



## Launching the Next Generation of Latinx Farmers in Washington's Skagit Valley

**The region is home to a handful of training programs helping to support new farmers and local food producers.**

BY **LAUREN TURNER**

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When Francisco Farias, a Latino farmer in Northwest Washington's Skagit Valley, completed [Viva Farms](#)' nine-month sustainable agriculture training program, he became eligible to lease a half-acre plot at the farm, where he now grows strawberries, peas, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and carrots.

But he's even more excited because, with the skills he learned through the program, he feels ready to grow Farias Organic Farm, a seven-acre operation his older brother, Sergio, started with Francisco and their younger brother, Juan.

"I learned different techniques [at Viva] that I can use in our farm, which will help lower overall costs and reduce labor," Francisco said. Perhaps even more important than those skills, however, he said, "Viva farm made starting my own farm possible because they rent equipment and land." This fact could save him thousands of dollars.



Francisco Farias (left) and Juan Farias planting strawberries at Viva Farms. (Photo credit: Bianca Valles)

Viva Farms is a nonprofit farm-business incubator in the Skagit Valley that supports aspiring and limited-resource farmers. Through a number of innovative partnerships—with Washington State University and Skagit Valley College on education, with PCC Farmland Trust to support farmland acquisition, and others—Viva Farms and programs like it are bringing new farmers to the land in Northwest Washington.

While Viva Farms trains farmers of all backgrounds, the program grew out of outreach to the region's Latinx agriculture community and has maintained its strong focus on Latinx farmers. Since 2010, Viva has trained more than 700 farmers—more than 150 who are primarily Spanish-speaking—in organic farming, and the nonprofit currently incubates 18 independent farm businesses, seven of which are Latino-owned.

It's an urgently needed success story. Across the country, farms are going out of business due to a one-two-three punch of price crashes, farm consolidation, and farmer retirements. The [average age of U.S. farmers is 58.3](#), and each year that number increases. The farmers that Viva Farms have trained, however, average 40.2 years of age. Francisco Farias, at age 39, is a prime example. His brother Sergio is 42, and Juan is 28. With these facts in mind, farm training programs in northwest Washington and the Skagit Valley have found a model that seems to be working to bring new and younger farmers to fields and help them succeed.

"Programs like Viva Farms are often the only means that young farmers may have to get started," said Lindsey Lusher Shute, executive director of the [National Young Farmers Coalition](#). "Particularly in a region like the Skagit Valley, where non-farm values drive up the price of farmland far beyond a farmer's income, affordable land must be set aside for working farmers."

Viva Farms goes to great lengths to encourage Latinx farmers to participate in its program, with classes, trainings, and resources—either presented in Spanish or translated into Spanish. While Latinx farmers make up only 3 percent of the nationwide farm population, they're 44 percent of Viva's graduates.

#### **Building a Family Farm from the Roots Up**

For the Farias family, starting a farm feels like a homecoming. Sergio Farias has years of experience working on an organic farm, and is glad to have his family joining him in the effort.

Francisco Farias said, "Farming is in our blood and it's what we love. It's what our family has done for many generations. We want to farm organically because we believe that farming with chemicals is harmful to [consumers'] health as well as to the farmer who has to inhale the chemicals on a daily basis."

Once Francisco completed his Viva Farms training, his enthusiasm rubbed off on younger brother Juan and Juan's wife, Bianca Valles, who have both now enrolled in the program. "We are both pretty excited," Valles said, "since we will be able to help [Juan's] brothers expand the sustainable and organic family farm that they have been working on."

The seven-acre operation will have its first harvest this summer—organically grown strawberries primarily, but also green beans, peas, onions, cucumbers, lettuce, and kale. They will be farming the land when it completes the three-year organic certification program this fall.

Michael Frazier, the executive director of Viva Farms, sees families like the Farias family as an example of the positive impact of the organization's work. "[Now] there are more potential farmers who see it as a viable career," Frazier said. "One of our first-ever farmers is a woman named Melita, she's in her ninth year now—so she's still a beginning farmer according to the USDA. She has 10 acres in production and supports herself with farming. Seeing not just a Latino farmer make it, but a Latina farmer make it, that really inspires more people to think, 'I can do that too!'"

The Farias family is representative of the large population of Latinx farmers that occupy Washington's Skagit Valley, a rich agricultural area with many small to medium-sized farms. Some are seasonal migrant workers, while others arrived decades ago. Although many have superior farming skills, they often face social barriers to getting started and succeeding in agriculture. They may lack the capital and social connections, language skills or business education to run a farm.

That's where Viva Farms and other organizations, including [The Northwest Agriculture Business Center](#) (NABC), also located in the Skagit Valley, come in. NABC

is a nonprofit devoted to keeping Northwest Washington farmers farming and local food accessible. Like Viva Farms, NABC has established a program for the region's Latinx farmer community, providing business services, including creating market connections, working with farmers to produce new products, and researching funding sources for new infrastructure and products.

NABC's Latino Farming Program Manager, Alex Perez, explained the many ways that NABC works with local farmers, including partnering with Viva Farms and others on trainings and workshops. Perez noted with pride, "Through workshops, events and outreach efforts, I was recently able to help three Latino farms join the Puget Sound Food Hub, a farmer-owned cooperative operating in the Puget Sound region. One of those farmers told me, 'I am very happy that my business is growing. I didn't imagine that I would be able to sell my produce on the food hub.'"



Photo credit: Patricia Krause, Viva Farms

#### **A Nationwide Movement**

Programs like those in the Skagit Valley are sprouting nationwide: According to the [New Entry Sustainable Farming Project](#) at Tufts University, there were 130 incubator farm programs (IFPs) nationwide in 2016, up from [45 in 2012](#). Many follow a similar model to Viva's, in terms of providing training, help with acquiring land, and even equipment rentals. Some focus their efforts on Latinx or other immigrant or refugee groups; 40 percent of IFPs tracked by New Entry offer multilingual programming and support. And some, such as the [Agriculture and Land-based Training Association](#) (ALBA) in California, also help farmers access markets for the food they grow.

"Viva Farms stands out because of the number of Latinx farmers it supports," said Lusher Shute. "The Latinx community is already at the foundation of U.S. agriculture, and it is encouraging to see more Latinx as business owners. With adequate financial and political support, this community can play a larger and

more equitable role in solving the nation's critical challenge of finding enough people to grow our food."

In the Skagit Valley, Bianca Valles sees the power of these programs in the Farias brothers' farm. "I really admire all the hard work the three of them have been putting into the farm," she said. "They all have full-time jobs [on top of farming] and have devoted all of their free time, as weather permits, to transplanting, tilling, fixing, and finding items and resources for the farm. This is definitely a family effort."

And Frazier sees no limit to the possibilities ahead for farmers like the Farias family—and for programs like Viva Farms. "We're growing great produce that people see a value in, and there's more market than we can supply," said Frazier. "The only thing that's slowing us down is our farmers' ability to grow more food."

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