

# Gardens help refugees take root in the US

July 20 2013, by Fabienne Faur

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Bending over a garden blooming with zinnia, Nidda Haseeb Al Dafrawi breathes in the fragrant perfume of the flowers and closes her eyes.

"They remind me of my house," says the 70-year-old Iraqi woman.

The house was in Baghdad. But the garden the former school headmistress now tends so lovingly is in a central square in Baltimore, Maryland.

Along with refugees from Sudan and Myanmar, Nidda regularly visits this urban horticultural oasis to plant flowers and vegetables which allow her to reconnect with her homeland.

"Everything I plant makes me think of home," says Nidda, wistfully.

Her green-fingered pursuits have been made possible by a program launched by the International Rescue Committee non-profit, New Roots.

In the Baltimore garden, around 15 raised beds are worked over by refugees who grow flowers and vegetables such as okra, tomatoes, peppers and [sweet potatoes](#).

New Roots was launched in the IRC's San Diego resettlement office in 2007, with the aim of "reconnecting refugees to the culture of their homelands by growing food."

The program now boasts 38 [community gardens](#) in 14 out of 22 cities

where the IRC helps around 10,000 refugees each year as they adjust to life in the United States.

One of the two gardens in Baltimore can be found in the courtyard of the IRC offices. Each bed bears the name of the refugee who helped create it. The Haregot bed reflects the Eritrean origins of its gardener, and grows eggplants and peppers.

The Niang bed was started by a Burmese refugee and offers zucchinis and green beans.

Nidda, who comes to the garden at least three times a week, planted eggplants, zucchinis and beans.

"I had a garden in Iraq, we used it for parties, for lunch , for dinner, the children would play in the garden," she says.

The war in Iraq shattered the idyllic picture she paints, however, with unemployment and crime in the city spiraling in the years following the conflict. Eventually she left Iraq for Jordan before reuniting with her son in the United States just under two years ago.

Joyce Kedan hails from South Sudan, but she arrived in the United States less than a year ago after spending around 15 years in refugee camps in Uganda.

"I am very lucky to be in America," the 32-year-old woman says through an interpreter.

Joyce, who grows green beans known as lubia which she was unable to find in US supermarkets, spends her time learning English, raising her four children and coming to the garden. "When I come here I feel that I am doing something positive".

Many of the refugee-gardeners who take advantage of the New Roots program come from farming backgrounds says community garden specialist Aliza Sollins.

"Many of our clients are former farmers but the majority of them just had gardens in their homes," Sollins explains.

"It was just much more of their culture back where they lived to be able to go to their garden to get food for dinner—to not have to go and purchase every single herb, or bean or flower."

The New Roots program also offers a form of therapy, says Sollins.

"It is not only a place to grow food but also a social place, a healing place for people to come... it's a place where people can come together and share memories, share things about their country back home."

Karine Nankam, a public health advocate who works for the scheme, said growing fresh vegetables also helped steer refugees away from unhealthy food choices.

Years of living in refugee camps often means some refugees arrive in the United States with diet-related illnesses such as type-2 diabetes or high blood pressure.

"They sometimes adopt unhealthy eating habits that can then lead to obesity and other health issues, or exacerbate pre-existing health conditions," Nankam explained.

The [garden](#) program ensures that for [refugees](#), "their first default is not the local fast food restaurant", Nankam adds.

Citation: Gardens help refugees take root in the US (2013, July 20) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-07-gardens-refugees-root.html>

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