

Growing the American Dream

California Strawberry Farming's Rich History of Immigrants & Opportunity

California Strawberry Commission Report | JULY 4, 2014



Growing the Dream for More Than a Century

IT STARTS IN THE STRAWBERRY FIELDS

For thousands of immigrants to California, the path to the American Dream quite literally winds its way through the state's 40,000 acres of strawberry fields.

Perhaps more than any other crop, strawberries are defined by decades of immigrants from Europe, Asia and Mexico. Not only do they work in the fields as harvesters, but they benefit from the unique attributes of strawberry farming that create numerous opportunities for upward mobility, including farm ownership.

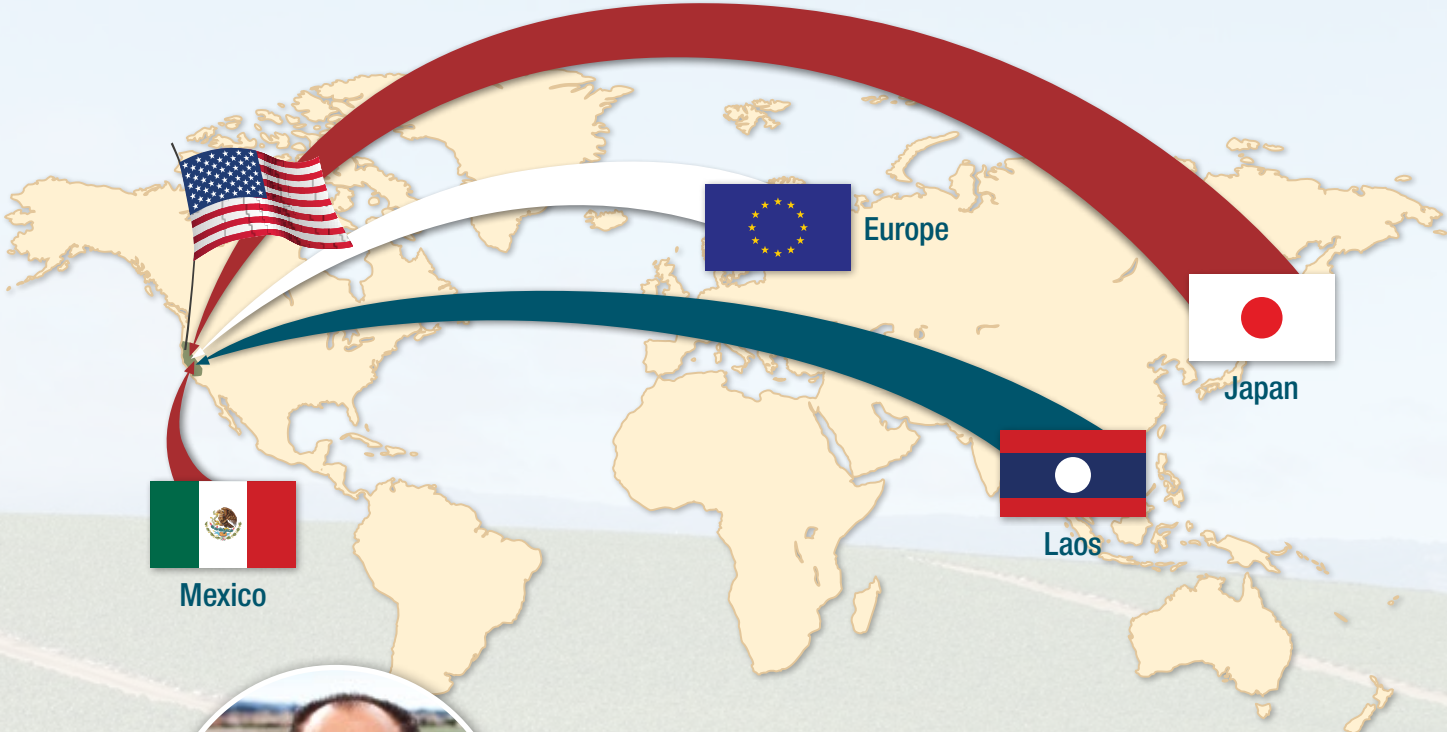


“Just as Japanese immigrants climbed the ladder of agricultural success, moving up from pickers to sharecroppers to independent growers, Latinos who came as immigrant laborers are making a similar leap.”

— LOS ANGELES TIMES



More Than a Century of Immigration



“I came from Mexico with nothing – just two empty pockets. I gave it everything I had.”

— LUIS CHAVEZ
Owner, L&G Farms, Santa Maria



Early 20th Century Immigrant Pioneers

IN RECOGNITION

The first Japanese colony in North America was founded in 1869 outside of Sacramento. By the 1940's Japanese immigrants had settled throughout California and proved to be capable farmers. One of those locations was Florin, California, once considered the nation's strawberry capital in the years preceding World War II. On May 11, 1942 photojournalist Dorothea Lange captured this image two days before the U.S. government forcibly relocated Japanese-Americans into internment camps.



