

Young farmers bucking the trend of withering profession

By **Gina Kim, Sacramento Bee**

There are small moments that make farming worthwhile for 26-year-old Toby Hastings – detaching a ripe Sharlyn melon from the vine with just a slight tug, digging for potatoes and finding nests of them huddled together, snapping the stem of a perfect strawberry.

Hastings is in his third season of coaxing life from tidy rows in the middle of an organic walnut orchard in rural Winters. He is simultaneously bucking two trends: the aging of the nation's farmers and the increasingly difficult feat of finding land that can be farmed and starting a business.

Hastings' Free Spirit Farm was born in 2008 when he became the "farmer incubator" – a name borrowed from the term business incubator – of the Center for Land-Based Learning, a nonprofit organization that exposes youths to sustainable agriculture and nature restoration.

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