

Garden variety: It's the community's plot to cross-pollinate culture

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"Oh why does Jeu Fua flee his homeland to arrive in a foreign country, where he will go see the whole place, with buildings of all sizes, sparkling in a distant group, but without all his people, crying here, crying there, in the country so remote, just like a hen who leaves her chicks behind, crying here, crying there, that they don't want to live in the others' chicken coop." Hmong sung poetry from the book titled: "Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way."

Pay Ly stands in her bare feet, looking down at the bittersweet soil that she farms at City Heights ' Community Garden.

She wipes the sweat from her brow and then plunges a garden hoe into the soil. The hoe pulls up unruly weeds tangled with rocks and more rocks.

Her mother sits nearby, taking a rest from the back-straining work that has brought them to the urban garden for the past four days.

Ly's two small boys, Richard and Ang, lie on a straw mat, clenching baby bottles between their tiny lips.

Nearly a dozen women -- all immigrants from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam -- are here on a hazy San Diego morning toiling in the urban garden, harvesting and planting beets, broccoli, cabbage, onions, peppers and other crops.

The City Heights Community Garden is not likely to make the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. The magical nature of suburban gardens is replaced here by the hard reality of inner-city life.

Waves of screeching, braking, honking vehicles roar past the garden all day and night, as it is trapped and surrounded by busy University, Central and Polk avenues, and 40th Street.

And just beneath the layer of traffic noise lies the joyful screams and yells of children playing at Wilson Middle School, the garden's neighbor.

The only peace found here is buried within the quiet lives of those who work the garden themselves.

An unsightly chain-link fence stands guard around the 120-plot community garden. Thieves make it a necessity.

And if not for the three large carrots, known as the "Dancing Carrots," artistically displayed near the corner of 40th Street and University Avenue, the site might be mistaken for a labor camp.

Rows of houses once occupied the land, rather than rows of corn, turnips and other vegetables. But the State of California razed the houses to make room for the extension of Interstate 15, which is scheduled to begin sometime next year.

For years, the vacant lot was an eyesore -- a constant reminder of unrealized expectations. It festered like a sore.

But that changed a year ago when the California Department of Transportation, nudged on by the City Heights Community Development Corporation, agreed to allow residents to put the 1-acre strip to productive use until the highway construction begins.

Since then, gardeners, like religious pilgrims on a faithful journey, arrive here daily, dirtying their hands from sunrise to sunset.

Once the highway project is under way, they hope to find new public ground to cultivate. Residents have learned that the beauty of a community garden lies not only in the food and flowers produced, but also in the neighborhood pride fostered by such an effort.

Community is key to the City Heights Community Garden. The hard work is shared. Digging trenches. Hauling trash.

Anna Daniels is the Dear Abby of gardening here, handling questions and complaints.

It's not easy. A majority of the City Heights gardeners are Southeast Asian, and English is not their first language.

Pay Ly, for example, came to San Diego 10 years ago from Laos. She knows just enough English to exchange pleasantries.

It is the same for the other women working on this particular morning. But then, English is not necessary to work the soil, as proven by the presence of an abundant harvest.

"Right now people are planting their winter crops, which are things like spinach, lettuce, root crops," Daniels said, as she weaved between the plots.

"And, to be honest with you, the Hmong put in crops that I have never seen before.

"It's one of the real challenges of the gardens. The only requirement is that you can't grow anything illegal." Pesticides are also forbidden.

Gardeners pay \$10 a year for an 11-by-11-foot plot. Plus, they share in the cost of water, which amounted to about \$10 per gardener last year.

When the project began, only City Heights residents were allowed to plant here. But that changed because the gardeners wanted to dispel the notion that City Heights is "a hellhole," Daniels said.

"What we realized is that it's extremely desirable for people outside City Heights to come here and garden with us.

"We need to have people to come in and feel that they can work in this community."

In her own garden plot, Daniels grows carrots, wildflowers, herbs and arugula, which she describes as a "yuppie salad food."

