

## Green Gardener Spotlight

### Marciano "Rocky" Chan



Constantly striving to find innovative and sustainable ways to improve his farm, Marciano "Rocky" Chan is a true Green Gardener. Rocky first discovered his "green thumb" while working in Santa Barbara's community garden, Pilgrim Terrace. This experience opened Rocky's eyes to the joys of gardening. Realizing he didn't want to work in a cubicle anymore, Rocky decided to pursue what he enjoyed: gardening. Three years later, Rocky has an established sharecropping program on several farms in Santa Barbara County. Rocky's unconventional method of farming benefits multiple parties in a way that is locally sustainable. The water, gardening supplies, and land Rocky farms on are paid for by a separate property owner. Rocky is responsible for planting and maintaining a healthy garden on the land. The owner is then allowed to pick from the garden whatever produce they desire. This mutually beneficial system trades skills for goods and keeps our farmers local.



On just one of his five farms Rocky grows cucumbers, asparagus, strawberries, carrots, kale, artichokes, tomatoes, five varieties of summer squash, five varieties of winter squash, hot and sweet peppers, watermelon, flowers, and more. This impressive array of vegetables is grown according to season and consumer demand. Mr. Chan grows his produce organically, without the use of harmful pesticides. As Rocky points out, pesticides kill both good and bad bacteria in the soil. Good bacteria break down organic matter in the soil, and allow the plants to absorb nutrients. To fertilize his soil, Rocky uses compost from the manure of local horses. He also uses pruning and clippings of the plants on his farm. This creates a sustainable compost cycle, and keeps the plants healthy.



As a certified Green Gardener, Rocky knows not only how to create healthy soil for his plants, but also how to efficiently water them. Rocky says the Green Gardener Program is useful for aspiring gardeners because it teaches them comprehensive composting and soil techniques, as well as water efficient irrigation techniques. On his farm, Rocky has a network of drip irrigation systems which waters all of his plants. Rocky is a strong supporter of using drip irrigation. Not only does it conserve water, the system is also healthier for the plants.

As Rocky talks about what he learned in the Green Gardener class, it becomes clear he knows far more than the basic of gardening. He explains how to water the plants to avoid mildew and aphids, how to keep plants alive for longer than is typical, and how to increase the yield of plants. His techniques improve upon traditional gardening basics. For example, Rocky puts tarp around the base of his tomato plants. This heats the soil and the plant produces more tomatoes. Rocky sets himself apart from other gardeners with his desire to always improve his farm through experimentation. After reading a study suggesting red tarps will increase tomato yield more than black tarps, Rocky decides to test the theory for himself. He has set up an experiment on the farm with several tomato plants next to each other, and either red or black tarps around their base. Experiments like this help Rocky improve the yield of his farm.

Another method Rocky uses to improve the quality of his produce is to plant flowers around his farm. The flowers, he says, attract bees and other insects that help pollinate the crops.



Local residents who are interested in learning about gardening from Rocky can join his apprenticeship program. As Rocky puts it, the program is a “win-win situation”. The first half hour of each meeting is spent learning a new gardening topic. The students then put their knowledge to practice. On the farm, Rocky points out a compost pile the students created. The students spend two hours working on the farm each meeting. Through this partnership, Rocky gets help maintaining his crops, and the students get to both learn and practice gardening techniques.

Marciano “Rocky” Chan is an innovative gardener who believes in local sustainability. This belief is clear through his organic gardening techniques and apprenticeship program. Through the Green Gardener class, Rocky learned water efficient irrigation practices and healthy soil and composting practices. Rocky’s own research has improved upon these techniques to create a thriving garden. The produce he grows is used in local restaurants, distributed by local suppliers like Plow to Porch and Tri-County Produce, and sold at local farmers markets. Rocky contributes to the sustainability of Santa Barbara; his produce is both grown and sold locally in a way that is healthy for the consumer and the environment.