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Global Gardens

Across the Ohio Valley, gardeners from around the world are coming together to grow food, exchange cultures, and broaden understanding.

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On the grounds of Saint Clare Convent, just north of Cincinnati, grows a community garden of extraordinary size and beauty. But what makes it truly remarkable for our region is that more than half of its 100+ plots are cultivated by ethnic Nepali Bhutanese immigrants.

Following their military expulsion from Bhutan, a Buddhist country in the Himalayas, many of these people spent decades in Nepali refugee camps before being relocated to the U.S. They bring a rich agricultural tradition and profound dedication to growing their own food to the garden, which is a collaboration between Franciscan Ministries and Heartfelt Tidbits, a local immigrant-support nonprofit created in 2008 to address the influx of Bhutanese refugees to our region. Between 2008 and 2018, 1,125 refugees from Bhutan resettled in Greater Cincinnati.

One evening in 2008, Sheryl Rajbhandari intercepted an email to her husband, who is from Nepal, asking for help for a family from Bhutan who had been living in a hotel room for more than a week. She took them into her home. “If I could give you anything, what would you want?” she asked them. “They said, ‘to go home, back to the refugee camp.’ And I was like, this is so terrible, to be here in the United States, [that they’d] rather be in a refugee camp.” Rajbhandari knew more help was needed, including a better understanding of their culture.

“What I didn’t know at the time was that this was part of the second largest U.S. resettlement effort since the Vietnam War,” she says. Local organizations and charities were underprepared for the influx of nearly 450 Bhutanese refugees in 2008 and 2009. Despite being a mother of three with designs on a corporate career, the experience helping that one family motivated her to start Heartfelt Tidbits. The organization quickly evolved from a part-time endeavor and specialized to support women, the elderly, and the differently abled—who were overlooked and isolated by agencies intent on connecting breadwinners, typically men, with needed employment and skills.

MEETING A NEED FOR FOOD

Of the six programs Heartfelt Tidbits currently runs, its community garden program was the second to emerge. Bhutanese participants in an English-language program Heartfelt Tidbits was running on the convent campus expressed a strong interest in a shared garden that Franciscan Ministries was starting there. Bhutanese growers began cultivating three of the eight plots in that original space, and their presence has expanded exponentially, Rajbhandari says. In addition to providing food, the garden has fostered connection, as people who were once neighbors in Bhutan and had been long separated in refugee camps have found one another again.

While gardening is central to Heartfelt Tidbits’ mission of empowering refugees to build new lives, for the Bhutanese, the gardens are a cornerstone of their traditional plant-based diet. Rajbhandari says the growers told volunteers, “This isn’t a hobby for us. We’re here to grow food to feed our families.”



The community garden at Franciscan Ministries is a cornucopia of cultures, nationalities, foodways, and gardening methods.

Franciscan Ministries Operations Director Marci Peebles laughs as she describes the space as “chaos, but it’s a beautiful chaos, and it’s kind of an organized chaos.” Managing a community garden has its challenges, especially one this large and where everyone doesn’t necessarily speak the same language.

Peebles rattles off the project’s vital statistics: 105 plots, ranging from 200 to 1,200 square feet across almost two acres. This year they have 150 named gardeners, but behind many of those names are extended families working, and eating from, each garden. She estimates that two-thirds of the gardeners here are Bhutanese, but the garden serves immigrants from all over the world, including Central and South America, Russia, and Senegal. Competition for plots is intense and they’ve absolutely reached the limit of expansion. Previous years’ gardeners get first dibs, and there’s little turnover. “We end up having mini dynasties across the garden, meaning there might be one family that has six plots across their family members.”

GROWING A FOOD CULTURE

There’s a quilt-like juxtaposition of contrasting styles, techniques, personalities to the plots. Individual sections are lovingly wrapped in

makeshift fencing. Latticework and trellises, often created from tree and honeysuckle branches, support violet spires of hyacinth bean and spiny vines and hand-like leaves of bitter melon, its wrinkled, nutritious gourds basking in the September sun. Many of the plots are given over entirely to brilliant hot peppers, central to Bhutanese cooking, culture, and spirituality. Many of the plots are three-dimensional, intentionally layered to provide shade for some crops, squeezing maximum growth from limited space.

Perhaps it’s no coincidence that this place is a garden: Buried near the border of the garden, Peebles says, are the foundations of a farmhouse from before the Franciscan sisters acquired the land in the late 19th century. The sisters continued to work the land and housed dairy cows and itinerant workers in the property’s Centennial Barn, which was gorgeously renovated in 2010 as a community space. How many of those working here were also immigrants, I wonder, including nuns who would have come here fleeing Otto Von Bismarck’s *kulturekampf* against Roman Catholics?

