

Farming an Avocation for Joe Del Bosque by Gilbert Mohtes-Chan

Joe Del Bosque will tell you there's never a dull moment in farming.

The San Joaquin Valley farmer should know. He's been around agriculture since the day he was born. Over the years, he has seen equipment change, agricultural practices evolve, workers receive better wages and safety precautions and new crops introduced.

"Farming is so dynamic. My whole career has been a constant change. You've have to be on the cutting edge all the time to survive," says Del Bosque, who along with his wife, Maria Gloria, operate Del Bosque Farms.

After all these years, Del Bosque remains passionate about farming. And he's more than happy to spread the message about the good work farmers are doing, whether it's leading a tour of his operations, meeting with politicians in Sacramento and Washington, D.C. or promoting farm worker safety to his peers.

"Farmers have changed and improved over the years. We have improved our conservation practices, water efficiency, employee conditions, more environmentally friendly and people friendly pest control, and we are better stewards. Farmers are not given enough recognition for that in today's world. Very few consumers ever hear this. I always mention these improvements when I speak to people about farming. And I do that a lot," says Del Bosque, who has enrolled cotton, alfalfa and almonds in the San Joaquin Sustainable Farming Project, a program of the Sustainable Cotton Project.

Del Bosque was born in the Imperial Valley, where his father Jose emigrated from Mexico in the 1920s to work in the fields. In 1953, the family moved to Firebaugh after his father earned a job as a farm manager at a local melon farm.

Early on, Del Bosque learned the value of work from his father and to respect those who spent hours in the fields and orchards.

"He started taking me with him to the farm in the summers when I was 9, taught me to drive a tractor and a truck," Del Bosque recalls. By age 11, "he put me on the tractor at 6 a.m. and picked me up at 6 p.m." It wasn't until he was 13 that he started getting paid.

"My father felt he had to teach me how to work," he says. "The Great Depression left him with the impression that a man should always have to work – work harder and better than anybody else."

Even while attending Fresno State, Del Bosque, returned home on school breaks, weekends and summers to work on his father's farm.

Originally, Del Bosque had other career aspirations: He entered Fresno State as a pre-dental student in 1967. He later took a four-year break to help his father who needed help with his trucking operations. Del Bosque eventually returned to college, switched majors and earned degree in agriculture in 1975.

After graduating college, he worked 10 years with his father's operation. But he yearned to start his own farm. With little money and no equipment, Del Bosque had to get creative.

He soon found out that "there were people willing to contract with me to grow crops." So he started out as a custom farmer, growing crops for other people.

In the mid-1980s, a neighbor asked him if he wanted to rent some of his land – a time when many farmers were struggling economically and going out of business. A cotton ginning company offered him a crop loan. He became a cotton farmer in 1985, planting 175 acres of cotton and custom farming 240 acres of melons.



Joe stands in one of his cotton fields enrolled in the San Joaquin Sustainable Farming Project. (2012)

His first year, he borrowed equipment from fellow farmers and rented a tractor. His goal was to grow his own melons. His wife, who worked in the fields herself before they were married, helped in the operation, as well.

“She began helping me manage our weeding crew. She later managed the personnel when they started a melon harvesting packing company.

“My goal was to be a melon packer and grower,” he said. His cotton proceeds helped achieve his goal and soon the melon operations helped him finance other crops – asparagus in 1999 and almonds in 2000.

In 2003, Del Bosque Farms evolved again. A neighbor had an 85 acre block of land certified for organic and offered to lease the land. Del Bosque soon ventured into organic cantaloupes, honeydew melons and watermelons. Today, he farms about 2,000 acres annually.

Venturing into organic farming proved to him that he could grow crops with fewer chemical inputs. In the past, the common practice was using a lot of pesticides on farmland and crops without using the best science in our decisions. His thought “maybe we are overdoing it.”

Del Bosque is a firm believer that implementing innovative and new practices are essential for growers to survive the increasing challenges in farming – whether its economics or pest management.

Del Bosque points to his own experience in the mid-1980s when he first started farming on his own. Because of limited equipment, he decided to farm melons on 80-inch beds instead of the conventional 40-inch beds, planted every other bed, that were standard practice at the time.

The change allowed him to use a lighter tractor and make fewer passes across field. It saved him time, money, water and fertilizer while creating a better soil structure. Today, the 80-inch bed is the industry standard.

Del Bosque also was an early adopter of drip irrigation in the 1990s. “It has been interesting and challenging to adapt to different methods and crops,” he says.

He also believes in giving back to the farming community. Over the years, he has been active in farm organizations, boards and commissions. As a result of his efforts with the California Latino Water Coalition, he has been a member of the California Water Commission, appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. His involvement with labor led him to become a director and then chairman of AgSafe, a nonprofit dedicated to preventing injuries and illnesses to farm workers.

Del Bosque doesn't forget his family farm roots. “I have known forever how important farm workers are. They are a vital part of my business. We should value our farm workers more. It's very important to me being able to work in a fair and safe environment. We should be more responsible not only to our workers, but to our environment, as well.” Del Bosque became active in the Latino Water Coalition to provide a voice as an advocate for water to farmland. He regularly meets with the media, elected officials locally and in Washington, D.C. along with hosting tours on his farm, including many from Southern California who are interested in agriculture.

“The coalition needed someone to speak for them that is a farmer. The reason we are the Latino Water Coalition is we want to have a Latino voice, and someone who can speak for farm workers”

Del Bosque says the Sustainable Cotton Project has helped him when he started his organic farming program.

“I was very interested in the program. I have a great deal of respect to their science-based way of thinking, and their integrated management approach. They bring a great deal of knowledge to this business,” he says.



Beauty is also functional. Joe's wife Maria stands in front of the habitat area of their organic melons. It is an insectary where good/beneficial bugs live to control pests in the crop.