I’m a farmer.

At the risk of sounding like Max Yasgur, the famous farmer who allowed Woodstock to be held on his fertile grounds a generation ago, I just had to share this news with all you city slickers. Not until Planning Director Mike Foley described to me the administration’s idea of farming did I realize that I, too, am a member of this most noble of professions.

As Old MacDonald might say: Ee-ai-ee-ai-o.

According to Foley, large lots in subdivisions zoned strictly for agriculture use can live up to that name if the owners turn in a “farm plan” showing that they intend to keep just 50 percent of their land in something like fruit trees or vegetable plots, anything that’s “for consumption or sale.” Even raising horses (how many, I don’t know) makes you a bona fide Pa Ingalls in the eyes of the county.

After I heard this, I started thinking about my own little 8,460-square-foot spread in a residential subdivision of Makawao, and that’s when it dawned on me: I’m living on the Ponderosa.

I got so excited I ran out to buy me a new pitchfork.

For you disbelievers, here’s my lineup of crops, in various amounts and various stages of growth: papayas, bananas (three separate stands and two volunteer patches starting up), the most productive avocado tree in the neighborhood, coffee, sugar cane (two varieties), guavas, pepper trees (you can grind up the dried corns), mulberries, tangerines (two kinds), grapefruit, limes, ti (green and red), a lilikoi vine that makes the best pies on the island and noni.

Also: sweet potatoes, gourds, taro (dryland), tomatoes (three kinds), bush beans, pole beans, broccoli, lettuce (all kinds), spinach, herbs, aloe and so many types of chili peppers I’ve lost track.

This doesn’t even include all the plants and vines I’ve put in for lei flowers, something which I certainly use “for consumption.” So I think I have every right to add these to my list of farm products: stephanotis, star jasmine, puakenikeni, pikake, pakalana, plumeria, maile and even my kukui tree since, hopefully, I’ll eventually get nuts off that which I can polish, string and wear — or maybe even sell.
One other thing: Do compost piles count toward that magic number of 50 percent? I’ve got three of those — one just started, one cooking and one ready to apply.

Anyhow, after putting together this breathtaking list of foodstuffs and other goods that I’m producing with my bare hands to cover way more than half my property, my next thought was: Hey, Mike Foley, how can I switch my current residential zoning to honest-to-goodness ag so my 8,460-square-foot lot can qualify for a lower overall land valuation that will give me a lower property tax bill and, just maybe, a lower water bill.

I mean, here I am, a single woman (and proud of it) who has unwittingly taken up farming — organic farming no less. Don’t I deserve the same tax breaks that all these other 50 percent gentlemen estate farmers are getting?

Since I grew up in the farm country of the Midwest (and spent some of my summers weeding soybean fields, detassling corn, smelling hog lots and swearing off farming forever because it’s just too damn hard), my image of agriculture is quite different from that of the current administration. A farm that uses only half its property is, I would imagine, on its way to foreclosure.

Even venturing around Kula, I don’t see many farms that aren’t using almost every inch of land. The Upcountry farms I pass by have onion fields for front yards and tractors out back.

What I’m driving at is, why don’t we stop this charade? Why don’t we reclassify the ag lots that have already been turned into expansive residential subdivisions by coming up with a whole new category of zoning with its own rules and regulations? Rather than simply change the designation from ag to rural, which would allow for much denser housing, let’s put together a new designation — let’s call it country living zoning — for those ag lots that have already become big home lots. Real ag lots, meanwhile, would be reserved for real, farm bureau kind of ag.

That way, farmers would still have their true ag lands assessed at their well-deserved lower valuations while the country living folks would pay closer to residential values on their entire lots, which only seems fair to me, as one of those 50-percent gentlewoman farmers already paying at residential rates.

When community plans come up for review in the next few years, the public could consider what ag lands, if any, they would specify for country living zoning so nonfarmers who just want to live on a big chunk of land can do exactly that without having to pretend to be Mr. Green Jeans or knock themselves out by trying to get crops to sprout out of blue rock. If they want to have a big lawn and nothing else, why not? If they want to garden their hearts out, like me, then all the better, but don’t call them farmers because they’re not.

The state Land Use Commission and county administration obviously have different ideas about what constitutes ag. During the past eight months of wrangling over the new
West Maui ag subdivisions, the LUC seems to be of a mind that a farm is a farm, where the whole operation centers around the crop, not the house. To the county, it appears that a farm is a farm — unless it’s a garden or maybe a corral or perhaps even Martha Stewart’s back yard. In the latter case, the crop seems to be a necessary evil rather than a livelihood.

Who knows how the next administration will describe ag?

If I follow Foley’s definition, I could rightly hang a sign on my fence and call it Monson Mahiai Ridge or Makawao Ranch Acres (oops, taken already). But, if truth be told, even with all my fruit trees, vegetable plots and compost piles, the most appropriate name for my little piece of paradise is what it’s always been: a home — a home sweet home with a great garden.

*Valerie Monson is a staff writer for The Maui News. “Off Deadline” offers staff members the opportunity to step back and reflect on issues of the day, or to just talk story.*