"A soldier and his mother in a strawberry field. He was furloughed to help his mother and family prepare for their evacuation.

The mother, age 53, came from Japan 37 years ago. Her husband died 21 years ago, leaving her to raise six children. She worked in a strawberry basket factory until last year when her children leased three acres of strawberries 'so she wouldn't have to work for somebody else.'"

Photograph & Excerpts: Dorothea Lange

*Source: U.S. Department of Interior,
War Relocation Authority*

GROWING GENERATIONS OF JAPANESE-AMERICAN FARMERS



“For nearly a century, California strawberry farming has provided a ladder to success for Japanese-American and other Asian families. It has allowed generations to rise up from the fields to improve their lives, assimilate into American society and assume leadership roles in business, academia and government.”

— A.G. KAWAMURA

Former California Secretary of Food and Agriculture



“The Japanese really prided themselves that they could be successful with a crop that is so difficult to grow... I am really proud to carry on this family tradition of growing strawberries.”

— GLEN HASEGAWA

Oxnard

A Legacy of Family Farming

GROWING GENERATIONS OF EUROPEAN FARMERS



Whether transplants from the Midwest or children of the Gold Rush, immigrants from Europe have also sought and found opportunity in California's strawberry fields for the past century.

At about 15 percent, European Americans comprise the smallest ethnic group in the strawberry farming community.

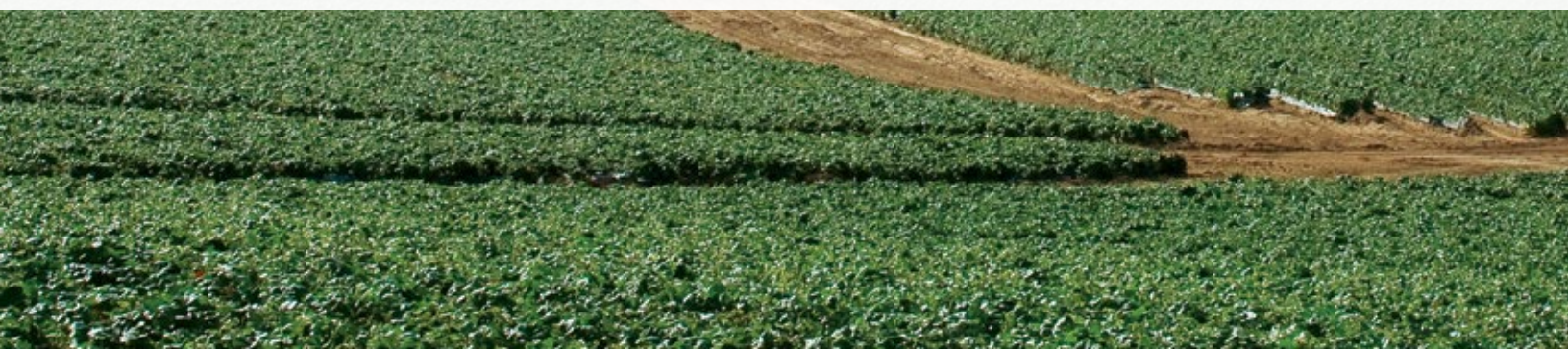
"My great grandfather Joseph emigrated from Portugal in 1890 and settled in Ventura County where generations of Terry family farming began. Today, strawberry farming is my family's livelihood and we continue to grow opportunities from the roots my great grandfather established over 120 years ago."

