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Farmer, author, educator Ken Love a big personality in the world of gardening

By Diana DuffSpecial to West Hawaii Today | Monday, August 22, 2016, 9:58 p.m.

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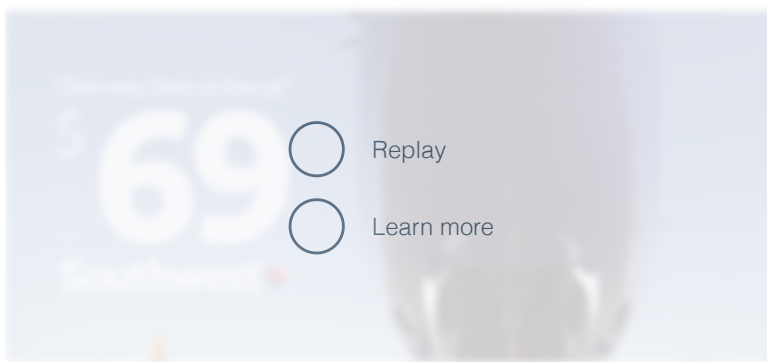
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KEALAKEKUA — When I asked Ken Love to describe his favorite part of being a fruit farmer, his reply was immediate, “Harvesting, of course.”

Ken’s newest orchard is a 2-acre plot in Kealahou that is covered in weed cloth and contains more than 300 types of fruit trees. Many of them are already producing some very interesting fruit that Ken harvests weekly. In his harvest basket last week I found exotics including peanut butter fruit, finger limes, sour otaheite gooseberry and kaffir limes. His wife Margy sells the fresh produce as well as some of their fruit preserves at the Keauhou Farmers Market on Saturday mornings.

Ken’s agricultural path began when he was very young growing up in Chicago. Wonderful summers on his uncle’s farm in Indiana addicted him to farm life. At age 5, Ken decided to replace the grass in his parent’s Chicago backyard with beans. His unhappy father gave him a good spanking but that didn’t deter Ken. Before finishing high school, he had organized victory gardens on Chicago’s South Side and won a prize in the city’s garden design competition.

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In 1983, Ken got an assignment from The Associated Press to come to Kona to take photos and develop a story on Kona Coffee and Mr. Yoshitaka Takashiba was one of the first coffee farmers he met. Takashiba proceeded to give him a crash course in Kona coffee and tropical agriculture while introducing him to local agricultural luminaries including Kona farmer, Mr. Egami. The trip became a culinary awakening when he tasted tropical fruit like cherimoya, soursop, jackfruit and jaboticaba.

“The fruit’s exotic flavors hooked me,” Ken said. “I had never tasted any of them before and never even heard of most of them.”

On return trips he became friends with fruit farmer George Schattauer, who Ken regarded as his mentor for many years before George died in 2005. He was also a staff photographer for West Hawaii Today.

Broadening his horizons

In the next few years, Ken got several photo assignments to Japan. Researching Japanese horticulture and culinary science served to deepen his interest in exotic fruit. During these trips, he was inspired to learn Japanese and to establish an office in Tokyo to continue his research in Japanese agriculture and to direct market his Kona coffee.

Ken's growing reputation as a fruit guru drew author Adam Gollner to Hawaii to meet him and feature him in his book, "The Fruit Hunters," published in 2008. Four years later, when the book was being made into a movie, Ken went to Hollywood to play himself in the film version. Though he had produced and participated in other films about agriculture since 2005, The Fruit Hunters firmly established him as a man obsessed with tropical fruit.

This obsession led Ken to promote awareness of the possibilities for diversity in Hawaiian agriculture. Growing lots of different crops, including many exotic tropical fruits, often reduces the pest problems that plague mono-crop farming. Diversity also enables a variety of harvest and cultivation periods, granting farmers a less stressed lifestyle. Including tropical fruit also provides some excellent year round taste treats.

Helping other farmers

Ken is truly dedicated to helping farmers succeed.

"I see myself as a kind of Robin Hood," he remarked. "Sometimes farm success means stealing from the rich to give to the poor."

This isn't a totally accurate description of his constant efforts to get state and federal funding to help farmers, but it's close. Small farmers are definitely among the underserved in our society and Ken is committed to improving their lot.

His research here and around the world has introduced Ken to many experts and the tropical fruit they grow. His experience made him the natural choice for executive director of the Hawaii Tropical Fruit Growers Association. In this position he continues to recruit interesting speakers for the HTFG conferences from the places he has travelled and lectured. This year's 26th annual event will begin Sept. 30 on Kauai. The official welcome to the conference will be delivered on Saturday morning, Oct. 1 by Scott Enright, chairperson of the Hawaii Department of Agriculture.

According to Ken, it is Enright's leadership that has directed more awareness and assistance to Hawaii's small family farms. Other speakers and breakout sessions are scheduled addressing many fruit farming topics. On Monday, Oct. 3 the conference begins travelling around the state with mini-conferences on Oahu and Molokai as well as in Hilo, ending up in Kona on Oct. 7. More information on the association and the conference is available at HTFG.org.

Ken's research and photographic experience led him to develop another website hawaiiifruit.net to disseminate more information on the fruit that can be grown in Hawaii. There you'll find many beautiful and informative posters as well as chef guides and lots of other information on tropical fruit.

Future plans

Today, Ken and his wife, Margy, have moved to the house next to the Kealakekua orchard and have plans to put a commercial kitchen on the site as a much needed community resource and an education center for classes like Ken's Master Preserver series. Plans for a retail outlet on the site are also in the works.

Ken is currently working on several active grants that are funding projects that might serve his Robin Hood persona.

One is a joint grant from the United States and Hawaii departments of Agriculture that has funded the development of four 2-acre tree repositories in the state. The two on the Big Island are located in Honomu, on the east side, as well as in Kona. Kauai and Molokai each have repositories in place as well. These orchards were created to be sources for plant material including seeds and cuttings of many tropical fruits.

A grant from the national and state agriculture departments is funding a 10,000-tree project. Ken is actively collecting fruit trees from worldwide markets to offer to local farmers at affordable prices. Most of the young trees are available to members of Hawaii Tropical Fruit Growers for \$20 and to the general public for \$40. The trees that are currently for sale include 10 grafted varieties of mangos and avocados as well as exotics like black sapote, peanut butter fruit and dragon fruit and 30 different citrus varieties.

In his quest for profitable fruit crops for Hawaii, Ken became interested in durian as a possibility. Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education has provided funding for him to research the possibilities. Despite the odiferous reputation of this fruit, Ken knows it grows well here and is researching potential markets in California that are currently

being served by South East Asian farmers. He also feels that a strong local market for the fruit exists.

Ken has offered several Master Food Preserver classes in Kona. He knows that teaching farmers certifiable preserving methods for their crops can add value as well as longer shelf life to their produce. The Hawaii Department of Labor, Work Force Development division also sees food preserving as a profitable skill that can increase revenue for farmers. They are funding Ken's proposal to expand the Master Food Preserver program throughout the state.

Never at rest, Ken will soon be launching a Kickstarter campaign to help raise funds to establish a community commercial kitchen to serve south Kona farmers and other value added producers. Look for the launch in early September.

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For a guy who loves fruit, Ken has certainly expanded his passion beyond his personal pleasure and infected our community with enthusiasm about growing many exotic tropical fruits. His hope is that this increased interest will translate to increased cash flow for local farmers.

So, let's get started. Get out and plant a fruit tree, today.

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