

A NEW KIND OF FARM AID

BY SLOANE BURWELL



This summer a new farm vendor joined the Downtown Phoenix Public Market family. That's remarkable, because we're losing more acreage every day to urban sprawl. And it's exciting, because far too many people leave agriculture as a career every year. And it's inspiring, because this new vendor is in its first year as a working farm.

And if that isn't enough—several of the farmers working for the vendor are spending their first year in America, recently resettled here from places like Tanzania, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Uzbekistan and Iraq.

If you were one of the lucky people to try some of their

delicious Armenian cucumbers or okra, your patronage helped provide income for the farmers and their support system, the Arizona Refugee Farming Association.

This local program is one of just a few nationwide, and is managed by the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC is a large and widely respected nongovernmental humanitarian and relief organization based in New York City. Their mission is to help those escaping all manner of persecution, as well as those fleeing war and armed conflict. This project also receives some support locally through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which is managed by the

Photo by Meri Friedman

Department of Health and Human Services.

Many of the displaced refugees were once farmers in their homelands. According to Timothy Olorunfemi, who works for the IRC, “The IRC, over time, discovered one of the ways to help [new refugees] is with business. Many of them are farmers, and it was hard for them to find jobs. This program does two things: 1) helps them find work, and 2) helps the community by producing food.”

Farming in the Valley, as you may imagine, certainly isn't an easy area to break into. Huge costs usually stand in the way. Initially, there's the question of land. Open spaces and farm land have been turned to subdivisions and strip malls, which has made land for farming difficult to find. If it can be found, especially close to Central Phoenix, prices are at a premium. Second, there are the farming implements necessary to work and farm larger plots of land—the large-scale machinery that makes farm production easier is prohibitively expensive.

But, according to Jon Vosper, IRC program manager, they weren't looking to start a huge farm, and their first venture this year began with only three acres, which they rented from Blue Sky Farm.

“Small plots—we're encouraging small organic plots. This helps the farmers since there's a potential for produce to be raised and sold at a premium as opposed to large-scale, traditional, pesticide-based production models,” says Vosper.

And, with smaller plots of land, it's possible for individuals and families to farm by themselves, without a lot of expensive equipment. While the farmers are currently prevented from using seed stock that they might have brought from their own country, the goal is to produce food that is familiar to the farmers and provides a sense of home while adapting to local growing seasons here.

So far, the refugee farmers have been a success. In one season, they were able to bring a crop to market, at the Downtown Phoenix Public Market.

“We grew Armenian cucumbers, zucchini, cantaloupe, melon and okra,” says Olorunfemi.

The work produced an excellent harvest of okra. Vosper says, “We still have a family that is harvesting just the okra, and they are able to make a living from that one crop.”

But the IRC's work isn't limited to farming. There is also a small ranching operation in place.

“We have a gentlemen who is raising goats. There is a huge market in halal [raised according to Islamic law] meat, and he's the only person around producing fresh halal goat. If it weren't for him, the only other choice is to have something that's been flown in, from New Zealand or someplace else,” Vosper says.

These early successes are already moving the group forward in new directions. Like a new farm site in Glendale at the YWCA, where they will break ground and “hopefully have produce to market by November,” says Olorunfemi.

There are several ways to help the Refugee Farmers. In addition to supporting them at the market by partaking in their excellent and fresh produce, the IRC is looking technical assistance in farming practices and ranching, small plots of land for rent or donation to the farmers for this project, and restaurants interested in buying their produce. For more information, please contact Jon Vosper at the International Rescue Committee (602-433-2440 x235, or jon.vosper@theirc.org).

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