

## Chong's Farm



Chong Ge Mua found out about the Minnesota Food Association's farmer training program from friends. He decided to apply for the organic transitions program and is currently in his second year. He is retired; he and his wife started farming to stay active and healthy. He explained that they do not make much money from farming since they do not have a lot of land, but it's not about the money. They wanted to farm organically because they believe it produces healthier vegetables and that it is better for the earth. "Any farm that I work in, I don't want to put fertilizers and damage the ground," he says. "I want to keep that. If you put some compost, or good soil, it keeps for you. You don't want to destroy the land." Farming is also a very important part of his culture, the Hmong culture, and to his people. "Ninety percent of people in Laos farm," he says.

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Chong Ge Mua is originally from the metropolitan area of Laos. In 1964, when he was 17, he joined the army lead by General Vang Pao. In 1973, after nine years in the military, he left and started farming corn and rice in Laos. "Rice is very important in the Hmong diet," Chong explains. In 1975, due to political distress, he fled to Thailand. In 1979, he arrived in Ohio and found a job working in the tool and die cutting industry. His children went to college in Minnesota, and he

followed them to the Twin Cities area in 2004. His five sons are adults and have families of their own. From 1988 to 2011, he also served as a pastor in a Christian church, all while working full time.

Chong and his wife have learned a lot from the Beginning Farmer Training Program. "You don't know anything until you've started farming and gone to class. [Then] you have experience with the soil and the land; this is important because they are different from place to place. Some are good for soybeans; some are good for vegetables, like collards and kale. They grow different kinds. You can't put one plant on the land all the time, you have to change the plants," Chong states. Chong grows many kinds of vegetables, including spring onions, potatoes, and bitter melon. One of the challenges is the relatively short growing season in Minnesota but Chong finds that spring onions and potatoes do well throughout the whole season. Chong is interested in raising chickens in the future but is not sure if he will try it. He says, "The difficulty is that when you live far away, you can't watch them closely and feed them." Although he is worried about the amount of traveling, Chong is still considering chickens.

"The younger generations from my culture like to eat American food and go to restaurants, while the older generations like to eat what they can grow themselves and traditional foods. The old people like different food from the young ones," Chong says. One of the most sought out vegetables by the older Hmong generations is bitter melon, which is believed to be good for health and bodily balance. Chong and his wife grow and sell bitter melon at the farmers' market, which can be hard to find at traditional supermarkets. Bitter melon can be used to make a soup with meat, broth, lemongrass, and other vegetables. "Try it!" he said. "Your body likes something bitter, to help your body." His favorite crops are young potatoes and bitter melon. Chong's favorite dish is young potatoes with a little salt, oil, water, chopped pork or beef, and lemon grass, for flavor, fried in a pan.