

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Stewardship, Mexican President's visit top farm family's business achievements

When Rene Garcia was a field worker in the orchards of the Yakima Valley more than 30 years ago, he never imagined that one day he would own more than 800 acres of productive orchards; operate his own state-of-the-art packing house and climate-controlled storage facility; and host the President of Mexico during an official state visit.

But through a combination of hard work, good market timing, teamwork, and perseverance, he and his family have achieved all of those things.

Today, the Garcia's are the only Hispanic grower/packer operation in the state of Washington – and the only farm in Washington visited by Mexican President Vicente Fox.

“Governor Gregoire invited Vicente Fox to the state,” Mr. Garcia says, “and they wanted to go see someone from Mexico who had made it in the business here. Not just as a grower, but as a grower/packer. So they invited him here. It was a surprise to us. We had no clue that he would come here,” he says.

After weeks of preparation, Governor Gregoire and President Fox – along with some 500 invited guests and throngs of local, state, national and international media – arrived at the Garcia's packing house, G&G Orchards.



Rene and Carmen Garcia, who began their careers as field workers more than 30 years ago, now own and operate G&G Orchards, Washington's only Hispanic-owned grower/packer operation.

“I wish we could have invited more people from the community,” Mr. Garcia says. “But they limited the number who could attend.”

Despite the fanfare and intense media attention, Mr. Garcia says, he was pleasantly surprised by the warmth and sincerity President Fox and his wife showed his family.

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Rene Garcia
G&G Orchards

us hugs,” Mr. Garcia says, “they were just down to earth people.” “Mrs. Fox was a really sweet lady,” he says.

Most recently Mr. Garcia and his wife have achieved another landmark by becoming Tier III contract holders in the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Conservation Security Program (CSP). The program, which rewards agricultural producers for historic conservation and environmental protection activities and encourages participants to add additional conservation practices. To date, some 300 agricultural producers throughout Washington hold CSP contracts.

In more than 30 years of farming, this is only the second USDA program in which the Garcia family has participated – the other being the Federal Crop Insurance. The Garcia’s still participate in the Federal Crop Insurance Program. During the near Alar scare of the late 1980’s – a time when apple prices plummeted based on consumer concerns about a commonly used pesticide – the Garcia’s opted not to participate in a USDA buyout program. It was a program that offered some financial relief in the midst of a near disastrous financial storm for apple growers.

“I just couldn’t throw away that beautiful fruit,” Mr. Garcia says. “We actually lost money not taking the buyout,” he says.

“But I just couldn’t do it. I wasn’t willing to just give it to the cattle.”

In another year, when a freeze destroyed all of the area’s fruit, he says, the federal government offered growers food stamps. “But my wife said ‘we just can’t do that,’” Mr. Garcia says. So they didn’t.

From the time they purchased their first 20-acre orchard in 1973, the Garcia’s have always done things their own way. “We’ve always been shoot from the hip,” he says. “Whatever our gut says we do.”

One day, while watching their fruit being packed by a commercial packer, Mr. Garcia asked the owner why so many of his good apples were tossed into the juice bin. The owner replied that some good ones inadvertently get diverted to the juice bin, and some bad apples inadvertently get packed – so it “all works out in the end.”



The Tier III CSP contract for the Garcia’s includes some 400 acres of orchards and features additional enhancements.

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After several years of germination, the idea finally took root.

“Back in 1987,” Mr. Garcia says, “returns were 20 dollars a bin back to the grower. My wife and I said ‘Hey, we can do this – we can pack and make \$50-\$60 a bin,’” he says. “We started tallying up

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the costs of operation. So we rented a little warehouse on 88th Ave. where my relatives, my kids, everybody worked.

“It was a family thing when we first started,” Mr. Garcia says. “It wasn’t a big return, but it was enough to support the orchard.”

And during the good years, the family used their profits to acquire additional small orchards. “We had some good price years,” Mr. Garcia says, “so we bought another 20 acres, then another 20 – buying here and there as people wanted to retire.” But when all of the profits are reinvested in the business, there’s little money for discretionary spending. “When the kids were growing up, we didn’t have enough money to even go to town to have hamburgers,” he says.

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The breakthrough year for the Garcia’s occurred in 1989 when they were able to buy their first bins and secure a loan from the Small Business Administration to build two controlled atmosphere rooms for cold storage.

Three years later, when apple prices dropped to five dollars a box, the Garcia’s decided to gamble.

“I said ‘Why should we sell at \$5 a box? We might as well hold on for a while – we can’t do any worse – it can’t go any lower,’” Mr. Garcia recalls. That year, right after the 4th of July, the apples went up to over \$20 a box,” he says. “Prices shot up overnight.”

And the Garcia’s were in the perfect position to profit. All of the other growers had sold low. “Even the big boys were out of fruit,” he says. “So we paid all of our bills, and bought some more orchards. That helped us really get the business going,” he says.



Amid the cherry tree branches of one of G&G’s orchards, Rene Garcia (left) and NRCS Conservation Agronomist Kevin Davis review the Garcia’s CSP conservation plan.

Not surprisingly, the Garcia’s approach conservation with the same can-do entrepreneurial attitude they employ with their business.

Kevin Davis, a conservation agronomist with NRCS in Zillah, says the Garcia’s qualified for a Tier III CSP contract in part because of the conservation work they’re already doing. “The Garcia’s were already doing many conservation practices that protect and enhance soil and water resources,” he says. “Those practices include irrigation scheduling; setback for nutrient applications to exceed recommended minimum distance from ditches or streams; and managing nitrogen applications by split-applying according to crop needs,” he says.

“In addition the Garcia’s do not till between the tree rows and have planted

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Mexican President Vicente Fox addresses more than 500 invited guests and throngs of local, state, national and international media at the Garcia's packing house, G&G Orchards, during his 2006 visit.



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cover crops, which increases organic matter in soil, reduces erosion and improves soil productivity,” NRCS’s Davis says.

The CSP contract for the Garcia’s includes some 400 acres of orchards and features additional enhancements that will raise the level of stewardship even higher.

“Future enhancements for the Garcia’s include managing applications of nutrients through tissue testing; micro nutrients and pH by applying annual results of complete soil tests,” NRCS’ Davis says. “And they plan on improving pesticide use through the use of an integrated pest management plan.”

Another future enhancement – wildlife habitat development – is something Mr. Garcia has always wanted to do. “I won’t kill a pheasant or a quail,” he says. “I’d just as soon have them around. It’s peaceful. So we’re trying to get more habitat for the wildlife, and we’ll be able to do even more because of the program,” he says.

Mr. Garcia says his participation in CSP has also heightened his awareness of other environmental concerns as well. “I never

really thought about dust control,” he says. “But now I see it makes sense. You don’t want that stuff in the air.”

With the stewardship payments they receive, the Garcia’s plan on doing what they’ve always done – reinvest in their operation. “We’ll be able to do more stewardship work with that payment,” Mr. Garcia says. “We won’t be buying a car,” he says with a chuckle. “We’re reinvesting in environmental improvements.”

From their success as farmers and business owners, to their commitment to conservation, the Garcia’s could point to any number of remarkable achievements. But Mr. Garcia doesn’t hesitate when he says the highlight of his whole life was meeting President Fox.

“That’s something,” he says, “I’ll never be able to top.”

*Written by Ron Nichols
NRCS, December 2006*