Unlike most gardeners, Daniels has a large back yard, so she does not come here because she lacks space.

"Working in my back yard is not the same as working in a community," she said. "This has given me an opportunity to evaluate all my social values.

"This is the only organization I've seen in San Diego that's been successful in bringing together such a diversity of individuals. I wake up in the mornings and I'm jazzed."

Gardening here requires a strong back.

"The reality is this is rocky, clay soil," said Daniels. "There were houses here. They were bulldozed, and there is still concrete and bricks and pipes and God knows what else."

Nonetheless, the proof of its glory is food for the table.

"The Hmong have created completely new soil," Daniels said.

A heap of sky-blue garbage bags at the garden, for example, are filled with grass clippings, fertilizer and fish emulsion.

The Southeast Asians used the mixture to create a new layer of soil.

Now the soil is so good, it should be able to grow anything, "because they have amended it so heavily," Daniels said. "And they continue to mulch it."

Daylight begins to fade into night as Rudy Lime gathers fennel and beets and broccoli.

"Fennel," he said, cutting a piece of the plant to taste. "It's good for salads."

Lime, 69, comes here faithfully every day. He's self-taught in the ways of gardening, learned from books.

A native of the Philippines who joined the U.S. Navy in 1945, Lime grows almost 30 different vegetables -- beets, radishes, eggplant, peppers, carrots, onions, broccoli, cauliflower.

"My yard is little," he said. "I'm glad the garden is here." Besides, the little space he does have at home he uses to grow succulent bonsai.

Daniels has a dream.

"In another year, I want to see Hmong gardeners growing tomatillos, what our Mexican gardeners grow.

"And I want to see our other gardeners grow what the Hmong refer to as zaub iab, which is a very tart plant" that is cooked by steaming it.

"I'm hoping eventually we'll have a cross-pollination of cultures, where we share what we eat and how we garden."

Caption: 3 PICS

1. Digging in: Ang Ly, left, and Richard Ly play near their family's garden while Pay Ly, center, and Pa Thao, right, work the soil. 2. Kid stuff: Richard Ly, left, and Ang Ly play with a grocery cart. 3. Hoe that line: Mao Moua tills the soil at City Height's Community Garden. (C-3) 1,3. Staff photo/HOWARD LIPIN

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Cross-pollination occurs when you have the same plant of different varieties in a garden space. However, if corn cross-pollinates, it will impact the corn kernels in the current growing season. Also, if you're going to plant different corn varieties, you need to place at least 150 feet between each type of corn. This will discourage the chance of cross-pollination. Preparing a garden plot for planting is an important step in the process. Getting rid of weeds and prepping the soil properly will ensure your garden grows successfully. It will also reduce the maintenance required for the garden plot. This will make it easy for you to clear the area to prepare the plot for planting. Put stakes on each corner of the plot and attach string to each stake. Open-pollinated plants are ones that are nearly identical to the parent plant because it (the parent plant) was pollinated by wind, humans, birds, or insects—not from a neighboring plant. In that case, the result of the cross-pollination between two neighboring plants would resemble both parent plants. For example, if a "Black Krim" tomato cross-pollinates with another "Black Krim" tomato plant, the seeds from the tomato fruit that results from this pollination will have seeds that will grow into a "Black Krim" plant. You will often see open pollinated abbreviated as OP, especially on seed packets. Stabilizing hybrids allows breeders to single out and maintain desirable traits, such as disease resistance, flavor, or higher yields. The Stroud Community Seed Bank in Gloucestershire is one of hundreds of initiatives across the UK focusing its seed-saving efforts on "open pollinated seed", which "providing there is no cross pollination" will reliably produce viable, true-to-type plants year after year. Rather than being locked into a cycle of buying new seed every season, seed can be saved and stored for future use. "What we have to do to combat the very narrow genetic basis to our seed is get as many people as possible growing as wide a diversity of seeds as possible," says Kate McEvoy of Real Seeds, a small-scale producer specialising in open pollinated seed for organic growing. Sally Oates's garden can be heard before it is seen.