

Community Gardens: To Plant Is to Believe

[MUSIC]

“To plant a garden is to believe in the future.” That quote from the late actor Audrey Hepburn rings especially true at a community garden in Wendell, North Carolina.

There, Southeast Asian refugees who suffered persecution in their home country are transforming what was once a slave plantation into a peaceful oasis. These gardeners, part of North Carolina’s Karen community, are reconnecting with the food traditions they grew up with. They are sharing these traditions with their children. And they are working to bring new crops to market, all in an effort to build a stronger future for their families.

I’m Dee Shore from North Carolina State University’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and in this episode of Farms, Food and You, we’ll consider the benefits of community gardens in general and those being enjoyed by the gardeners who are part of the new Karen Community Farm in particular.

[MUSIC]

It’s late summer, and gardeners across North Carolina are harvesting vegetables and fruit sown during a spring of uncertainty and isolation. There are watermelons, cantaloupes, butterbeans, okra, cucumbers, squash

Look around, and you might see a big backyard encircled by a sturdy fence aimed at keeping the deer and rabbits away; a new COVID-era Victory Garden laid out in neat, well-marked rows; or a tiny apartment patio container garden of flowers and herbs.

You also might see evidence of community gardens – places where people come together during the growing season with a common purpose.

Lucy Bradley is a North Carolina State University gardening expert and a state and national leader in the area of community gardens.

[LUCY BRADLEY]

A community garden is a place where people come together to garden for a number of different reasons. So there are community gardens where people come together to grow food. They may come together to beautify their neighborhood. They may come together for therapeutic reasons to help people grow. It may be an entrepreneurial market community garden, where the members actually sell the produce for income, and then there’s a variety of youth gardens and school gardens.

Bradley says that community gardens offer several benefits.

[LUCY BRADLEY]

When you're talking about food gardens the obvious outcome is food. So people produce healthy, fresh food. They've had some control over how that food is grown and what types of herbicides or pesticides, or fertilizers are used on that food.

But you also grow people, and you grow communities, and you build relationships and networks that help your communities.

Bradley says that research has shown that people who participate in community gardens improve their diets by eating more fruits and vegetables. Community gardens also have economic, social and environmental benefits.

[LUCY BRADLEY]

In terms of the bigger picture for community gardens overall there've been studies that show that there's a reduction in crime in neighborhoods where community gardens have been created. You certainly create urban wildlife habitat and urban pollinator habitat. And even studies have showed that the value of property around community gardens goes up.

Community gardens at schools also have important advantages. Liz Driscoll is an NC State University 4-H youth development specialist:

[LIZ DRISCOLL]

Those benefits we have found have been increased academic achievement, increased positive attitudes around not only science, but health and nutrition. It often is a more inclusive space. And so we have found that some of our students who maybe don't thrive as much in a traditional academic setting might thrive in a garden. So it could be a place for them to achieve in a different way.

At the Karen Community Farm in Eastern Wake County, young and old are profiting from a new gardening partnership. The project is giving new life to an old farm, and it's helping immigrant families connect in new ways to their new home in North Carolina's piedmont.

The Karen refugees arrived around a decade ago from camps in Thailand, where they'd lived for years after being persecuted in the countryside of Burma, a Southeast Asian country now known as Myanmar.

Civil war broke out there in the late 1940s, after Burma gained its independence from Great Britain. The Karen people, an ethnic minority, suffered brutal persecution at the hands of the ruling government. The war is one of the longest – if not the longest – civil war in the world today.

Kay Coleman is helping the Karen refugees establish their new garden. She first met some of them in Raleigh when she helped them set up a one-acre plot within the farm she ran for the nonprofit Inter-Faith Food Shuttle. When the nonprofit agency could no longer accommodate the Karen garden, Coleman connected the refugees with someone she thought could help.

Talmage Brown is a retired NC State University professor and a food shuttle volunteer. He owns a small piece of what had been a 4,500-acre plantation established by his great, great, great grandfather in 1798.

