

# Tending the Hmong tradition

## Refugees are at home in the garden

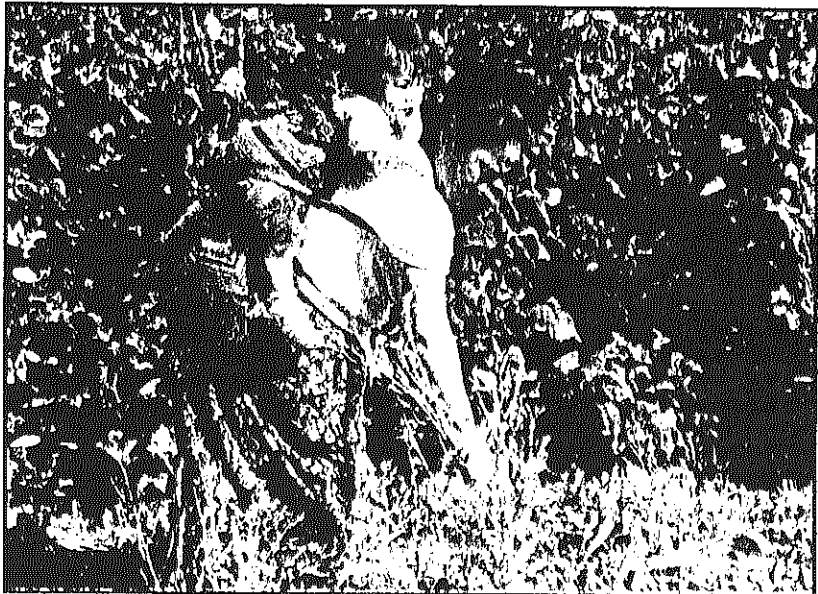
By Pat Prince  
Staff Writer

Drawn to the lush greenery flourishing behind the drab beige apartment complexes where they live, the women seem to float through the cool air of morning.

Their hair is swept back into practical buns, their appearances enlivened by colorful sarongs, brightly contrasting blouses and tiny, intricate gold earrings.

Alone or with children or grandchildren in tow, the women carry well-used hoes and tiny cloth bags of special seeds brought from their ancestral homeland, the hardscrabble mountains of Laos. Chatting and laughing, they plunge into the carefully tilled vegetable gardens and set about their tasks with relish.

The scene seems likely to become a



Staff Photo by Charles Bjorgen

**Xai Pha, with baby Pa Nhia Vang, weeded her community garden plot at Roosevelt Homes on St. Paul's East Side.**

tradition at two St. Paul public housing developments, thanks to a decision by the city's Public Housing Agency (PHA) to join a nationwide effort to bring community gardens to housing projects.

Typically, such programs must start from scratch, teaching lifelong city-dwellers the rudiments and rewards of gardening. But at McDonough Homes and Roosevelt Homes, where

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# Gardens/ Displaced farmers return to their roots in projects



Staff Photo by Charles Bjorgen

Mao Moua harvests plump, sweet "Hmong beans" at Roosevelt Homes. It's easier to farm here, she says, than in the thin mountain soil of Laos.

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about 85 percent of the residents are Hmong immigrants, the gardeners needed no coaxing.

Most are displaced farmers who have embraced the gardens as a way to carry on their agrarian traditions in a land where there often is too little chance for them to feel pride. The gardens have become a peaceful retreat where women gather, a place where young mothers with too many tasks and elderly widows with too much time find a sense of quiet purpose.

Jon Gutzman, executive director of the PHA, which owns and manages the developments, decided to give gardens a try at Roosevelt Homes on the East Side last year after residents asked for them. Two Minneapolis public housing developments already had community gardens, developed by a community gardening group.

Gutzman enlisted Minnesota Green, a statewide gardening program of the Minnesota Horticultural Society, to coordinate the project. The PHA spent \$10,000 to bring water lines to the one-acre site, till the soil and work in compost.

So many hopeful gardeners requested one of the 88 available 20-by-20-foot plots that a lottery was held. The PHA said there would be no money for a fence. So the gardeners built their own, the traditional way, by gathering branches from the woods

and lashing them together with rags, twine, yarn and recycled plastic.

They packed their plots with vegetables, spices and herbs. Many are hard to find in the stores, some cannot be identified by trained horticulturists. "We call this 'Hmong vegetable,'" said Minnesota Green coordinator Rick Bonlender, pointing to the mustard-like green that dominates most plots.

This year, the garden came to McDonough Homes, just north of downtown, bringing with them the sweet smell of what the farmers call "Hmong dill" (cardamom), "American dill" (dill) and parsley. Fifty-nine plots boast dense assortments of greens and onions, cabbage, eggplant, cabbage, peas, broccoli, spinach and asparagus beans. "Hmong beans" curl their way up trellises made of branches fashioned into tripods.

"We call this zaub iab, or 'bitter vegetable,'" said Kao Yang, a translator and outreach worker at McDonough. "It's good for the old people. They boil it with water and drink it, instead of pop or coffee. In the jungle, they were far away from markets."

Over here, he said, is "white vegetable" — "zaub daub" — a kind of mint, that is used to cut the smell of pork or fish. There, "green vegetable," which is boiled or fried with meat and noodles.

The women have their own special plants, including herbs believed to turn breech babies and to help cleanse and strengthen the body after childbirth, said Youa Xiong, a translator at Roosevelt.

Many of the gardeners are elderly widows like Xiong's mother, Mao Moua. Moua smiles as she harvests fistfuls of plump, sweet "Hmong beans." It is easier to farm here than in Laos, she says, where the thin mountain soil required farmers to practice labor-intensive, slash-and-burn agriculture, changing sites every couple of years. There, she says, the women would leave their children at the bottom of the mountain and work their way up the steep slopes.

Pa Lor, 60, digs a trench in her plot at McDonough to bury her dead greens and plant her second crop of the season. She explains that she is a widow with no children and has nothing to do at home except watch TV. Now, she says, she comes every day and night to her garden and she is happy.

Nearby, Der Xiong surveys her beautiful garden with pleasure. The 38-year-old mother of seven says she has too much to do.

Her husband, she says, is disabled from injuries he received as a soldier for the CIA, so she must care for him as well as for the children. She has no time to drive to the plot she used to rent outside of town.

Her garden, she says, helps her stretch her budget and gives her a quiet place to go. "This is a women's place," she says.

Like many Hmong women, she packed her hoe and handfuls of seeds in her suitcase when she came to the United States. "People said there weren't any (hoes) in this country," she said.

Ia Lee is proud of her garden at Roosevelt. But her five children seem to lack appreciation for the fruits of her labor.

"The children won't eat Hmong things," she said. "They just want to eat bread, hot dogs, chicken noodle soup and cereal — Kix and Honeycomb. They say, 'Not good, Mommy. Not good.'"

But for the older Hmong women, tied to tradition, the gardens provide more than food.

"My mother comes four days a week, two or three times a day," said Youa Xiong, the translator at Roosevelt.

"They're out here talking with each other. They invite their neighbors to come along with them.

"The younger teens are more Americanized," she said.

"But this is so hard for the old Hmong to live here. Many have the sadness of the heart, and this helps a lot."