

HOST LEDE:

The average age of California farmers has climbed to 59 according to the USDA's latest census.

As this generational wave of farmers age out of the fields, they face big decisions about whether to sell the farm, pass the business on to family members or find an alternative path.

As part of our "Graying California" series, Capital Public Radio's Julia Mitric brings us the story of a farming couple who struck a balance between their desire to stay on the farm and the financial calculus of retirement.

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AMBI Wind chimes

Riverhill Farm is nestled below a steep ridge in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

ALAN: I internalized this whole place.

Alan Haight knows his farm by heart — even with his eyes closed.

ALAN: I know every change in the pitch of the ground. I know where the best soil is. I know where the outcroppings are. I know where the buried rocks are that are too big to move that I avoid hitting with the tractor.

Alan and his wife Jo McProud came to farming as a second career in their forties. Together they built up a business selling organic vegetables, lettuce and fruit to folks in Nevada City.

The hard work was worth it to them — the watering, the constant weeding, the sweaty summer harvest. But, Jo says, it took its toll.

JO: Pushing through those hard times was doable thru our fifties. And then, as we got into our sixties, the lack of sleep, the physical stress on our joints. You're not as resilient. Physically, we're getting older.

The couple wanted the farm to continue beyond them. They also needed to draw an income for retirement.

So they started scoping out the regional farming scene for a younger successor. They found Antonio Garza.

ANTONIO: I was looking for a long-term opportunity, I'd been farming for seven years at that point.

AMBI sound of snipping broccoli rabe in clear

Antonio and his partner Daylin Wade crouch in the field, picking broccoli rabe and its lesser known cousin:

REPORTER: What is it called again?

ANTONIO: Spig-ah-ree-ello. Spigariello rabe is also a leaf broccoli and it's also starting to flower.

The spigariello greens will go on pizzas at a local restaurant.

As Antonio took the reins as farmer, he inherited loyal customers and clients that took Alan and Jo years to cultivate. As part of a two-year lease, he has use of the land and equipment. In return, he pays the retired couple rent each month.

They all expect this to grow into a longer-term relationship.

JO: It's our baby and our passion and our life. And if we were here watching it wither and die it would be really heartbreaking. It would be terrible.

Instead, the farm succession is rolling along smoothly. Jo and Alan live on at their house, overlooking fields and orchards.

JO: I have to say, you know, it's an icy, snowy morning...and looking out and seeing Antonio and Daylin out harvesting the brussel sprouts this morning, I was pretty happy with my cup of coffee in the house! [laughs]

There are other perks to retirement. Alan and Jo get to spend time with their first grandchild. Alan's planning five backpacking adventures this summer.

And the couple's going on a bunch of road trips. They'll cherish time spent together, not talking about the farm.

In Nevada City, I'm Julia Mitric.