Peebles and I cross paths with Pima and Seti Moktan. The sisters-in-law carry bags bulging with greens, vegetables, and fruit. I ask what they’ve picked. “Nepali food,” Pima says. “Hot chilis, tomatoes, and

beans.” Pima has been gardening here for three years, she says. I ask whether they eat the high-protein hyacinth beans, which are consumed in many parts of the world (with care taken to soak the poisonous cyanide out of the mature beans). Pima says they do. “In Nepal, these are very much money,” she says. The women continue to carry their harvest down the path. Rajbhandari has learned that many Bhutanese dishes incorporate much more of the plant than Westerners think to eat, including the stalks and leaves of vining fruits.

Peter Huttinger helped create Franciscan Community Garden in his previous role as the Civic Garden Center’s Community Gardens Coordinator. Today, as Director of Turner Farm’s Community Gardens Program, he provides education and support here and at immigrant-gardened spaces around the city in Mt. Healthy, Price Hill, and Carthage. This includes training gardeners on sustainable gardening practices specific to our region, climate, weather, and pests. However, usually he’s the one learning something from the gardeners.

MESHING DIFFERENT GARDENING STYLES

There was never any question, Huttinger says, of whether the immigrant families were welcome at Franciscan Community Garden. But

some misunderstanding arose when Western and Eastern gardening philosophies collided. “Some people were just confused about what the Bhutanese gardens looked like,” he says. “To some it looked like they weren’t being taken care of, that they were letting them go. In fact they were employing a very sophisticated gardening technique, what the Western world has come to call permaculture.” With the aid of a translator provided by Heartfelt Tidbits, he asked questions, listened, learned.

“The rules that many community gardens have are sometimes at odds with permaculture practices: that you can’t leave any stakes or trellises standing, or the idea that the garden has to be made weed-free and mulched and overwintered by Thanksgiving, so it’s clean and ready to go in the spring. But if you’re using permaculture practices, it doesn’t quite work like that.”

In fact, he says, our current understanding of permaculture has evolved from the agricultural techniques of indigenous peoples. For example, Bhutanese gardeners grow a spinach/mustard hybrid, a brassica that they allow to flower and go to seed. The whole plant—stalks, leaves, and seeds—is used for culinary purposes, but also, Huttinger says, as a cover crop and for replanting. Letting it go to seed means



Bhutanese immigrants who garden at the Franciscan Community Garden have brought new approaches to raising food, including overwintering crops, using trellises, and layering plantings for shade. Garden educator Peter Huttinger says he's learned a lot from these growers.

that as soon as the weather warms up, the seeds are already sprouting, and very quickly they produce young plants for harvest.

Practices like this can lead some to assume plots are untended, Huttinger says. "And so one of the big things we did with education was find out what they were doing so that we could go back and share this information with the other gardeners and the garden crews so that people could realize that we needed to rethink the rules."

That includes allowing gardeners to leave trellises up or to store materials in the garden, as well as allowing gardeners to compost in place, which, again, "might look untidy, but when you realize what they're doing, it's actually a very good idea."

One big lesson, he says, "is just to acknowledge that they were subsistence farmers and they knew more than I was probably ever going to know."

Hurringer provides support to other gardens anchored by immigrant growers, including Price Hill's "Tres Hermanas" (Three Sisters) Garden, which is run on a model rooted in Latina tradition: row crops, communally tended. This model, he says, has allowed him to install an irrigation system. The understanding that immigrants bring entire toolkits to gardens, traditions built on experience and the exigencies of survival, makes such places sources of knowledge in a world where climate change will increasingly drive human

migration. And there are so many layers of value. These gardens are spaces for organic cultural exchange, for developing language skills, for practicing tolerance and cooperation.

The long waiting list at Franciscan Community Garden had me wondering: Do we need more gardens for newly arrived growers? Huttinger's take, having seen all too many grant-funded community garden initiatives fail, is that more needs to be done with existing spaces in our region. "A lot of gardens are underutilized. So we want to find ways to have these spaces more efficiently used." Not that additional space can't be a boon. At Tikkun Farms, in Mount Healthy, he says, when an adjacent property owner recognized the needs and skills of Bhutanese gardeners, they turned over some of their land for gardening.

Community gardens offer myriad co-benefits, including supporting mental and physical health and knitting communities together. When gardeners from all corners of the planet come together, these spaces feed the soul as well as the body with the foods that are particularly meaningful, culturally important, even rare. They are places to work the common soil, under the common sun, to remember a past and look to the future. As one gardener poignantly observed to Rajbhandari, "This is all I have left from my country to show my grandkids." ■



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