

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Elizabeth Brabec

November 25, 2021

'If I have land, I feed my family' - refugee resettlement through community gardening in Seattle

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How do refugees find community in their new home? For Mien migrants in Seattle, the answer lies in growing food from their former lives in Laos at the city’s communal gardens.

Written by Elizabeth Brabec, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Published 25th November 2021



Resettlement communities offer varying levels of aid, support, and programmes to refugees when they arrive in their new homes. But those programmes and the assistance they provide disappear quickly after the initial resettlement phase, leaving former refugees to search for home, community and cultural heritage in other ways.

Community gardens often serve as a hub of support for newly settled refugees, assisting them in coming to terms with their new social, cultural and physical environment. The structure of the gardens, where anyone can apply for a gardening plot, provides new residents with a sense of ownership and agency in creating a tangible space to inhabit that is also reflective of their lost home.

In the 1970s and 80s, refugees from the Mien community in Laos came to the US via refugee camps in Thailand after fleeing civil war. Their agrarian heritage made their lives inseparable from the act of growing food.

Over the past 40 years, Mien families have created gardens rich with heritage in three abandoned plots of Seattle. The unique landscapes they created reflect Mien cultural attitudes, needs, and beliefs. Three gardens – Snoqalmie, Thistle, and Maa Nyei Lai Ndeic ("My Mother's Garden") – provide the basis for this case study, which analyses the long-term effects of resettlement and the continuing desire of resettled communities to feel at home.

We used in-person interviews, archival data and a random sampling of plants in community garden plots to gain insight into the significance of garden spaces to the Mien community in Seattle. We spoke to 12 men and women from the Mien, Khmu and Hmong ethnicities about their experiences with the community gardens. All participants were born in Laos, and all had spent time living in Thai refugee camps for periods that ranged from a few months to 12 years.

The gardens reflect a desire to reconstruct a remembered and longed-for home. At the same time, they support cross-cultural interactions that provide broader lessons for planning and resettlement policy.

'I want to eat something that I can grow'

When asked why they garden, all participants gave reasons relating to food production, with a few explicitly citing their family, including children and grandchildren. Others described gardening as being important for financial reasons due to the comparatively high cost of groceries.

Four participants said they gardened for reasons related to continuity or familiarity in their past lives. One woman in her 60s stated, 'I want to eat something that I can grow. I want to get my habit back.' A couple in their 50s wanted to 'garden like old culture...like what we had before.'



'I want to expand my life and reduce my worrying.'

One Mien gardener said she would grow more if she had the space. She came from a long line of farmers in Laos.

'We have a little plot here. But when we grow our food and fruit, we are proud and feel good because we can grow with our own hands,' she said. 'If people were able to garden in the [refugee] camps, it would be very good.'

In the same garden, a Mien woman in her seventies had had a plot for 27 years, and had never missed a season. She told us she suffers from depression. But, she said, 'if I have land, I feed my family... bring home food for my family. I want to expand my life and reduce my worrying.' With younger generations increasingly unable to speak her language, she said the garden also gives her a purpose within her family.

Amaranth, beans and corn

The gardeners have adapted to their new home in Seattle and its different environmental conditions and growing season. The annual potluck dinner occurs in the last weekend in February, the beginning of the garden season in Seattle.

Self-sufficiency and self-determination were clear motivations for gardening. All of those interviewed cited food security and control over that food as primary motivators for gardening. The proof is in the plants they grow: Mien gardeners devoted about 80% of their gardens to vegetables, 10-20% to herbs and 10-20% to flowers or ornamental plants.



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While Seattle’s community garden standards do not allow for permanent overhead structures, all the gardeners in Maa Nyei Lai Ndeic and the majority in Thistle built elaborate trellises to support the vining plants that are integral to the Mien. Chayote (adapted from Meso-America), several varieties of vining beans and tree flowers predominate.

Most of the plots grow a significant amount of a variety of corn that is starchy and sticky. Flowering amaranth plants were common around the edges of the gardens, and gardeners spoke about the symbolic importance of the bright red flowers. Amaranth is a particularly significant indicator of the Mien culture: it is pressed into cooking oil in Laos.

Culture clashes

In Laos, purple beans are grown together with rice for support, but in Seattle, rice is not viable so beans must be trellised. The overhead structures produce considerable conflict with other gardeners and the community surrounding the garden. Perceived as “messy” and “trashy,” the overhead trellises were removed at one point, traumatising the elderly women who called the gardens their home.

The Mien gardeners, meanwhile, often criticise other gardeners for not being serious enough, causing more friction. These are indicators of clashes of culture that exist long after refugees have been resettled and new communities have been established and stabilised.

It is clear from our results that supportive policies that allow everyone to garden within their own cultural norms are vital, as well as programs to support inter-cultural meeting and discussions.

Regular pot-luck garden events are popular ways for the resettlement communities to carry on cultural traditions, and to engage with other communities in dialogue and understanding.

Sean O'Donnell assisted in conducting the interviews and collecting the data for this case study.



Visit <https://womenmigration.com/case-study/gardens/>¹ for more images

Suggested further reading

Cheung, S. & Phillimore, J. (2017). Gender and refugee integration: A quantitative analysis of integration and social policy outcomes.² *Journal of Social Policy*, 46(2), 211-230.

Hartwig, K.A. & Mason, M. (2016). Community gardens for refugee and immigrant communities as a means of health promotion.³ *J Community Health*, 41, 1153–1159.

Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Kabe, K., Hashimoto, N., Hassan, S. & Reyes, M. (2021). Economic self-reliance or social relations? What works in refugee integration? Learning from resettlement programmes in Japan and the UK.⁴ *CMS*, 9(17).

Links

1. <https://womenmigration.com/case-study/gardens>
2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279416000775>
3. <https://rdcu.be/cA59p>
4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00223-7>

A special thank you for
making this project
possible.