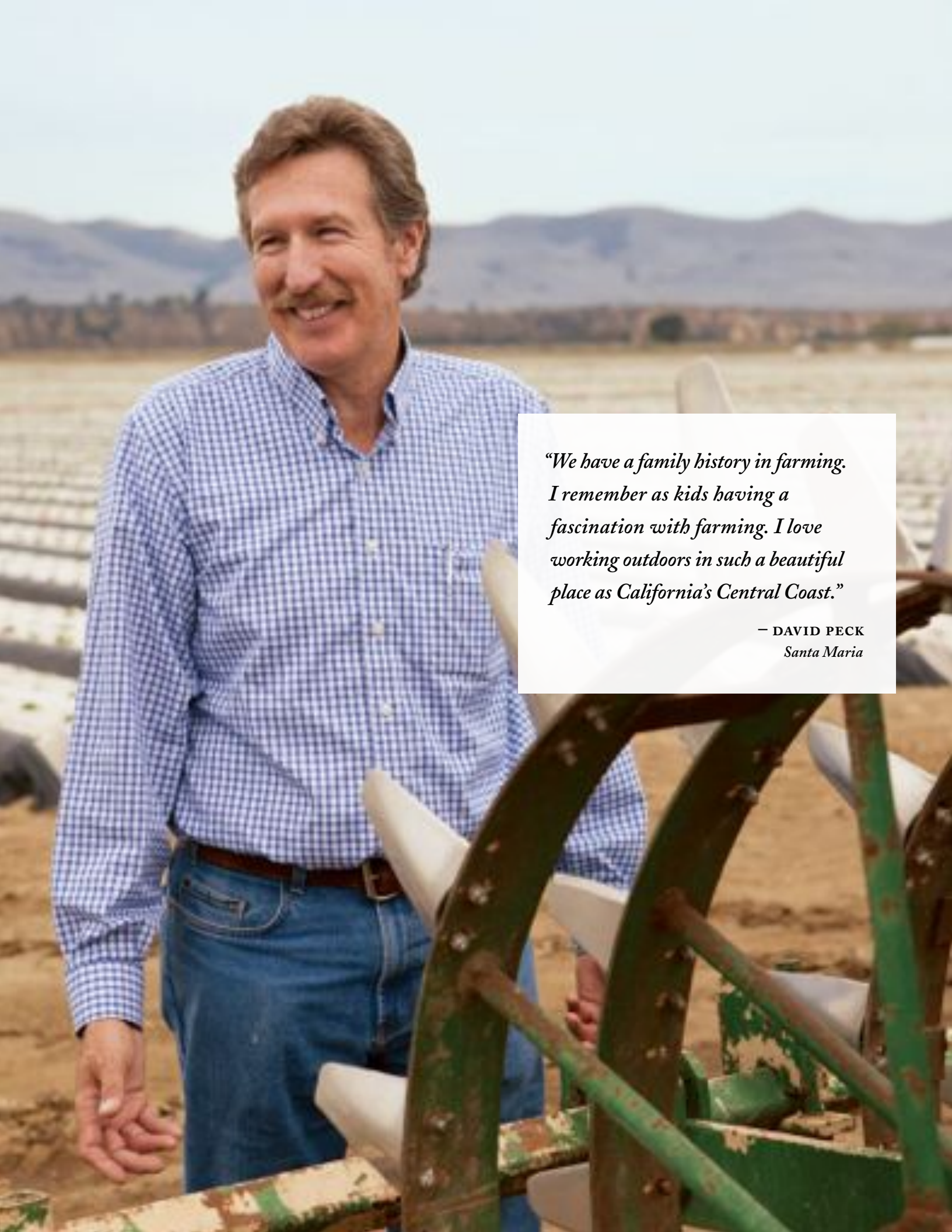
— EDGAR TERRY
Ventura



"Our family has been farming the same California lands since 1851. Our children are the sixth generation to choose farming as the means of achieving the American Dream. The California strawberry industry is comprised of a diverse group of growers with European, Japanese, Hispanic, and Southeast Asian backgrounds – all of them pursuing that American Dream. We are all grateful to the strawberry fields and our employees that enable us to improve our lives and become vital members of our community."

— ED KELLY
Watsonville





“We have a family history in farming. I remember as kids having a fascination with farming. I love working outdoors in such a beautiful place as California’s Central Coast.”

— DAVID PECK
Santa Maria

Upward Mobility for Immigrants

REWARDING WORK LEADS TO A BETTER LIFE

Why are so many immigrants drawn to strawberry farming? And why are so many able to advance up the ladder to become supervisors and farm owners?

Year-Round Harvesting

This translates into steady work that immigrants can count on to feed their families and build a better life in the United States.



High Yield

On less than one percent of the state's farmland, California strawberry farmers grow nearly 90 percent of the nation's strawberries.



Consumer Demand

Household consumption continues to rise due to the fact strawberries are one of America's most nutritious and favorite fruits.



Access to Land

There exists a relatively low barrier of entry to start a strawberry farm because farmers typically rent their land and therefore do not need a lot of money up front to purchase land.

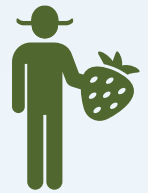


GROWING GENERATIONS OF LATINO FARMERS

“Strawberries have given Latinos more ownership opportunities than any other major crop. Latinos now comprise two-thirds of strawberry growers in California, where 90 percent of the nation's strawberries are grown.”

Gosia Wozniacka

Associated Press | July 14, 2012



FARMER



FOREMAN



FIELD WORKER

25% Number of Latino strawberry farmers in California who started out as field workers (estimated)

“For the \$2.3 billion strawberry industry, it's the second time a minority group has emerged from the fields in such a profound way. Japanese immigrants took over the industry as they grew in numbers after the turn of the 20th century. Like the Japanese, many Latino growers are former pickers or the children of field workers who worked their way up to rent or own land.”

— ASSOCIATED PRESS



PERSEVERANCE

Alfredo Ramirez: Mexico

“If you want to work hard, grow strawberries. This is the only thing I know how to grow. I’ve got the American Dream and I can’t ask for anything else.”

