

FOOD SECURITY, LABOR, TOURISM

These Gardens Started When Travel Slowed. Now, They're Spurring Tourism.

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When COVID caused a shutdown of travel to Costa Rica, many in the tourism sector found themselves out of work, and a local non-profit helped them turn to farming to fill the gaps. Now, those successful farms are stimulating tourism in the country.



Rosaura Baltodano Pereira in the garden.

Photography courtesy of Creciendo Juntos.

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Immaculately tilled rows, prodigiously verdant leafy greens, towering tomato plants, sprawling zucchini and three more plots of radishes and peppers. It's called *la huerta*, the garden, but the humble name doesn't capture the majesty or size. No, this garden in Triunfo, Costa Rica is no pandemic plot of veggies or a common backyard patch of corn and green beans. This is a farm, an enterprise. It started when the pandemic-induced moratorium on tourism forced many in Costa Rica to turn to agriculture, and now, in an almost ironic turn of events, it's funded by and encouraging tourism.

Perhaps even more unbelievable than the state of the massive garden are the women tending to it. With wide smiles, they don wide-brimmed hats and rubber boots covered in mud, holding fistfuls of dirt-encrusted squash blossoms. A year ago, they hadn't planted or harvested a day in their lives; now, thanks to **Creciendo Juntos**, **Peninsula Papagayo's** non-profit arm, these women till the soil, grow good things and find joy in working with their hands. More importantly, they also feed their families and make a living, something that, in 2020, many of their peers worried they wouldn't be able to do.

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MEET THE MODERN FARMER

When COVID spread across the globe, Costa Rica's borders closed, leaving a massive percentage—20 percent on average—of the area's population unemployed or severely under-employed. Something needed to be done; people needed jobs and food. Creciendo Juntos' solution: Take over funding of the new farmer program the Ministry of Agriculture started in 2020, to help promote and encourage farming in the Guanacaste region of the country, an area known for its long, hot, dry season followed by months of rain. Historically, it's a region more likely to host cattle and rice than water-loving fruits and vegetables. The Las Huertas program aimed to offer education and economic stability, while bringing fresh produce to a region that relied heavily on imports.

Dubbed *Las Huertas*, or Home Garden, Creciendo Juntos saw the program as a way to provide income and purpose to families in the region of Guanacaste who were economically devastated by the loss of tourism during COVID.

Organizers borrowed farming techniques from Israel, where the landscape and conditions are similarly dry, and launched a pilot program with 19 families. The program was a resounding success. But even so, it was low on the priority list for government funding, and it seemed that the effort had reached its end.

That was the case until, through a series of sidewalk conversations between friends, Creciendo Juntos got wind of the details and jumped at the chance to step in. The non-profit joined forces with the Ministry of Agriculture, and together they launched another round of training. These new farmers, in the small communities near Peninsula Papagayo, mainly work in tourism, so farming had never been a priority. With the tourism sector waylaid due to COVID, the timing was perfect.

Creciendo Juntos secured funds via grants and private donations, and launched the first round of training in August 2020 with 75 families from five communities. They sat through four hours a week of classroom instruction, then spent the remainder of the six-day work week preparing their land. For seven months, the farmers trained, and in the end, 63 families completed the program and were reaping the first fruits of their labor.

When the success of the program became apparent in early 2021, Creciendo Juntos launched a second round of training for more families in 10 additional communities, bringing the total number of new farms in the area to 103. Of those, 63 percent are owned and run by women, many of whom didn't have jobs or significant income before. "It's really lovely and amazing to see the empowerment," says Elsa Bonilla, the program's director. "For many, this is the first time they have two incomes in one home."

In fact, many households had little to no income at all when tourism slowed down, making farming a literal lifesaving career change. Rosaura Baltodano Pereira, who farms with her mother, signed up because local families who had lost their jobs didn't have money to purchase the goods she sold at her small community market.

Heidy Palacios Palacios, who only worked occasionally as a house cleaner pre-pandemic, plants and picks with her husband, who couldn't return to his job because he was diagnosed with kidney disease. "Seeing those squashes, seeing the quality of the vegetables that I harvest, those onions, all of that is what I enjoy," says Pereira, who adds that she's constantly surprised at the abundance of the garden.

Argerie de los Angeles Chavarria Espinoza's husband's hours were slashed, so she signed up. "It was very motivating to be able to have my own income," says Espinoza, excited and proud to show that women can lead a project like this.

When tourism did finally return, many of the men went back to work, but the women stayed, taking pride in running a business and supporting their household. “It is an immense satisfaction because now I feel like a fulfilled businesswoman, who wants to do things better every day,” Palacios says of the harvests she’s produced.

“Now, we are more professional, we identify diseases, we classify products... we have a collection center, a cold truck, and, in two years, we are already [changed] for the better,” says Espinoza.

But the resounding economic and psychological success of the program—new farmers often reference the mental health boost learning to farm brings—also came with an interesting cyclical twist: Even as the program was born out of the fall of tourism, the industry is now supporting the program as tourism returns with a bang.

In 2022, **Andaz**, the second resort on the peninsula, started buying produce from farmers to use in the resort kitchens; Four Seasons began doing the same this January. Peninsula guests and homeowners can also book a Huertas Experience: They tour a home garden with a chef, pick out their own produce and then sit down to enjoy a custom, private, chef-prepared dinner back at the resort made with the very vegetables among which they walked. The fee for the experience funds the program.

That means that, although the absence of tourism on the Peninsula may have created the need for Las Huertas, the produce grown on these improbable farms is now literally feeding back into it, sustaining guests who in turn help fund the program monetarily, which has helped form farmer associations and purchase supplies. Four Seasons even donated a delivery truck that farmers use to transport produce to Peninsula kitchens as often as six days a week.

And the more tourism grows, the more these farmers make and the more fulfillment they receive from planting, harvesting and celebrating the bounty.

“My way of seeing things, valuing things—everything changed,” says Palacios.



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Mike Brady 3 months ago

Awesome

1 Reply

Woozie 3 months ago

Sounds great on the surface but I certainly hope that environmental stewardship is mandated! Not just following organic growing practices, but land and water conservation and encouraging, rather than destroying biodiversity. The biggest red flag for me was the phrase opening the second paragraph: "Immaculately tilled rows". Why are they tilling at all? How do they 'bank' water during the rainy season to use during the dry season. If not careful, I can anticipate the use of the term "desertification" in descriptions of Costa Rica -- That would be a sin!

0 Reply View Replies (1)

Scott 2 months ago

Really amazing loved every piece of it

Last edited 2 months ago by Scott

0 Reply

Ozempic Pens 1 month ago

Really amazing loved every piece of it

0 Reply

Brynn 3 months ago

Sounds like they may be destroying the rich biodiversity by increasing farming areas. Tilling is horrible for soil. They need to practice regenerative farming. Collect rain water. Use organic only techniques. It's such a lush beautiful country. Please don't destroy it or the wildlife.

-1 Reply

Brynn 3 months ago

Seems they need to practice regenerative farming instead of tilling the soil and disrupting the organisms that create the health in crops. Great that women are involved and enjoying it. 🙌 My first comment disappeared. Hope this one is allowed.

-1 Reply

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