



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Benefits of Conservation Planning

Landowner Profile

“It looked like such a big challenge, when we purchased this property, to transition 65 acres of damaged land into beautiful rich soil.”

— Debby Takikawa
Organic Farmer

The Garden of

Conservation Goals:

- Transition previously conventionally farmed land to organic farming
- Improve irrigation water efficiency
- Improve soil health
- Minimize soil erosion
- Improve water quality
- Increase soil moisture
- Improve wildlife habitat

Conservation Practices:

- Irrigation Water Management
- Structure for Water Control
- Mulching
- Nutrient Management
- Hedgerow Planting

Conservation Planning is Intrinsic to The Garden of

The Garden of is a small-scale transitioning organic farm owned and operated by Debby and Shu Takikawa in Los Olivos, California.

Harmony and gentle care of the land underlies the foundation of the Takikawa philosophy. Their stewardship of the land has always included farming organically.

The Takikawas started The Garden Of in the early 1980s with 4 acres of assorted vegetables, greens, and flowers. Over the years they have leased increasingly more land to meet a growing demand for their produce. More recently, when a 65-acre tract of Santa Ynez farmland located a block away from their farm came up for lease, Shu and Debby leapt at the opportunity.

Because this newly acquired land was previously farmed conventionally, the Takikawas have had to work hard to transition the fields to strictly organic cultivation. Through good management and with some financial and technical assistance from Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) they have steadily restored the soil with cover cropping, applications of organic compost, crop rotation, and giving the land plenty of rest between plantings.

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Debby and Shu Takikawa, owners and operators of The Garden of in Los Olivos, chose their farm's curiously elliptical name to allow customers to complete it according to their own imaginations.



Shu has experimented with hundreds of plant varieties to select the ones best adapted to his location, and he constantly strives to improve. He carefully regulates irrigation to maximize flavor, so everything that he and his wife bring to market is ultra fresh and delicious.

beautiful rich soil,” Debby said.

To tackle that challenge, the Takikawas worked with NRCS District Conservationist Jeff Rodriguez and Soil Conservationist Emma Chow to develop a conservation plan to transition the previously conventionally farmed land. They have implemented organic farming methods since the start of their farm operation there four years ago.

“The Takikawas noted how expensive it is to transition from a conventionally farmed system to an organic one and were happy to hear that NRCS had a program to help producers transition to organic farming,” Chow said.

DROUGHT POSES BIG CHALLENGE

Through NRCS’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Takikawas implemented several practices to improve soil health and provide beneficial wildlife habitat. Yet, the ongoing California drought has presented additional challenges to their farm operation.

“Our area has slowly become drier and drier over the last 20 years,” Debby said. “Right now we are in a big drought. The biggest challenge to the way we farm is the changes that are taking place in the soil because of the lack of moisture.”

Careful water management is critically important to Takikawas many varieties of vegetables.

“The soil is struggling and we’re transitioning,” Debby said. “We’re transitioning from a chemical farm, to an organic farm. That’s probably been our biggest



The Takikawas plant sorghum between rows to help provide shade for their pepper crop which can be susceptible to burn.

challenge, the lack of water, to apply the nutrients to the soil in a natural way.”

“Our style of farming is not about dumping a lot of water onto the plants and encouraging them to grow quickly with large amounts of fertilizer,” Shu said. “Our approach to farming is gentle and harmonious.”

Healthy soil, minimal additives and special attention to a healthy underground population of micro-organisms is key for the Takikawa farm. With the ongoing California drought there is little to no naturally occurring water in the soil. This reality is affecting all farmers across the state including organic.

“The drought is affecting the health and wellbeing of the soil,” Debby said. “The natural vitality of the plants that are growing in these dry conditions is a huge quality factor.”

To help address their drought concerns, the Takikawas applied for a second EQIP contract for irrigation water management and irrigation flow meters to improve the efficiency of water use.

“Debby and Shu were interested in working with NRCS to increase and monitor soil health, improve irrigation water use efficiency, as well as improve pollinator and beneficial insect habitat for pest management,” said Chow. “Practices they are using include nutrient management, compost applications, cover crops, hedgerows, flow meters, and irrigation water management.”

“We love our end result,” Debby said. “We’re allowing the plants to grow as they were naturally intended to grow as much as possible. We’re not trying to push nature away. Our goal is to have incredibly beautiful crops that are very flavorful and very wonderful to eat. What we find is that if we farm gently, we get that.”



Shu Takikawa reviewing his conservation plan with NRCS Agricultural Engineer Phil Durgin.