

# A different sort of farm share



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

A Laotian man tends to his crops at Flats Mentor Farm.

By **Jane Dornbusch** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 01, 2015



:JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

Kenyan Henrietta Nyaigoti grabs kale.

LANCASTER — Maria Moreira, 62, is fond of the proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention.” When her kids were small and she and her husband had

a dairy farm in this Central Massachusetts town, she had plenty of milk, hungry kids to feed, and a need to make a little money. So she started a business making a soft Portuguese cheese — she calls it simply Portuguese fresh cheese — that reflected her roots in the Azores, where she was born.

That was in 1986. A year earlier, she had seen another need, and, in her own inventive way, she'd set about meeting it. Moreira and her husband, Manny, had a 70-acre field, not far from their farm, that they used to grow corn. A Hmong woman, an immigrant from Laos, approached Moreira about using a small corner of the field to grow her own crops. Soon, word spread, and little by little the entire field was given over to immigrant farmers, each in charge of his or her own plot.

Today, says Moreira, 275 farmers are growing more than 75 kinds of vegetables at what is now called Flats Mentor Farm. (The name derives from the fact that the farm is in the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management area — the only privately owned land within the “flats” area.) The first group was mostly Hmong, who grew many locally unfamiliar greens and introduced them to eager consumers at farmers' markets. Then came waves of other immigrants, says Moreira, reflecting strife around the world. “War produces refugees,” she says, “and Massachusetts is a welcoming state to immigrants and refugees,” noting that it was the fallout from the Vietnam War that sent many Hmong here. Now, she says, unrest in Africa has led to an increase in Flats Mentor farmers from that continent.





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**Tanzanian Sangiwa Eliamani holds a beet.**

The whole enterprise sprouted as quickly and readily as the amaranth and bok choy and pea tendrils that now fill the fields — but with less design. “I didn’t sit down one day and say, ‘I think I’m going to do this,’” says Moreira. “I just kept going, one step at a time, with one very, very clear mission: I’m going to make the lives of immigrant farmers better. End of story.”

Gus Schumacher, former Massachusetts commissioner of food and agriculture, came to know Moreira’s work when he served as a USDA undersecretary in the late ’90s. He notes that she was among a handful of leaders — others included John Ogonowski (one of the pilots killed on 9/11)

and Jennifer Hashley, of New Entry Sustainable Farming Project — supporting refugees and immigrants in establishing themselves as farmers and market gardeners. It’s a movement that has since gained momentum nationally, he says. “But it all started in Massachusetts.”



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**Maria Moreira, of Flats Mentor Farm, holds some lemon basil.**

Moreira herself arrived in this country at age 12, unable to speak a word of English. She learned the language quickly — the first in her family to do so — and soon she became, she says, “the family interpreter — the one who spoke with doctors, paid the bills, spoke with teachers for my younger siblings.” The challenges she overcame are very much on her mind as she mentors immigrant farmers. “I totally identify with the hardships these farmers face,”



she says, adding that she is saddened that many also experience racism on a daily basis.

Her mission includes becoming part of a three-phase program Moreira has instituted at the farm. It offers support, guidance, and infrastructure.



:JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**Henrietta Nyaigoti gets help from daughter Avah Delcaruz and nephews Isack Onchiri and Barack Kaffa as they harvest chinsaga.**

In phase one, aspiring farmers are given, free of charge, a small plot — 1/8 of an acre — and the necessary training and tools to raise crops. That first year, says Moreira, is a self-assessment tool. Some, discouraged by the hard work and steep learning curve, don't come back; those who do enter phase two. At this stage, farmers pay \$50 for the use of the land for the season and continue to learn about production and about handling and marketing their crops — some

of it through formal training, some through informal mentoring of one another as they learn. The amount of training they receive depends on the amount of funding and support Moreira is able to secure, which varies from year to year. Sometimes there is money from the US Department of Agriculture or the University of Massachusetts Extension programs, but “this program goes on whether we have support or not,” says Moreira.



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Nyaigoti clears a patch of land.

By phase three, farmers are close to the goal of becoming independent farmers and entrepreneurs. “At that point,” says Moreira with evident pride, “they are ready to fly. They are ready to go to other states and purchase land and have

their own farms.” Over its 30 years, Flats Mentor has provided training to more than 1,200 beginning farmers.

On a recent Friday, three generations of the Nyaigoti family, from Kenya, were working in the hot sun, harvesting collards and pulling weeds. Henrietta Nyaigoti, 28, stripped the collard leaves from the stems, explaining that the leaves would later be shredded and cooked with tomatoes, onions, and spices. “With cornbread, it’s a staple meal for us,” she says.

