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October 9, 2011

# When the Uprooted Put Down Roots

By **PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN**

SAN DIEGO — At the Saturday farmer’s market in City Heights, a major portal for refugees, Khadija Musame, a Somali, arranges her freshly picked pumpkin leaves and lablab beans amid a United Nations of produce, including water spinach grown by a Cambodian refugee and amaranth, a grain harvested by Sarah Salie, who fled rebels in Liberia. Eaten with a touch of lemon by Africans, and coveted by Southeast Asians for soups, this crop is always a sell-out.

Among the regular customers at the New Roots farm stand are Congolese women in flowing dresses, Somali Muslims in headscarves, Latino men wearing broad-brimmed hats and Burundian mothers in brightly patterned textiles who walk home balancing boxes of produce on their heads.

New Roots, with 85 growers from 12 countries, is one of more than 50 community farms dedicated to refugee agriculture, an entrepreneurial movement spreading across the country. American agriculture has historically been forged by newcomers, like the Scandinavians who helped settle the Great Plains; today’s growers are more likely to be rural subsistence farmers from Africa and Asia, resettled in and around cities from New York, Burlington, Vt., and Lowell, Mass., to Minneapolis, Phoenix and San Diego.

With language and cultural hurdles, and the need to gain access to land, financing and marketing, farm ownership for refugees can be very difficult. Programs like New Roots, which provide training in soil, irrigation techniques and climate, “help refugees make the leap from community gardens to independent farms,” said Hugh Joseph, an assistant professor at the [Friedman School of Nutrition](#) at Tufts, which advises 28 “incubator” farms representing hundreds of small-scale producers.

Cameroonian peanut plants are growing at [Drew Gardens](#) in the Bronx, chronicled on the Facebook page of Angela Nogue, a refugee farmer. Near Phoenix, a successful goat meat farm and store was begun by Ibrahim Sawara Dahab, an ethnic Sudanese from Somalia. “In

America, you need experience, and my experience was goats,” he said.

The [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) in Washington formed a sustainable farming program in 1998, financing 14 refugee farms and gardens, including one in Boise, Idaho, where sub-Saharan African farmers have gradually learned to cope with unpredictable frosts.

Larry Laverentz, the program manager for refugee agriculture with the Office of Refugee Resettlement, said inspiration came from the [Hmong](#), Mien and Lao refugee farmers of Fresno County, Calif., who settled in the late 1970s and now have 1,300 growers specializing in Asian crops.

These small plots of land can become significant sources of income for refugees, with most farmers able to earn from \$5,000 to more than \$50,000 annually, as the Liberian refugees James and Jawn Golo do on their 20-acre organic farm outside Phoenix, including sales to five farmers’ markets, restaurants and chefs.

In Burlington, a four-acre farm started by Bhutanese-Nepali, Somali Bantu and Congolese farmers is still reeling from the flooding of the Winooski River after [Hurricane Irene](#), which ruined crops at the height of the season and caused an estimated \$15,000 in losses.

“This is a significant supplement to our diet, and budgets are geared to it,” said Yacouba Jacob Bogre, 38, executive director of the [Association of Africans Living in Vermont](#) and a lawyer from Burkina Faso. “Emotionally, we lost a lot, along with fresh vegetables for our households.”

New Roots in City Heights, which Michelle Obama visited last spring, is a model for today’s micro-enterprise. (It is also a culinary education, where a Zimbabwean grower can discover bok choy.) It was started at the request of his Somali Bantu community, said Bilali Muya, the effervescent trainer-in-chief. “There was this kind of depression,” he said. “Everyone was dreaming to come to the U.S.A., but they were not happy. The people were put in apartments, missing activity, community. They were bored.”

They were also homesick for traditional food, grown by hand. In City Heights, where half the residents live at or below the federal poverty line, the three-year-old farmer’s market was the city’s first in a low-income neighborhood, a collaboration between the nonprofit [International Rescue Committee](#) and the San Diego County Farm Bureau.

One can hear 15 different languages there, amid the neat rows of kale, rape and banana plants — but body language is the lingua franca.

“If I see a weed, I pull it, shaking my head,” said Mrs. Musame, the Somali farmer. “We understand each other.”

The hub of refugee life, City Heights was largely home to African-Americans and Mexican immigrants until the fall of Saigon in 1975, when thousands of Southeast Asian refugees arrived to a massive tent city at nearby Camp Pendleton.

From 1980 through 1990, the population almost doubled with immigrants and refugees (most recently from Iraq). The changing demographics of the neighborhood resemble an electrocardiogram of international conflict.

But the exquisite fruits and vegetables for sale, lovingly grown, belie the life experiences of the growers. Mrs. Salie, the Liberian, was raped by rebels and hid for two years in the bush after reporting the crime, she said. Mrs. Musame, a Somali Bantu, came to San Diego as a widow after her husband and three of her sons were gunned down.

And Mr. Muya said Somalis had taken his father, who dug irrigation trenches for a local banana farm, and tortured him, his screams echoing through the village. His grandfather went to help and was beaten with the butt of a rifle. Many hours later, Mr. Muya said, the villagers were told: “Come pick up your dogs.”

“As a Somali Bantu, you don’t go to sleep really deep,” Mr. Muya continued. “You sleep awake.”

In addition to accepting food stamps, the market offers \$20 a month to low-income shoppers to buy more produce (financing comes from [Wholesome Wave](#), a nonprofit based in Connecticut, and a \$250,000 grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

“Especially in tough times, farmers are becoming pharmacists — providing healthy fresh local fruits and vegetables to vulnerable families,” said Gus Schumacher, a former under secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture and now an executive vice president of Wholesome Wave.

Their produce is sold to restaurateurs like George and Samia Salameh, who buy the farm’s tomatoes and mint. Mr. Salameh, a former airline pilot, came to the United States from Lebanon 37 years ago. “This product is absolutely fitting for me,” he said.

The country’s pioneering refugee farm program, in Lowell, Mass., was founded by Tufts University and continues to thrive.

Visoth Kim, a Khmer refugee from Cambodia, now 63, farms land in Dracut, Mass., owned by the widow of John Ogonowski, the pilot of American Airlines Flight 11 that crashed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. Mr. Ogonowski, whose ancestors were Polish immigrants, made land available to Hmong and Cambodian refugees, teaching them modern irrigation techniques in exchange for fresh vegetables.

Mr. Kim, who witnessed mass starvation in Cambodia, losing a brother, refers to his two-acre plot as “my plenty.” His fellow farmer Sinikiwe Makarutsa grew up in Zimbabwe and now grows maize on land rented from a local church. She made enough money to buy a tractor and rototiller.

Ms. Makarutsa was inspired to farm, she said, after tasting supermarket tomatoes. She uses the Zimbabwean phrase “Pamuzinda” to describe her seven-acre plot.

Roughly translated, she said, “It means ‘where you belong.’ ”