

Sebra Farm



Porfirio came to Big River Farms with a lot of experience in agriculture and food processing. He is originally from Guatemala, where he grew coffee, corn, and beans. “We were always working in the fields,” he said, and he was involved in all the many steps of coffee production, from preparing the land, planting and caring for trees, harvesting, washing, drying, processing, bagging, and bringing the crop to market.

When Porfirio first came to the US, he found a job in a meat processing plant in Iowa, where he lived for seven years. When fewer and fewer hours were available, he found a job with a construction company that operated all over the Midwest, including Minnesota. Eventually he moved permanently to Minnesota, after spending a year driving back and forth from Iowa for work. Porfirio has been in the Twin Cities for thirteen years now, and has been with Big River Farms for seven of them.

Why organic?

Porfirio hadn't heard the term organic until he started working with Big River Farms, although he had farmed without chemicals in Guatemala. He values *comida saludable* - healthy food - and saw that the organic method focused on producing food that is good for people to eat. Today in Guatemala, he says, there are people that can't produce crops without pesticides, because there are too many insects that eat the plants.

“If they don't spray, bugs will destroy the crop in one day, and the next day there will be nothing. The seeds are coated with chemicals, when the plant emerges they release them. Then every week, chemicals, chemicals, until the pests are gone. This is why the plants are not healthy; we too, are consuming the chemicals. But if we didn't do it this way, we wouldn't produce anything. The system works like this.”

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But it wasn't always like this, so many chemicals, so many pests. “Before, we grew *café, natural. Maíz, natural. Frijoles, natural.* There were no chemicals.” But now, he says, “we ourselves, the workers, don't know how to protect the earth.” Big River Farms is where Porfirio “discovered that we are killing the earth, and that we ourselves can give life to the earth. There, [in Guatemala] the earth is dead. It's dead. If we plant things, we have to take good care of the earth, so that the earth has strength. If we don't, it will not produce anything.”

And does he think Big River Farms teaches new farmers how to take care of the earth? “Sí. Sí. That is how I noticed, how I discovered this. This is where I learned to maintain the land, so that it produces.”

Without Big River Farms, Porfirio doesn't think he would be growing plants today. “For us, for immigrants, we're working in the cities, and we can't see any of the countryside. It's not easy to enter, to start. Big River Farms has helped many people discover how to get out of the city and get access to land.” There are other immigrants who would like to have access to a plot of farmland, he thinks, but many do not want to work two jobs – farming requires a lot of work! And if you don't take good care of your crops, you'll lose them. Porfirio works full time in construction, and comes to the farm after work and on weekends to ensure the success of his crops.

When he started at Big River Farms, he lost a lot of produce due to lack of experience. But today, he sells half his vegetables to BRF, including sweet corn, several kinds of tomatoes, unique dry beans like Black Turtle, jalapeños, cabbage, and squash, and has enough left over to sell at the Lyndale and West Side Farmers Markets.

“I have learned a lot from [the instructors]” he says, starting with how to cultivate land organically, and in the process other things too, like how to bring the produce to market. “*Me siento bien para estar trabajando con ellos...* I feel good to be working with them.”

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Porfirio’s favorite crop that he grows is corn for tortillas. “It’s not sweet corn,” he explained, “just corn. And beans. Both.”