In a nearby field, Sangiwa Eliamani, from Tanzania, is tending to a bumper crop of amaranth. Eliamani was a farmer back home, and he hopes to be one again. Meanwhile, he balances this work with a day job in construction. “It’s hard,” he says, “but that’s why we’re here at Flats Mentor Farm. I believe it provides opportunities to expand. Right now I cannot say exactly how it’s going to happen, but I believe it will. She makes things happen,” he says, indicating Moreira, and laughs.

The claim is indisputable. On 70 acres, with little in the way of a plan or funding, Moreira — who says she’s never turned away an aspiring farmer — has launched the agricultural careers of dozens of immigrants. The farm was born of necessity, she says again. “But then, if you get excited about what you’re doing, if you love what you’re doing,” she says, “good things happen.”





JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

**Tanzanian Sangiwa Eliamani holds some amaranth.**



**A stalk of “African corn.”**

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# Burundi Woman Models Future Of Farming In Lancaster

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Fabiola (Martha Bebinger/WBUR)

By MARTHA BEBINGER

**LANCASTER, MASS.** There were still drops of dew on the stalks of thick, spear-shaped leaves Fabiola Nizigiyimana slashed and tossed into a box one early morning.

“We call them lenga lenga, in our language,” she said, laughing the words. “They are [a] green.”

The 40-year-old single mother of five farms a one-acre plot in Lancaster. She's one of 232 farmers who share the 40-acre Flats Mentor Farm. Last year, Nizigiyimana helped found a co-op that teaches farmers, many of whom can't read or write in English or their native tongue, how to turn their plots into a business.



*Fabiola Nizigiyimana (Martha Bebinger/WBUR)*

They get help with packaging and selling their goods to local restaurants, ethnic food stores and farmers' markets, many of them creating budgets and balance sheets for the first time.

Nizigiyimana will be honored for her work Tuesday at a White House ceremony after being selected as one of 15 USDA Champions of Change, who represent the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

Nizigiyimana said she is proud to give something back to the country that welcomed her as a refugee. Her family fled conflict in Burundi just before she was born. They settled and farmed in Rwanda until a war there drove them out in the early 1990s. From there they traveled to a camp in Tanzania for 10 years before finally coming to the U.S. in 2007.

Now Nizigiyimana works at a nursery and for FedEx. She grows and sells enough to keep her children fed and buy a few extra treats.

“This farming help me to take care of my family without food stamps,” she said. “If I get \$300 to \$500, I can go buy goat and my kids can eat meat.”



*Nizigiyimana shares the 40-acre Flats Mentor Farm with 232 farmers. (Martha Bebinger/WBUR)*

Her goal is to farm full time.

“If God’s going to help me, I can open like a store to sell the vegetables, like a small mini-market,” she said. “If I’m going to work hard, I can reach whatever [goal] I want.”

But Nizigiyimana is a long way from being able to support her family through farming. And she’s not alone.

Fifty-two percent of U.S. farmers have another job that is their primary occupation, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. Farms of all sizes are losing money, and smaller farms that bring in \$100,000 or less are losing the most. In Massachusetts, 47 percent of small farmers make less than \$2,500 a year.

“We can’t ask farmers to do this work for little or no pay,” said Jennifer Hashley, who runs the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project at Tufts University.

Here’s A Simple ‘Lenga Lenga’ Recipe





- Cut off stalks below leaves.
- Chop remaining stalks and leaves into small pieces.
- Chop onions and tomatoes.
- Fry all ingredients in oil.
- Stir, stir, stir.
- Add salt, curry powder and some turmeric.
- Add meat of your choice. (optional)

*This recipe is courtesy of Gertrude Gachau, a native of Kenya who lives in Worcester.*

There are lots of people who want to farm and there's lots of interest in locally grown foods, but small farmers are going to have to charge more to keep their operations going, Hashley said.

"That's the only way that we're going to continue to see any kind of growth or hope or opportunity for a future of agriculture, is if we support it today," she said.

Maria Moreira, who owns and runs Flats Mentor Farm, has learned that lesson. Moreira keeps the project going almost single-handedly and barely breaks even, but as she looked out over the fields of spinach, amaranth, spider plant and mustard green, she broke into a smile.

"Just look at the colors," she said. "They're beautiful. Doesn't this make you feel like the world is OK?"

Moreira and Nizigiyimana find reasons to be optimistic about the future of farming in the U.S. The market for native foods that help

immigrants feel comfortable in their home country is growing, they said. And as the country becomes more diverse, so will the foods grown here and so will the farmers, they said.