

Community Garden turns 20 in Dallas

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DALLAS, TX (April 19 , 2008) It's Saturday morning and the East Dallas Community garden is bustling. Today is the first plant sale of the season. The air is full of fresh, pungent aromas and idle chatter. The gardeners, mostly Southeast Asian seniors, have taken a break from tending their plants to make a profit. Some display the season's first harvest on tables near the garden entrance. Others sell their produce right in front of their narrow garden plots.

Savorn Touch is sitting beneath an awning of wooden beams and a blue plastic tarp. He's a thin man, with weathered skin and an infectious laugh. Touch has been gardening here since he came to Dallas from Cambodia in 1987. He spoke to us with the help of Police Lieutenant Paul Thai who works at the neighborhood police storefront

Savorn Touch and Paul Thai: "He and his family decided to leave the country, seeking refuge. And they went to the old camp on the border if Thailand and Cambodia. And he was sick, his wife was sick his children were sick. Then his family was sponsored by the YMCA to come to the U.S. He moved to Dallas to join his friend, who was a cans collector. He heard about the garden project and asked for a plot."

Today, Touch and his wife are selling lettuce, lemon grass and garlic chives. Gardening allows them to grow the vegetables they like to use in cooking and also to make some extra money. Mr. Touch has six young grandchildren who come to the garden to play. He is beaming with pride. But when he is asked about the past, about adjusting to life in Dallas, he pauses and his eyes glisten.

Savorn Touch and Paul Thai: "He said he was happy and wanted to live here, but he has been homesick. That is why he had a hard time describing. He was originally a farmer in Cambodia. Gardening makes him feel like he is at home, and he is happy with that."

Mr. Touch - like most of the gardeners here - had to leave his home because of widespread violence and starvation. For him and his fellow refugees, the garden is a source of food as well as comfort. Around twenty other Cambodian and Burmese families are planting and harvesting this season. From ivy leaf gourd and bitter melon to watercress, the garden offers a wide variety of plants and vegetables. The plots, which are separated by tiny, makeshift wooden fences, are all in different stages of growth - some lush with greenery, others boasting only a few sprouts.

Lieutenant Thai remembers the garden's humble beginnings

Lieutenant Paul Thai: "This area used to be called Little Asia. Back then there were a lot of people doing gardening in their own apartments. Managers would complain: those people were gardening in the front yard and all that. We told them not too, but they don't understand us. So we found a donor who donated land for us."

The land is owned by the Texas Community Foundation. The garden organization has to pay one dollar per year to use the land. Each individual family pays an annual plot fee of \$30, which covers the cost of utilities such as water.

Looking around, it is hard not to wonder what the garden will be like in ten or twenty years. Few of the younger community members seem to be involved. Nuon Chun thinks this is a shame.

Nuon Chun: "Her children used to come to the garden but they don't anymore. They are all grown up and have jobs and stuff. She would like to see her children and younger generations coming to the garden more often. She likes to visit and socialize with friends and they should do the same."

Before leaving the garden, Lieutenant Thai walks over to one of the plots. It is mostly soil, but there are small green plants peeking out of the earth. Soon, that plot will be a large crop of watercress. He explains that watercress grows easily and in large quantities. It saved many refugees from starvation back in Cambodia. Now, many of the gardeners grow it, remembering what it did for them and their families. After talking to gardeners like Mr. Touch, it is obvious that this garden sustains more than the people's diets.



Savorn Touch relaxes for a few minutes during the East Dallas Community Garden's first plant sale of the season. Touch has been gardening here since he came to Dallas from Cambodia.

For more information about Community Gardening and a list of Gardens in your area please see below links

[American Community Gardening Association](http://www.communitygarden.org)
www.communitygarden.org

[East Dallas Community Garden](http://www.gardendallas.org/east_dallas_community_garden.htm)
www.gardendallas.org/east_dallas_community_garden.htm

[Dallas Gardeners in Community Development](http://www.gardendallas.org) www.gardendallas.org