Alfredo Ramirez came to the United States at the age of 18 to join his cousin in Los Angeles. There he found work as a carpenter and cabinetmaker before moving northward to Redding, where he found work at Lassen Canyon Nursery. It was literally tough hoeing – for days on end he would hoe weeds from the strawberry plant fields. On the first day, “I was crying. I really cried. I was the youngest worker and didn’t understand a word of English.”

The frustration fueled Ramirez, who committed himself to learning English by memorizing five new words every day for several years. “I was raised to always try to improve myself,” said Ramirez, whose father was a street vendor in Mexico selling fruit and ice cream.

Learning English paid dividends because Ramirez was eventually moved from hoeing weeds to maintaining vehicles and farm equipment. He became a naturalized American citizen in 2001 and now supervises the nursery’s Manteca operations. During peak season, the nursery swells to 350 workers who help raise 500 million strawberry plants annually. Overall, California nurseries supply an estimated 2 billion plants annually to farms along California’s Central Coast and the rest of the world.





FARM OWNERSHIP

Alejandro Ramirez: Mexico

“This is my pride. Twenty years ago, I had nothing. The strawberry is my life.”

California strawberry fields nurture more than America’s favorite fruit. They are incubators for growing an immigrant family business through patience, hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit.

These qualities are reflected in the countless immigrants who have come to California. They work the fields. They learn the business. They advance as foreman, drivers and equipment operators. Some, like Alejandro Ramirez, find the courage to start their own family strawberry farms. Ramirez’s father toiled as a strawberry farmer in Mexico and fell on hard times. He relocated to the United States to earn money and seek better opportunities. In 1982, Ramirez and his brother followed their father. They sought work in the state’s fertile strawberry fields.

Ramirez fell in love and married a woman picking strawberries in his crew. Together, they started Alejandro Ramirez Farms.

In the beginning, it was just the two of them. In 2003, their business was expanding and they hired their first employee.

Today, Ramirez is teaching the next generation how to farm. Alejandro Jr.’s goal is to graduate from Hartnell College and California State University Fresno, and then make a career alongside his father as an agricultural engineer.

“It is a beautiful thing working with my dad. I get to spend time with him. He is a great boss and father,” said Alejandro Jr. “I am proud of him. He has been a teacher to me and I fell in love with the farm life.”





FROM EMPTY POCKETS

Luis Chavez: Mexico

“Strawberry farming represents everything to my family.”

Luis Chavez embodies the American Dream. He came to the United States from a small rural town in Jalisco, Mexico. Born in 1934, he was raised in a home with no electricity or running water. He hasn't attended a single day of school in his life. His father and family grew corn and beans to survive.

Because he had 11 brothers, there was no opportunity to take over the family farm. He moved to California in search of a better life.

In 1955, Chavez arrived in the Golden State as part of the Bracero program (a guest worker program between Mexico and the U.S.).

Chavez knew the path to success required hard work. He first took a job in a dairy, working double shifts for 16 years until the family could scrape up enough money to lease an acre to plant strawberries. While still working their regular jobs, Luis and his wife would get up at 4 a.m. every day, before the kids awoke, to tend their plot and slowly build their business. Gradually, they expanded to become self-sustaining as L&G Farms.

The Chavez family now employs 300 people and farms nearly 300 acres. Despite never attending school himself, Luis is especially proud that he was able to put his children through college and pay for his grandchildren's schooling. Luis' son, Danny, attended Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, earning a degree in 2004 in agribusiness. Danny is joined by his siblings in carrying on the family business – and the American Dream.



A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

Brian Saetern: Laos

“I like strawberries. They give me enough for my family to survive.”

Farming is in Brian Saetern’s blood. And it is all about survival.

“I started farming when I was eight. Instead of going to school, we learned how to farm,” he says of his upbringing in his native Laos. After moving to Thailand, and then the USA, Saetern eventually settled in Merced, where he installed windows and worked in construction. But when the housing market crashed, he returned to his agrarian roots in 2005. Saetern is one of hundreds of Laotian farmers who sell strawberries and other crops from roadside stands. Laotians represent the latest wave of immigrants to find prosperity in California by growing strawberries.

“I had to stay alive. That’s why I got back into farming.”

He now farms four acres of strawberries along busy Highway 120 in Manteca. Tourists en route to Yosemite stop to buy his berries.

Saetern says strawberries are one of the few crops that allow a small family farm to operate because he can yield a lot of fruit per acre.

With 22,000 plants per acre, Saetern can harvest nearly 5 tons of fruit annually per acre.





Growing the





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P.O. Box 269, Watsonville, CA 95077-0269 · P: 831.724.1301 · F: 831.724.5973
info@calstrawberry.com · www.californiastrawberries.com

