

Robert & See Moua's Little Garden



Robert Lor is originally from the metropolitan area of Laos, though his parents and much of his family were farmers in the countryside. When Robert was young, he attended school and did not farm. When he was twelve, political instability and fighting forced the family to move constantly. He recalls sleeping in his clothes and shoes, so that if fighting began in the middle of the night, his family could get up and run without worrying about leaving anything behind. He described the “food from the sky”, 100-kilo bags of rice and canned beef dropped with parachutes by American troops to Laotian people fleeing from the war. For three years, until Robert was fifteen, he and his family fled from the communist regime. Once the fighting calmed, he worked as a schoolteacher for several years, but he was not safe in Laos. He explained what he heard from elders, “Anyone who had sided with the US – including my family – during the war became a target of the communist forces.”

In 1978, when Robert was nineteen, he fled Laos and arrived in Washington State. In 1983, after five years in Washington, he moved to California. He learned English, attended college, and earned degrees in social studies and business administration. He worked as a social worker, as an interpreter, in transportation management, and as a schoolteacher in California.

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In June 1999, he came to Minnesota, where he started working in manufacturing. In 2002, he started farming on some land near Marine on St. Croix, Minnesota, a few miles away from Big River Farms. A year later, he attended a farming conference where he learned about MFA/Big River Farms. There were plots available, which sparked Robert’s curiosity in the program. He and his brother-in-law, Chong Mua, decided to share a plot. He is now in his second year of the organic transitions program and looks forward to continuing farming organic vegetables with MFA.

What is his favorite kind of vegetable? “Everything!” he replied happily.

Robert likes to grow organic crops since he believes organic practices produce healthier food. He also thinks organic agriculture is more profitable since it fetches a better price at the market – often double that of conventional. Robert stated, “When I grow a conventional cucumber, I get one dollar. When I grow organic, I get two.” Robert grows zucchini, mustard greens, Asian cucumber, squash, bitter melon, white water spinach, sweet potato greens, sugar snap peas, green beans, spring onions, tomatoes, potatoes, and many other vegetables. What is his favorite kind of vegetable? “Everything!” he replied happily.

Robert’s crops meet the needs of a diverse community. He pointed out parts of his field and explained, “These types are for Asian communities... These are for Africans.” White water spinach is especially popular with Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, and Laotian immigrants, he said, and typically cannot be found in grocery stores. “It can be boiled, stir-fried, or fried,” he said.

Robert has also traveled to many different countries. Through his traveling, he has learned about different foods, agricultural practices, and cultures. One of these experiences included visiting Hmong communities in French Guyana that grow papaya, lychee, and other tropical fruits. Robert understands the importance of cultural diversity and makes efforts to make everyone feel welcome at his market stand. His native language is Hmong, but he also speaks English. He greets his customers in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese; whichever is his customer's language. "People are so happy when you talk to them in their language!" he said.

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Robert grows zucchini, mustard greens, Asian cucumber, squash, bitter melon, white water spinach, sweet potato greens, sugar snap peas, green beans, spring onions, tomatoes, potatoes, and many other vegetables in his plot at Big River Farms.