

New Subtropical Farm Advisor Comes to Southern California

By Tim Linden

To Sonia Rios, her appointment as University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Subtropical Horticulture farm advisor for Riverside and San Diego counties is a return to her roots.

Rios grew up in Wasco in the San Joaquin Valley and was heavily involved in Future Farmers of America (FFA). In high school she competed in the FFA's statewide citrus contest. "I came in second place as a junior and won for the entire state my senior year," she said.

Though that proved to be a fairly accurate predictor of her future career, it took Sonia quite a few years before she embraced plant science as her career path. She admits that the path was staring her in the face for many years before she decided to go down it.

She was born in Delano into an agricultural family. Her grandfather had been a migrant worker and her father studied agronomy in Mexico and received his master's degree in ag engineering. Throughout her childhood he worked for several different farming operations, including citrus groves in Kern County.

But even though Sonia was raised with a plant science background and used her knowledge well in the FFA competition, when she started college at Cal State University at Fresno she entered as a pre-veterinarian major. "I thought I wanted to work with animals."

Her college career did not take a linear path and she admits it took her the better part of a decade to get her bachelor's degree. From Cal State Fresno, she moved to Southern California and went to community college after taking a couple of years off. Eventually she enrolled in Cal Poly Pomona and began to study plant science and pest management. After graduating from Cal Poly, she moved back up to the San Joaquin Valley taking a position with UCCE in Tulare County as a staff research associate. It was while in Tulare that her superior at the Cooperative Extension office urged her to continue her education. She did so and in the summer of 2014 Sonia earned her master's degree in plant science with an emphasis in weed science from Cal State Fresno.

Prior to graduation, her husband transferred to the Cal Fire (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection) office in San Bernardino, causing Sonia to begin to look



for a position in the same general vicinity. "When I saw that this position was open, it seemed that it was meant for me," she noted, as it combines her early experience in citrus with much of her undergraduate work at Cal Poly Pomona. While a student there, she worked in the tree fruit arena with both avocados and citrus, which fittingly are the two major crops that fall under her purview in Riverside and San Diego counties.

Rios knows she has big shoes to fill as it is the first time one farm advisor has worked both Riverside and San Diego counties. And she also is replacing longtime veteran farm advisor Gary Bender, who has retired. "I am on a very steep learning curve," she told *From the Grove* in early December after being on the job for only two weeks.

For the first six to eight months, Rios is doing an assessment of the needs of the growers she will be helping. "I am finding out what their needs are and what we can accomplish," she said.

It is only after that assessment is completed that her research projects will be established with the help of the other Cooperative Extension personnel, including those stationed at UC Riverside. Rios is eager to visit as many groves and farmers as she can and encourages growers in the two counties to reach out and invite her to their ranches. "I'd love that," she says. "I'm willing to travel anywhere in the two counties to meet growers."

She can be reached at the UCCE office in Moreno Valley (sirios@ucanr.edu). 🥑