[TALMAGE BROWN]

A little bit about the background of the farm: This farm is called Oaky Grove. It's a farm where my mother was born and raised. And she had six brothers and sisters, and at the time I was born, my grandma was still living, and we used to go out there on holidays, and it became special place for me.

Brown says some of his fondest memories are from times spent at Oaky Grove, hearing his aunts and uncles and mother talk about the old days. He and his mother went on to purchase a piece of the farm. And Brown doesn't want the land to become another housing development. He saw a partnership with the Karen community as a win-win.

[TALMAGE BROWN]

I saw this as an opportunity to keep it as a farm, get into sustainable farming and then if our project will be successful, Oaky Grove could be quite an advantage to the Karen community, it would benefit me in helping me maintain it as a farm, and that's what we're working toward now.

With the help of Brown, Coleman and others, the Karen community began building their garden at Oaky Grove in 2019. Most of the families who are now growing produce in the garden are doing so to feed themselves and their families. Two farmers want to market some of the Asian specialty crops they grow.

One of them, Htoo Saw Ywa, gave us a quick tour of the three-acre community garden at Oaky Grove. It was a hot day cooled by a brisk wind. As the gardeners worked, they shared stories and laughter.

[LAUGHTER AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONVERSATION]

Some things that we saw in the Karen garden are common to most North Carolina plots – things like eggplant and okra, cucumbers and tomatoes. But there were Asian specialty plants like yard-long beans. Yard-long beans are like string beans, only longer than Htoo Saw's arm.

Growing on a bamboo trellis, there were basketball-sized water gourds. Long, skinny ridge gourds. And then greenish-yellow gourds that Coleman held in her outstretched hand. They're called bitter gourds, and she says their name tells you all you need to know about their taste.

Htoo Saw then led us to another area of the garden.

[FOOTSTEPS IN DRY GRASS]

He stopped and pointed out lemongrass, turmeric and even rice plants that his fellow farmer Htoo Paw Loe is growing.

Coleman wanted to know more about these.

[SOUNDBITE: KAY COLEMAN AND HTOO SAW YWA]

Kay Coleman: What variety is she using, do you know?

Htoo Saw Ywa: I don't know. I have to ask her.

Kay Coleman: Because when we grew rice in the farm, we had a dig a hole, and every time I passed by it, I had to pour a five-gallon bucket of water on it. [Laughs]

Htoo Saw Ywa: There are three or five different kinds of rice in Burma. The one that we plant on the mountainside – that is good for growing in the rainy season.

Kay Coleman: Uh-huh.

Htoo Saw Ywa: You don't need a lot of water, but it's fed by the rainwater. The one that we grew in the low-level area – yeah – you need to give that plenty of water.

Kay Coleman: That's like the rice paddy?

Htoo Saw Ywa: That is another kind – this takes longer to grow.

Kay Coleman: Is this the mountainside kind?

Htoo Saw Ywa: I think it is not in the mountain – you cannot grow it here, because here it's dry.

Kay Coleman: Wow.

Coleman, Gary Bullen – an NC State farm management specialist – and others meet with the farmers regularly to help them learn about growing and marketing practices that are standard in North Carolina. Coleman says the learning goes both ways.

[KAY COLEMAN]

We are working together because they know how to farm in Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asian food that they grow ... is very, very different. It's a big learning curve for me. They've been doing that forever in the refugee camps, and so they know how to grow food. They just don't know how to grow this food in Piedmont, North Carolina.

Htoo Paw, the farmer growing the rice that Htoo Saw pointed out, agrees. She notes that the seasons, the weather patterns and the insects she experiences as a farmer in North Carolina are much different than those she faced when helping her parents farm in Burma and when gardening in the refugee camp in Thailand.

Farming is also hard here because the Karen garden doesn't have tractors or lawnmowers, and the fencing hasn't been enough to stop rabbits. They've secured funding for a hoop house and a well, but they don't yet have money for electricity that would allow them to operate the greenhouse that's under construction.

