



Hmong Community Gardens in Harmony with the Land

Above: Ka Ying Vang, NRCS Soil Conservationist (left) presents soil health information to Hmong community members.

A collaboration with the Eau Claire Area Hmong Assistance Association (ECAHAA) in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, sparked a successful community garden project through a cooperative agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). "Through our partnership, I was confident a project like this would greatly be of value in the Hmong community in Eau Claire," explained Pa Thao, ECAHAA Executive Director. "Helping the historically under-served population into growing their own food locally, in a community people's garden is part of NRCS's mission of Helping People Help the Land," said Ka Ying Vang, NRCS Soil Conservationist, Menominee Service Center.

The ECAHAA and Hmong community welcomed the opportunity to work with NRCS. Elders in the community have a passion for gardening and were interested in learning about growing food more sustainably and using conservation practices. Hmong community residents in the Eau Claire area were limited initially due to the lack of affordable land available for gardening, lack of transportation to and from available land, and language barriers. Through a cooperative agreement with NRCS, the ECAHAA was able to provide rented land for a large community garden plot and provide transportation to and from the garden plots for 13 Hmong community members throughout the 2015 growing season. "NRCS is committed to ensuring its programs and services are accessible to all our

customers, especially the under-served. This great opportunity enabled us to provide technical and financial assistance in getting conservation on the ground, to assist the Eau Claire Hmong community," said Jimmy Bramblett, NRCS State Conservationist for Wisconsin.

Within this historically under-served community group, knowledge on soil health and conservation was very limited. On May 15, 2015, project members participated in a ground breaking ceremony and workshop. NRCS employee Ka Ying Vang helped overcome barriers by giving presentations on land conservation, soil health, and the use of fertilizer, chemical pesticides, and herbicides. Ka also provided demonstrations on soil aggregate stability and further discussed soil health topics tied to farming practices Hmong communities practiced back in Laos and Thailand when conservation wasn't understood. "I had the opportunity to teach modern conservation practices and talk about land management; show the group what was going on in the soil and how traditional practices back in Laos and Thailand degraded soil fertility. I was able to discuss and demonstrate ways to improve the soils and provide guidance to the community members in adding cover crops, crop rotations, reducing tillage, and other soil health practices," said Ka. "If community members are taught how to manage land with conservation and sustainability in mind, they can effectively use the same plots of land

Helping people help the land



Left: Hmong community members at their garden plots. Below: Pai Lee harvesting vegetables.



for 20, 40, or even 100 or more years from now," explained Ka. "This workshop really opened their eyes, they never thought of the soil as being something living; it was so fulfilling to teach them and help make a difference; hearing they've never thought of some of the teachings before and were excited to try them, was rewarding."

During the 2015 growing season, the ECAHAA was also able to provide transportation for the Eau Claire Hmong community individuals to attend additional conservation education events, including the participation at the Minority Farmer Conference held in St. Paul, Minnesota. UW-Extension was also a key partner in the community garden project, providing financial assistance in garden plot maintenance. "Cost savings, due to UW-Extension's partnership, provided the gardeners extra opportunity to visit their plots more frequently during the peak growing season," said Tom Krapf, Assistant State Conservationist and Program Liaison. The Hmong Cooperative Agreement was successfully completed on September 30, 2015. Hmong community members have continued the community garden, utilizing their newly learned conservation practices provided through NRCS technical and financial assistance, sharing their harvest with friends and relatives. The group has future plans to rent larger plots for more gardening in the upcoming seasons. "The community garden, made possible through partnerships with NRCS, ECAHAA, and UW-Extension, gave them an opportunity to be useful, to fulfill meaningful traditional Hmong roles, and to contribute to their community in a positive way," said Ka.

"If community members are taught how to manage land with conservation and sustainability in mind, they can effectively use the same plots of land for 20, 40, or even 100 or more years from now."~ Ka Ying Vang



Hmong community members participate in the ground breaking ceremony for the community garden plot.

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