veterans and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. FSA provides programs for women and minority farmers and ranchers, as well as loans for new farmers through its Direct Farm Ownership loan and the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program.

In addition, national organizations such as Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences, a 34-year-old professional organization, help minority students and professionals network and advance in the agriculture industry. The Cultivating Change Foundation (CCF), a nonprofit founded in 2016, supports members of the LGBTQ agriculture community through advocacy, educational and networking opportunities, including an annual national conference.

These efforts play different roles but share one critical goal: bringing people of diverse backgrounds into the industry.

“As the complexity of societal needs continues to expand, and resources are rapidly being depleted, we have to work smarter in the agriculture industry,” said Marcus Hollan, CCF’s executive director. “The only way to get there is by not excluding anyone from the table.”

EMBRACING DIVERSITY
Leon Etchepare, a fourth-generation farmer in Maxwell, Calif., manages Emerald Farms, his family’s 6,000-acre ranch. He oversees 4,000 acres of almond and walnut orchards as well as a large vegetable seed production operation with his husband, Andrew Pentecost, and their two children.

As an only child, Etchepare, 40, is ultimately the sole person who will continue the family’s operation. “If I didn’t have a feeling of acceptance (as a gay man) to come back into the fold and into agriculture, my dad would have put the family ranch up for sale as he’s headed into retirement ... and the family farming aspect of this would have died,” Etchepare said. “I’m sure I’m not the only story out there like that.”

If crop diversity is critical to maintaining healthy soil on a farm, diversity among people is important for the health and resilience of the industry, said Etchepare.

“We’re probably one of the most diverse farming operations that I know of,” he said. “We grow hundreds of different species and thousands of different varieties. We have very good success keeping diversity in our crops, which is a very good correlation to diversity regarding people in the industry.”

“The stories (media) tell are what shapes our values and our actions,” Penniman said. “So, when media chooses to uplift the stories of black agriculturalists that are noble and dignified, that’s going to influence the way all Americans see us and see our place in the food system.”

— Mary Helen Berg

The contemporary drama, Queen Sugar, chronicles the lives and loves of the oft-battling Bordelon siblings, set on a farm in Louisiana.

MODERN-DAY GRIOT
Queen Sugar, the hit cable series about a family of sugar cane farmers, will premiere its fourth season on the OWN network this summer.

The show follows the triumphs and trials of the fictional Bordelon siblings as they manage their family legacy — 800 acres of Louisiana soil. Based on Natalie Baszile’s novel of the same name, Queen Sugar was brought to the screen by Ava DuVernay and Oprah Winfrey.

Leah Penniman, author of Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land and co-director of Soul Fire Farm, said everyone tells her to watch the show, but so far she’s seen only one episode. Still, she believes Queen Sugar potentially plays an important role, since contemporary media is much like the griot, or storyteller, in some traditional African cultures.

“The stories (media) tell are what shapes our values and our actions,” Penniman said. “So, when media chooses to uplift the stories of black agriculturalists that are noble and dignified, that’s going to influence the way all Americans see us and see our place in the food system.”