

Beyond dollars: Farmer couple's reverse migration push, son to quit Canada job to work in family's fruit orchard

Courtesy: Anju Agnihotri Chhaba



At a time when most young people in Punjab are trying all means to reach foreign shores, Rajinder Kaur Virk and her husband Gurnam Singh Virk of Moranwali village in Faridkot are elated as their son will return from Canada in April this year and join them in farming. The couple, in their mid 50s, have transformed their 18 acres of farmland into a thriving orchard in just six years and now hope to venture into the food processing area with the expertise of their son, who has a Masters in agriculture from Ludhiana's Punjab Agriculture University. To ensure that their orchards thrive, the couple uses grafting techniques which gives them fruits in the second or third year. While Rajinder Kaur worked as an instructor in district welfare department and took premature retirement, her husband Gurnam is still serving as the PA to the Faridkot deputy commissioner. "We had earlier leased out our land and farmers grew wheat and paddy. When our son and daughter left for Canada, we wanted to start a sustainable business model and pursue our children to return to their homeland. Now when our children see what we have achieved, they have realised that they can earn more here. We are looking forward to having our son join us in April, especially since there is great potential for fruit processing, which would require more hands on the deck," says Rajinder, adding that they started with kinnow, malta, lemon, and mosambi on around 8 acres. The Virks' shifted to orchard farming in 2019. Gurnam adds that when they started they were often met with ridicule. "People laughed and thought that we would fail. They couldn't understand

how we will manage with our respective jobs. But our focus was clear. I once asked my son if he wants to earn less working under someone else or come here and take over the family tradition and earn way more. From our 18 acres, we now earn around Rs 50 lakh annually. Now that my son is convinced, I am half relieved. Once he is back, our daughter will also understand,” he says, adding that his son first went to Canada to study and now he will return despite having a post-study work permit. Explaining how it all started, the Virks say, “When our children were leaving for Canada for higher studies, we were busy with our respective careers. Over time, we realized that they might never return. We then gradually started withdrawing our land from lease agreements and started planting fruit trees. We took guidance from Rajinder’s brother, Jaswinder Brar, who is a horticultural scientist at PAU and with his expertise, we first planted kinnow, malta, lemon, and mosambi on approximately 8 acres. Over time we expanded to guava on 8 acres and apple in one acre. We also grew papayas, ber (Indian Jujube), pear, persimmon, dragon fruit, pomegranate, karonda and jamun.” Their orchards bear fruits the year round except during June-July months, ensuring a steady income for the couple. To ensure that their orchards thrive, the couple uses grafting techniques which gives them fruits in the second or third year. “To conserve water and optimize crop yield, we have installed a drip irrigation system throughout our farm. We also use plant residues and fallen fruit to create a natural ecosystem that protects crops from pests and increases productivity. Apples are typically not for hot weather, but several varieties have now been developed that suit Punjab’s climate. We have dedicated one acre to apple and the trees have started to bear fruit,” says Rajinder, who retired in 2022. Apart from the fruits, the couple also grows wheat on 12 acres during winter through intercropping and plant maize, moonggi (green gram) and sugarcane in summer. “We handle marketing and sales ourselves and sell our produce directly to buyers. We transport the fruits to local mandis in Faridkot, Bathinda, Zira, and Kotkapura early morning or late evening, where we have our purchasers. We grade and pack our fruits carefully and our 15-20 labourers help with the work during the season while 5-6 people are employed around-the-year.”
