



In past decades, American family farms were handed down through the generations. These days, almost every beginning farmer or rancher must start their farm as a dream. In San Juan County, rising land and housing prices have squeezed out many eager new farmers. Thus, a constellation of services and resources is needed to support beginners who dream to farm. The San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild helps to provide these services and resources.

Joanna Rubi Aldort came to Orcas Island with a fresh degree in chemical engineering, but she wanted to see more of the world before settling down to an engineering career. After some twists and turns and a true love story, Joanna found herself dreaming of flowers: a crop to celebrate life's turning points, a crop that could realize her financial goals, and a crop that connected her to family and creativity. But growing flowers commercially in the islands is not always easy, and she knew she would need advice.

Joanna diligently studied under an experienced farmer as a field worker at West Beach Farm. She experimented with growing in her own small backyard. When she outgrew a space at an OPAL Community Land Trust garden, Joanna knew she needed more land and a plan, so she connected with the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild's Farmers-to-Farmland program. Through the program, she was directed to free business planning through the Northwest Agricultural Business Center and to farm planning through Washington State University's Cultivating Success course.

The Ag Guild helped Joanna to explore her needs, which were an acre of land, sun, water, proximity to home and work, an affordable lease, and landlords willing to let her build a fence and a small hoop house. As it turned out, her neighbor was keen to have a piece of their property bloom with flowers.

Through the help of NABC's legal templates, Ag Guild support, and legal counsel, Joanna began her business and signed a 5-year farmland lease. Her determination to grow her farm business has found her selling flowers at her own farmstand and at the Orcas Island Farmers Market. Joanna's hard work caught the attention of the National Young Farmers Coalition, who granted her startup funds as one of only 35 of their grant awardees in 2023.

Joanna acknowledges, "When I was working on setting up a farm as a first time farmer on Orcas Island, the Ag Guild was a huge help to me. They sent Farmers-to-Farmland program coordinator Chelsea Thorpe to help guide me through the process of securing a lease. Being a first time farmer, I was not familiar with the structure of these agreements and would have felt lost without the invaluable support from the Ag Guild. I'm glad we have an organization that helps beginner farmers in our community."

For young farmers in the San Juan Islands, the Ag Guild and its partners are stepping in to provide support and help new farmers like Joanna realize their dreams.