

Get to Know Your Farmer: Vince Xiong

Beginning farmer Vince Xiong (pronounced “shong”) wants to start an organic growing movement in the Hmong agricultural community by proving that sustainable land practices can be financially viable. Vince (washing cabbage, pictured left) is one of only two organic certified Hmong farmers in the state of Minnesota.



“I want to take the Hmong people back to their roots (of organic production),” he said. “I want my community to remember back to farming in Laos when no one used chemicals. Currently, there is a lot of confusion in the community about what it means to grow organically.”

Like all Hmong (pronounced “mung”) of his generation, Vince comes from a farming family. His parents farmed in Laos for 25 years before coming to Minnesota in 1979 when Vince was just 4 years old. According to 2010 Census Data, over 65,000 Hmong people currently live in Minnesota. The Hmong are an ethnic minority group from Laos who fought with the United States during the Vietnam War. Following the conflict, thousands were resettled to states like California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

In his second season at Big River Farms (BRF), Vince's Intrinsic Farm has begun selling vegetables to local co-op groceries and restaurants this year. More than actual vegetable production, Vince's real interest with farming is on the business side. He likes sales and management and, “to sell something, you have to know it.” Thus, Vince has started his farming venture in the fields, learning first-hand the challenges that Hmong farmers face as they grow in a new climate, market their produce and run a business in a different culture. It is new ideas and new skills about sustainable land practices that he wants to bring to his community, which hopefully will spark a new organic growing movement.

Throughout the beginning farmer classes and one-on-one assistance offered through Minnesota Food Association, Vince says he is gaining more specific knowledge about vegetable production by “going step, by step, the complexities become clearer.” After starting with a ¼ acre plot in 2010, Vince has moved up to an acre of land this year and is experimenting with several new crops, including radishes, leeks, dill and kale. Often, Vince's mother is seen working in the plot with Vince, scattering seed for traditional Hmong greens, quickly harvesting green beans, or weeding with a traditional Hmong hoe.

“My mom is the hardest one to convince of using new methods,” said Vince. “This year, I finally got her to plant in straight rows, which is a lot easier for weeding. And last week, she finally tried the wheel hoe (an upright weed management tool) and she loved it.”

Being a part of the BRF's training program has given Vince agricultural knowledge outside the traditional Hmong community. He has learned organic practices, farmer financing opportunities, and marketing techniques. Vince sees a need in the Hmong community to better understand successful business practices. Working together and farming “smarter” are the two things that Vince believes will make the Hmong farmers more successful in this country. He participated in the planning of the 6th annual Immigrant and Minority Farmers Conference, held in February 2011. By being present in gatherings like this one, Vince provides a strong voice for the burgeoning Hmong farming community.

Vince's vision for the future is to own a piece of property large enough to host many large Hmong family gatherings. While being out in the field himself every day is not be part of his long term vision, Vince hopes that his experience growing vegetables at BRF will help him facilitate a new organic growing movement within the larger Hmong community.

The name of Vince's farm is Intrinsic Farms and he can be reached at vincexiongxxx@msn.com.