

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY TO RAISE A GARDEN

Resettled refugees plus agriculture create a powerful synergy in Idaho

by JoAnna Haugen

Take a few acres of donated land. Add a handful of community volunteers. Provide seeds and equipment. Top off with training.

The result? In Boise, Idaho, it's a fully functioning gardening program designed for refugees who are resettled in the region, which in turn offers fresh and organic produce to community members.

"We resettle around 100 individuals per year and most of them are coming from situations of conflict around the world," says Katie Painter (Paraguay 00-02), the refugee agriculture coordinator for the Idaho Office for Refugees. In recent years, the city has helped integrate people who have been persecuted from Iraq, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar and Burundi by offering job training and placement. A three-year federal grant has allowed the office to establish Global Gardens, which offers gardening space and equipment to these people, many of whom have grown up in cultures steeped in farming and agriculture.

Setting up community gardens takes, well, a community. Global Gardens currently encompasses five gardens and two larger sites (considered farms), which are two to three acres in size. Each plot of land is sponsored by a local organization such as a church or neighborhood association. They oversee the day-to-day operations of the gardens. Community members have also been generous with their donations, offering seedlings and equipment.

But the people who plant the seeds, weed the gardens and harvest the crops are the local refugees. Each garden is unique to the people who work in it. The Avathath Beth Israel Synagogue Garden, for example, is maintained



Dadiri Nuro and Mualiko Mberwa, both from Samalia at the Edwards Greenhouse Market in Boise.

Global Gardens

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by a large number of Somali Bantu who enjoy growing corn. The Silver Sage Girl Scouts Garden is gardened primarily by Bosnians and Meskhetian Turks from Russia who like to grow ethnic crops such as gypsy peppers, root crops (such as turnips and potatoes), tomatoes, a variety of yellow peppers and cucumbers.

Growing crops is only part of the story at Global Gardens. Once harvesting is complete, the produce has to go somewhere. To bring the program full circle, Painter teaches a technical course to the gardeners and farmers that includes information on planning planting calendars, water and irrigation, managing pests, soil and, of course, marketing. Local Boise farmers donate their time to help teach the classes by sharing their knowledge about the land. This past year, farmers at the Somali Bantu Community Farm in particular focused on their marketing skills by learning how to wash and prepare produce for sale, setting up a booth at the farmers' market, pricing products and managing transactions with customers. The refugees have also been successful in selling their produce to local restaurants.

In 2009, the Global Gardens program introduced community-



Mwechiwa Migua at the Capitol City Public Market in Boise.

supported agriculture (CSA) into the marketing mix, which has provided gardeners with another way to share and sell their produce. "It's basically like buying a subscription to the farm," Painter says, "and when we start harvesting vegetables, the people who have signed up receive a bag of whatever vegetables we have each week."

From June through September, members of the Global Gardens CSA

received large shopping bags heaped with leafy greens, several varieties of squash, tomatoes, peppers, beets, carrots and savory items, such as onions and garlic.

"The amount of stuff we got through the CSA was astounding for the price we paid," says Matthew Miller, a Boise resident and CSA member who served in the Peace Corps with his wife, Juana Nolasco (Russia 00-02). Miller says the couple ate more healthily in Russia and wanted to integrate similar eating habits into their lifestyle stateside. They were actively looking for a CSA program to join when they found out about Global Gardens. After speaking with Painter about the program, Miller and Nolasco signed up for the season. They are planning on enrolling in 2010 as well.

"It's a fabulous deal," Miller says. "We're a family of four and we could barely keep up." But it's not just the food that keeps them coming back. Knowing that they're supporting the local community is important and being able to interact with the refugees working in the gardens at the farmers' market was a valuable experience, especially for their kids. Global Gardens offered members of the CSA an opportunity to tour the gardens, and at the end of the season, members were treated to a meal created with



Yussuf Sundi, a refugee from Somalia, at the Somali Bantu Community Farm.

foods from the gardens and farms. “It was a great way to celebrate the end of the season,” Miller says. “I’ve never seen that with other CSA programs.”

Having traveled so far from their home countries to settle in Boise, the refugees have struggled with language differences and lack of educational and job training, but Global Gardens has given many of them an opportunity to learn and master new skills that have led some down professional career paths. This past summer the organization was able to hire some refugees through the Idaho Department of Labor. Painter offered a job to a young Somali Bantu who was unemployed at the time, and though he wasn’t particularly interested in farming, he accepted the position. “He really ran with it and became independent,” Painter says. “He became a leader in his community. He’s a really ambitious guy anyway, but I think he discovered an area of interest that he didn’t know about.”

The federal grant that has helped make the community gardens a reality will run out in September 2010, but Painter has worked to make the project self-sustainable. Some of the gardening groups have applied for and received individual grants for additional funding. Other farmers and gardeners have mentioned breaking away from the community gardens and starting their own gardens and businesses. And there’s already talk of enrolling up to 20 members in the 2010 CSA program.

“I talk with my clients and make sure they’re aware that they need to be self-sufficient. I explain that our funding might run out,” Painter says. “People have asked them about what they will do if that happens and they’ve said that the community farms will always continue in some form.”

Learn more about the Idaho Refugee Garden Program at www.idahorefugees.org/Home/Global_Gardens.

JoAnna Haugen (Kenya 04-05) is the community news editor for the National Peace Corps Association.

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