

A field of their own

Far from home, refugees reconnect with their roots through a special MercyCorps NW project, Refuge Gardens

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As early as five in the morning, you can find refugee growers kneeling in the dirt of the Refuge Gardens in Damascus, among the rows of broccoli, kale, squash, onions and other autumn crops. Neatly planted vegetables and fruits stretch out across the two acres of planned plots at the south side of the five-acre property.

The Refuge Gardens is a program of MercyCorps Northwest that engages refugee families in farming at three Oregon sites, one in Damascus and two in Southeast Portland. The program sells a large portion of the produce at two Portland farmers markets and through Community Supported Agriculture, and the growers keep the profits — as well as some of their own crop.

Sei has been a grower at the Refuge Gardens Damascus site for three years — the same age he was when his family left their home country of Myanmar for a Thai refugee camp. His family is ethnically Karen, an oppressed minority group in Myanmar, and were no longer safe in their home country.

“Burmese people, they keep fighting with Karen people,” Sei said. “So, they never have peace in the land, they just keep fighting and kick out the Karen people.”

His family of five was among an estimated 140,000 refugees living in border camps in Thailand, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The area surrounding the refugee camps, however, where many refugees went to work, was also not safe. Sei remembers Thai police taking refugees without the proper paperwork to jail if they didn't receive bribes.

“You have to be careful,” Sei said. “Sometimes, they see you, they don't ask you, they just shoot you.”

When he was 13, Sei's family relocated to the United States, joining a population of about 55,000 Karen refugees living in the U.S., according to the Burmese American Community Institute. At the Refuge Gardens site in Damascus, there are currently four Karen families each planting and harvesting their own half-acre plot. Families come to the program through referrals from refugee resettlement agencies and word-of-mouth recommendations from other refugees in their community.

“We're really trying to meet people where they're at and give them a place to engage and be productive in their lives, help their households through having extra fresh food to bring home, supplemental income to bring home, and also to build networks of community,” MercyCorps NW Agriculture Program Manager Seth Belber said. “Both within their own ethnic communities and also to meet and interact with people outside of those communities and break out of the isolation that's sometimes associated



PHOTOS BY SARAH HANSELL

Above, Sei (standing) and his mom Tee Hsar work in one of the Refuge Gardens created by MercyCorps NW. At right, Saw Pipi hauls a wagon of vegetables grown at a Refuge Garden.

with refugee experience.”

MercyCorps NW provides training for the growers on best farming practices, but allows farmers to govern their own plot according to their own jurisdiction. Some of the refugees, like Thaw Thit, a father of four young adults, was a farmer by occupation before emigrating to the U.S., so working in the Gardens comes naturally to him. In fact, learning more about farming is one of the things he values most about the program.

“It's easy for him and he likes to work with plants,” Sei said, translating for Thaw Thit. “It's his favorite to work on the garden.”

MercyCorps NW has a centralized crop plan they coordinate throughout their three Refuge Garden sites. They decide what to plant each year in collaboration with the growers, and facilitate the marketing aspect. Growers usually accompany the program staff to their stands at the two farmers markets where they sell, and sales are continuing to increase, Belber said.

“The produce always looks fabulous, and it's for a good cause,” Karen Ludes said, a regular Shemanski Farmers Market customer.

In addition, the western section of the Gardens is reserved for families to grow whatever they want, rather than the crop provided by MercyCorps NW. They can sell this crop or keep it to bring home.

“I like this because you plant — sometimes you don't have to go buy the fruit in store,” Sei said. “You can pick it here and take it home, and you can sell.”

Working at the Refuge Gardens is one way that Sei helps support his mother and three siblings, especially since his father died last year. According to Belber, families make on average \$1,500-\$3,000 a year from selling their produce.

“I just help (my family) to make them be safe and make everything good,” Sei said. “This year January, my father just passed away so he cannot come here anymore. So I just try to help out my mom with my family.”

Refugees' income from the Gardens



doesn't quite cover all the expenses. Sei's older brother is also looking for a job to support the family. Thaw Thit's wife is a housekeeper and one of his children also works to help support their family. But the Gardens provide more than just food and financial security. They're a place where people who speak little to no English, who may be lacking a network of friends and family, who are new to American culture, can find a sense of place and begin to build their own community.

“Lots of folks have gone through pretty traumatic times in their life, and so it takes a while to warm up and be comfortable, laughing and smiling and sharing that stuff,” Belber said. “So even beyond the kind of changes we're talking about in terms of financial security and food security, it's really those personalities and people growing more into themselves and becoming more comfortable here and in the Portland community, and in their own personality interacting with the folks around them.”

But throughout my talks with both Sei and Thaw Thit, one theme was overwhelming: family. They didn't speak about the new friends they'd made or relationships they'd built through the program, though it's clear this is exactly what's happened through the easy camaraderie among the growers.

For the Karen refugees, working at the Gardens, farming is a family affair. Sei's mother, brothers and sister also work on their plot of land, sometimes bringing lunch with them and spending the whole day working in the Gardens. Thaw Thit's family farms with him as well.

“They can't keep up with Thaw Thit though,” Belber said. “He's a hard worker.”

Sei laughs as he tells me that, like Thaw Thit, he doesn't find farming difficult — “it's easy for me” — he says. But unlike Thaw Thit, for whom farming is a way of life, it's not what Sei wants to do forever. He wants to be an auto mechanic; he loves the freedom that cars provide. And like many things in his life, it comes back to family.

“It's easy to take your family everywhere,” he said. “It helps out.”

For Thaw Thit, his family working together is his favorite thing about the Gardens. The same is true for Sei.

“(Here it) helps us every time so I feel so happy for that, and sometimes we work together to help each other,” Sei said. “That's a good thing to me.”

Refuge Gardens will be selling produce at the Shemanski Park Farmers Market (10 a.m.-2 p.m.) and the Portland State University Farmers Market (8:30 a.m.-2 p.m.) until Thanksgiving.

Thank you for giving a hand up in Portland and supporting your neighborhood vendor!