For the help she's received, Htoo Paw expresses gratitude. She speaks in the Karen language, and Htoo Saw interprets for her.

[HTOO PAW LOE: FOREIGN LANGUAGE]

[HTOO SAW YWA INTERPRETS]

The first gratefulness to every helper is they open up opportunities for us to grow in the open field and wider place – before we have our chance to grow this only in our small space backyard. Now we get to manage to grow in a big space like this. So that is very beneficial for me. Number one reason.

The other reason is we are very thankful to them to help us to learn to legalize our farm. To follow the laws and rules here. It's legalized under the rules now of North Carolina.

Another Karen gardener, Sa Tin, says the project has been about more than simply growing food: At the farm, families are able to enjoy fresh air, and their health improves. Their children put away their video games and get to see how to plant and grow water gourds, rice and other traditional crops.

It's not just about growing plants for today, she says, it's about sharing a culture far into the future. Again, Htoo Saw interprets.

[SA TIN: FOREIGN LANGUAGE]

[HTOO SAW YWA INTERPRETS]

When you started this project, it's not only for our generation, for our children's generation to come. Karen people, almost all of them, are growers of plants. In harvest time, they come together. They enjoy. That is the way and culture of Karen people in Burma, but that culture is continuing today. We wanted to bring back those to our children in the future generations here, in America.

[MUSIC]

Thanks for listening today, and we hope you'll join us again for our next episode. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcast, visit go.ncsu.edu/farms. While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.

MORE INFORMATION

Dig into NC State Extension's [NC Community Gardens](#) portal to [find a community garden](#) near you; to learn how to [start a new garden](#); or to [find resources to support an existing garden](#).

Another great resource? Your county North Carolina Cooperative Extension center. [button][Connect with Cooperative Extension](#)[/button]

OUR GUESTS

Lucy Bradley is associate head and department extension leader for NC State University's Department of Horticultural Science and directs NC State Extension's consumer and community horticulture program. She has served in leadership roles with the grassroots North Carolina Community Garden Partners organization and the American Community Gardening Association.

Liz Driscoll is a 4-H youth development specialist in three NC State departments – horticultural science, entomology and plant pathology and crop and soil science. Her [4-H Grow for It!](#) program fosters curiosity and wonder among young people as they explore plants, insects and soils.

Htoo Saw Ywa was born in Myanmar and lived in a refugee camp in Thailand before moving to North Carolina 15 years ago. He works in a distribution warehouse, and he markets some of the produce he raises at the Karen Community Farm.

Htoo Paw Loe grew up on a farm in Myanmar, and she gardened while she lived in a refugee camp in Thailand. Through the Karen Community Farm, she produces food for her family and for sale in local markets. She also works in a distribution warehouse.

Sa Tin works as a housekeeper for the city of Raleigh. She has lived in North Carolina for 12 years, where she resettled with her son from a refugee camp in Thailand. Her husband remains in Thailand.

Kay Coleman works with the nonprofit Inter-Faith Food Shuttle's urban agricultural program and has played a key role in the development of the Karen Community Farm. She earned degrees in both horticultural science and animal science at NC State.

Talmage Brown is a retired professor from NC State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, an Inter-Faith Food Shuttle volunteer and owner of Oaky Grove, remnants of a 19th century plantation that's now home to the Karen Community Farm. He's a College of Agricultural and Life Sciences alumnus and holds advanced degrees from Oklahoma State and Cornell universities.

OTHERS INTERVIEWED

Ar Kee was born in Myanmar but moved to a refugee camp when he was 12 years old. He and his wife came to the United States in 2008, and he works at a golf course.

S. Gary Bullen is an extension associate in farm management with NC State University's Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics. He is also director of NC Farm School, an extension program that

helps beginning farmers across the state launch new enterprises. He's also a volunteer with the Karen Community Farm.