

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Land of Opportunity: Immigrant Farmers Put Down Roots in Holyoke, Massachusetts

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NEW FARMERS

Land of Opportunity

Immigrant farmers put down roots in Holyoke, Massachusetts

By Eric Toensmeier

Finding and procuring 4.1 acres of rich farmland just outside an urban center is no small feat. But Nuestras Raíces (NR), a grass-roots organization that promotes economic, human, and community development, did just that.

Based in Holyoke, Massachusetts, NR carries out their mission through projects related to food and agriculture. Fittingly called Tierra de Oportunidades (TDO) or Land of Opportunities, their new farm is being developed as an incubator site for beginning farmer enterprises.

This prime property is located on the Connecticut River, boasts world-class Hadley loam, and is home to several at-risk and endangered species, including the bald eagle. Yet the Massachusetts Turnpike is a scant one mile away as is one of the largest shopping malls in the northeast. The striking juxtaposition is poignant in an environmental sense, yet also provides easy access to the project.

A significant number of Holyoke residents grew up farming in Puerto Rico. While many of them aspire to continue this tradition, they are faced with substantial barriers, particularly the language gap and access to land and capital. TDO offers a means of overcoming these hurdles.

Each prospective farmer takes part in a brief training course offered in Spanish. First we review the realities of farming in the Northeast US, helping participants make the decision as to whether this path is truly the right one for them. This "reality check" is followed by the development of a production, marketing, and financial plan. A committee of farmers, business experts, and community organizers then reviews each plan; the most viable ones are selected for participation in the program. After three years, a farmer is eligible to apply for a small business loan through Farm Service Agency.

The hands-on part of the project began in fall 2004 with the rigorous task of reclaiming the land, which had not been cultivated in twenty-five years. Luckily many of the TOD farmers were experienced with cutting sugar cane and were already adept with the machete. In the winter of 2004-5, TOD held its first training course, a prerequisite for participating in the project. Many of these aspiring farmers were already members of Nuestras Raíces' urban community gardens. Now they can spread their wings, working on a larger scale that opens doors to increasing profits.

In the spring of 2005, six farmers began to work the land, honoring their native land and tastes by raising specialty Puerto Rican vegetables and herbs (e.g., calabaza, recaó, ají dulce, cilantrillo, sorghum). Small livestock such as chickens, rabbits, goats, and pigs were also integrated into the system. Farmers currently pay \$25 per month for a quarter-acre plot.

Marketing opportunities include the Holyoke farmers' market and Nuestras Raíces' own restaurant, bakery, and shared-use commercial kitchen (for value-adding or sales to existing food processing businesses). Advertising costs are minimal as both of these organizations already have communications in place with the public. The outlook includes forging relationships with local restaurants, adding an on-site farm stand with a café, and developing a women's entrepreneur network and a cooperative to provide flowers and food for weddings.

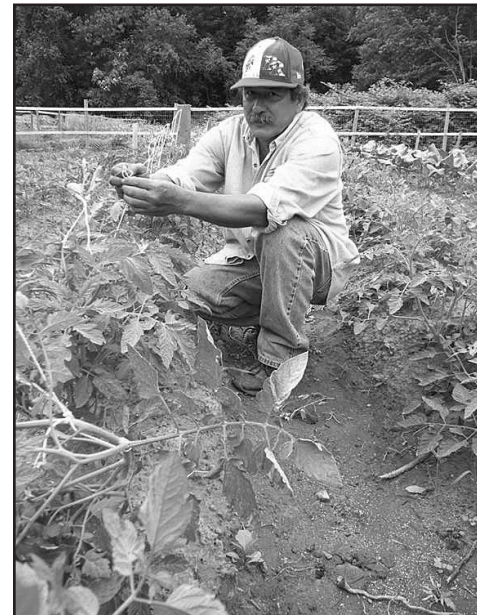
But Tierra de Oportunidades is not just about raising produce. It's also about raising awareness. To that end, there are farm tours, harvest festivals, and other agricultural events. With a canoe



Angel Galarza and Segundo Serrano show off their eggplants and peppers.



Participants also have the opportunity to raise small livestock such as chickens, rabbits, goats, and pigs. Here Fermin Galarza is shown with a favorite rooster.



Segundo Serrano ties up a tomato plant on his plot at Tierra de Oportunidades. Farmers currently pay \$25 per month for a quarter-acre plot.

organization housed right next door, boating (and fishing) is yet another option for visitors. A common part of Puerto Rican culture is to avoid cooking at home on weekends, choosing instead to attend a pig roast and bringing some of the food back home. TDO has now made this possible in their adopted city. Several pig roasts drew large crowds that also enjoyed Caballo

Paso Fino, a fanciful horse demonstration. Many visitors, moved by this lush refuge right in their city (on a busline!), have been overheard exclaiming, "I feel like I'm back in Puerto Rico!"

One of the most exciting beacons for the future is the addition of 25 acres of adja-

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Growing Nuts

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the-Lake, Canada, has donated some 5,000 Carpathian (think English or Persian) seed Walnuts to our association. John Gordon stratified them in winter storage and some of these nuts were distributed to participants at the Saratoga Meeting last spring.

One thousand of these nuts were planted at Cornell University by NYNGA volunteers. They were germinated (better than 50% growth) in the green houses there, summered outside, and are now in cold storage waiting a spring 2006 planting. These nuts (Pappe, Combe, G3 ISU H24, Lake, and Harrison) came from Lane Ontario trees that we believe have cold hardiness, are late leafing, and may have Walnut Blight resistance.

A number are for sale through the Schlabach's Nursery, 2784 Murdock Road, Medina, NY, 14103. Write to them for a catalog listing these trees and their other orchard fruits and fruit growing products. A quantity of these trees will be planted at Cornell and at our Spring Meeting site at Trumansburg, northwest of Ithaca.

Some Carpathian Walnut seedlings will be available for distribution at that meeting. There will be a discussion of Eastern Filbert production, Butternut Blight studies, and the planting of our NYNGA Carpathian Walnut Orchard...our on-going research project and commitment to the continuation and expansion of nut-growing activities in New York State.

If you would like to know more about our organization, the Carpathian Project, or our May 6th meeting; contact

Looking For English Walnuts

If you know of any "English Walnut" trees producing good tasting and good-sized nuts in NYS, please contact Jon Wertis at 607-387-4331. He is recording and mapping the location of these sources of quality genetic material.

the NYNGA at BWW Farm, 8144 Sears- burg Road, Trumansburg, NY 14886, Phone 607-387-4331 or email farmerjon2000@aol.com.

Jon Wertis is Vice President of NY Nut Growers Association and a retired public school educator. He and his partner Marian Pritchard run a 90-acre Boer meat goat operation in Trumansburg, NY.

Don's DAIRY SUPPLY Inc.



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