



Beginning Farmers: Hmong Grower Meeting Series

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Hmong are a group of people originally from Laos, a neighbor to Vietnam, who immigrated to the United States as a result of persecution in their home country after their support of the United States during the Vietnam War. Originally immigrating to areas in the Midwest, Hmong have recently relocated to Florida where they find themselves unfamiliar with new climate and soil conditions. In their home country, most Hmong have subsistence family gardens where rice, leafy vegetables and Asian vegetables, such as bitter melon, are grown. Now in Florida, Hmong growers have organized to form the Florida Hmong Community, Inc. to maintain cultural ties and assist each other in transition to their new surroundings. The Florida Hmong Community contacted a legislator for assistance in growing their traditional crops in their new location. Extension administrators were contacted on their behalf, and enlisted local agents to provide education to help these new Florida residents adapt their native farming practices to their new climate and soil.

Exploratory tours of Hmong farms were conducted, where small plots of rice growing in dry fields and other practices unfavorable for production in Florida were observed. It was also observed that the Hmong community was generally concentrated along the I-4 corridor from Polk to Manatee County, in addition to Highlands and Pinellas County. A 5-month series of 2-h Saturday programs, translated into the participants' native language, ensued. The program was organized by the Vegetable Agents of Hillsborough and Manatee Counties and the Small Farms Agent of Polk County. The objectives of this program were to increase the awareness of farming practices and opportunities in Florida.

Program activities included farm visits and collaborative efforts of four Agents, two Specialists, local USDA and other governmental representatives, as well as a successful Asian vegetable grower. Teaching methods included presentations, demonstrations of applied entomology, interactive question and answer periods, and equipment displays. Topics included: vegetable production for farmers markets, co-ops, Worker Protection Standards,



Fig. 1. Hmong growers listen intently to speaker Ken Schulyer as he describes, through a translator, making vegetable beds.

pesticide licensing, insect pests, disease, and USDA resources. Topics chosen were based on interests expressed through a written survey of the participants. Seventy-five contacts were made over the course of the series.

This program was evaluated through discussion with group leaders and an end of series printed evaluation ($n = 9$). One hundred percent ($n = 9$) increased awareness and understanding of agricultural concepts and opportunities; 89% plan to apply the concepts learned; 78% strongly agreed the series will help them make better decisions regarding their small farm. Sixty-seven percent expected increased sales to others as a result of the series. One grower joined the Polk County Small Farms Advisory Committee and participated in a video on the small farms of the County. Regional agents will continue to work Hmong growers and gauge interest for presenting a second educational series.