



Agribusiness Development Corporation

AG NOTES

November 2023 Newsletter

NICHE – A specialized segment of the market for a particular kind of product or service

Two ADC tenants, two farmers catering to two different type of markets.

Outside Wahiawa, **Aaron O'Brien** of Helemano Farms Christmas tree farm locally grows and sells trees for the holiday season. **Teo Soukhaseum** raises produce specifically tailored to ethnic markets.

O'Brien, owner of the long-time Christmas tree farm, is readying for lines of customers again this holiday season to purchase his locally-raised Christmas trees.

Situated on 40 acres of ag land leased by ADC, the Christmas tree farm is tucked away at the end of Whitmore Avenue after a two-mile drive to get there off Kamehameha Highway. The family-owned company is also one of ADC's longest-running tenants utilizing ag-designated lands in the Wahiawa area.

Christmas tree sales began last weekend at Helemano Farms and will resume on Black Friday following Thanksgiving until he runs out of inventory for this holiday season.

Customers have the option of selecting and purchasing Norfolk Pine, Leyland Cypress, Murray Cypress and Carolina Cypress trees.

Taking home a fresh tree straight from the Wahiawa farm means a longer tree shelf life during the holiday season. "The traditional cypress Christmas tree with the pine needles last about 4-6 weeks," O'Brien said. "The Norfolk trees can last up to several months if watered properly."

Buying a locally-grown Christmas tree also means invasive species are not brought over from the Mainland during shipping, O'Brien noted.

While the Christmas trees are "seasonal" crops produced for the holiday season, it requires year-round maintenance of irrigation and trimming to groom the trees to its familiar triangular shape.



Helemano Farms owner Aaron O'Brien shows off a 13-foot-tall Cypress Christmas tree.

O'Brien grows the Norfolk and Cypress trees to maturity and harvest in a five-year cycle. Each year, new tree plantings are raised in a nursery for the first year of the cycle and eventually transplanted to the ADC property to keep up with the annual demand for Christmas trees at his farm.

The top of the Norfolks are cut for customer purchase, with the trunk growing back within 2-3 years for another harvest.

"The Norfolks are easier to maintain and manage since you can regrow the trees stems several times over the tree's life," he said. "Once you cut down a Cypress tree for a customer, you have to start all over again, which is why we plant new ones each year from scratch."

O'Brien's father, Michael, started the family tree farm business back in 2002. When Michael, a Dole Company retiree, grew up in California, he and his family would go to a farm to pick out their Christmas trees.

"Dad always wanted to bring to Hawaii that Mainland family tradition of the family choosing and cutting down a Christmas tree," son Aaron recalled. "That's when he got the idea for a Christmas tree farm here."

Michael ultimately planted more than 15,000 Norfolk trees, but passed away before getting to see families visit the tree farm. Son Aaron said he now gets the thrill of seeing the children getting excited picking a tree.

"That's probably the best part of all of this," he said. "That's what probably keeps me going in continuing this..."



HELEMANO FARMS
1750 WHITMORE AVENUE

Holiday Season Business Hours from Nov. 24 to Dec. 23
Wednesday, Thursday & Friday: Noon to Sunset
Saturdays and Sundays: 10 a.m. to Sunset
Closed on Mondays and Tuesdays

For more information, call (808) 622-4287 or go to the company website at www.helemanofarms.com

Raising Ethnic Produce

Meanwhile, on another parcel on ADC property outside Wahiawa, Teo Soukhaseum and her husband Sengouthit Sounthone leases 35 acres to grow ethnic produce.

Over the past three years, Soukhaseum's family has raised a variety of produce on the Central Oahu area. The inventory consists of bananas, bitter melon, dragon fruit, okra, taro, bitter melon, wing bean and long bean.



Many of her clients are of Filipino, Laotian, and Thai background. Instead of competing against bigger farmers on more traditional forms of produce, her family made the decision to focus on the niche market of ethnic produce.

All of her goods are sold to her ethnic customer base at either local farmer's markets, or shipped to the Mainland.

Arriving in Hawaii in 2004, Soukhaseum never farmed while back in Laos, but said she knew when she got here she wanted to grow crops to tailor to certain ethnic groups here.

The family operation began raising crops in the Kahuku area on the North Shore, but decided to relocate to ADC's Galbraith property.

"Shorter distance to take our goods into town," she said, adding that the water supply and the long-term license to farm on ADC property brings continuity for her family operation.

