



Guy Hand

A plot of earth is a second chance for Ali Mbanda, a refugee from Somalia's war. More than 1,000 Somali Bantu have resettled in the Boise Valley.

8 Refugee GARDENERS

by Tonya Nelson

Dadiri Nuro leans over and picks a leaf off a small plant next to the path. "This plant is good for getting the irons back into your blood," he tells me. "I don't know how you say it in English but in my language we call it *mchicha*." To me it looks like a weed. I had pulled many of these small plants from my garden and helped grandpa do the same on the farm. Nuro eats them, sautéed in a little oil with lemon juice or garlic. This is when I realized how far apart our two cultures are. Nuro and I are opposites. Nuro is dark; I am not. He grew up in Africa and I grew up in Idaho. He had to run for his life; I never have. He eats what I consider weeds.

For Nuro, and many like him, gardening bridges the gap of two worlds and brings a sense of accomplishment and independence to people who have lived too often filled with displacement and uncertainty. Nuro's journey to America is typical of many refugees who fled their homes because of wars and genocide, leaving everything behind. They lived in harsh refugee

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Cherry tomatoes, kale, green beans, cucumbers and an African leafy green called mchicha are among the mid-summer seasonal produce sold directly to Boise consumers via markets and subscription programs.

camp and waited to learn their resettlement destination from the United Nations. Poor security, meager rations and uncertainty in the camps created unstable living environments that often resulted in violence.

Once refugees arrive in Boise after a long bureaucratic process, there are many programs to help them acclimate to the new way of life—driving lessons, personal finance counseling and English lessons, to name only a few. Still, obstacles remain. Some have never used a flush toilet, cooked food on a proper stove range or driven a car. For many, it has been years since they held a job, if ever. Programs have to be navigated, children put into schools and clothes bought for winters they had never experienced—all of this on top of the trauma of their escape and life in refugee camps.

Yet, for many Idaho refugees, one activity is comfortingly familiar: gardening. Many have worked the land in their home countries and the opportunity to literally plant seeds in unfamiliar ground helps them connect the



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The Somali Bantu Community Farm, founded in 2003, reconnects refugees to the land on three lush acres in Eagle. About 15 Somali Bantu families work year-round at the farm.

past to the future and begin to heal. For many, tilling the soil, tending crops and harvesting food provides an emotional and physical outlet that other refugee resettlement programs—whether language, accounting or driving lessons—simply can not.

This is why Global Gardens, a local program sponsored by the Idaho Office for Refugees, plays such an important role in resettlement. Some refugees arrive having tended small gardens in the refugee camps; others come with degrees in agriculture. Global Gardens helps all of them get training in how to garden in Idaho's high-desert climate. Many refugees go on to maintain small plots and grow vegetables for their own consumption. Others go further, raising produce for farmers markets, community-supported agricultural (CSA) programs and restaurants around Boise to help supplement the income they make from their regular jobs.



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"We are farming people," said Dadiri Nuro, a Somali who reached Boise via a refugee camp in Kenya in 2004.

Global Gardens guides refugee farmers in what to grow and how to grow it, as well as how to order seeds and use tools. Global Gardens also provides coolers to help transport produce from garden to market along with tables and tents to set up at the market. Since refugees often lack English language skills, the program helps them with marketing as well. When participants start to sell independently they may still need help with networking and marketing to recruit CSA members since they may not know people in the area with an income high enough to participate. Global Gardens stays networked with farmers to offer further assistance while supporting the refugees' independence.

Unknown to many, Idaho has been a refugee resettlement state since 1975. Former Gov. John Evans set up the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program to assist with the resettlement of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees. The program accepted Eastern Europeans during the reign of Soviet Communism and then Africans as war ravaged that continent in the 2000s. In 2011, 775 refugees from 17 different countries came to Idaho.

Dadiri Nuro is one of many Somali Bantu who came to Boise as a refugee in 2004. He lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for seven years after fleeing Somalia because of the civil war between the president and the militia. Of the more than 200 villagers who fled into the jungle, 80 made it to the Marafa refugee camp after 16 days. He later moved to the Kakuma camp and then to America. He spent almost 12 years in refugee camps before he arrived in Boise on Friday night, Sept. 24, 2004, a date he clearly remembers.

Nuro first noticed the food when he arrived in the U.S. All of it seemed to come in cans, he said. He found very few of the fresh foods he used to eat, like *ugali*, a traditional hard corn variety his people grew to make breads and staples. "Canned food is lazy people food," Nuro said. He, like many in Boise's Somali Bantu community, quickly embraced the Global Gardens pro-



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Refugee gardening programs assist more than 100 families in the Boise Valley. Congolese, Bhutanese, Burundians, Meskhetian Turks, Colombians, Ethiopians, Somali Bantu, Burmese and Bosnians all tend organic gardens in Boise, Eagle and Star.

gram. Once refugees like Nuro get involved in Idaho gardening, they notice benefits that go far beyond fresh produce. Memories of loss—loved ones, homes and a whole way of life—still persist long after the danger is gone. The garden helps them build new memories and new lives in Boise by using skills they had known from their old lives in Africa. It helps refugees become more self-reliant and build a sense of community between the host country and refugee community. Nuro says it helps people get out of their houses where they might think too much, referring to their mental state. People don't dwell as much on past lives, lost loved ones and all the traumas they went through when working in their new Treasure Valley gardens. The Bantus also use their garden to take care of people in their community who fall on hard financial times.



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Women, men and children both Hutu and Tutsi work the Saturday market. Shamsi Nurrow wears the traditional sash dango headscarf and gonfo wrap-around cloth.

Global Gardens has more than 10 gardening sites and helps 150 refugee families with gardening. Katie Painter, refugee agriculture coordinator at Global Gardens, said many refugees gain a sense of accomplishment while gardening, especially when they first get here and haven't found that first job. Painter said it helps them feel that they are contributing to their family and also helps seniors who still want something to do.

According to Susan Forbes Martin in her book *Refugee Women*, "The most immediate feeling experienced after leaving such a situation of constant danger is relief ... together with sadness and grief for those left behind. Confusion and frustration about all the new places, people and customs soon add further burdens. But then, slowly, the unfamiliar starts becoming familiar, daily events start blurring the intense feelings of the first few weeks and years, and life settles into a new routine." For many

refugees, gardening helps create this blurring of intense feelings, providing a routine and a sense of ownership.

In recent years, a practice called “horticulture therapy” has experienced renewed popularity with therapists who say it can help patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, the loss of loved ones or physical disabilities. Defined as “the use of plants and gardens for human healing and rehabilitation,” horticultural therapy has become established at several universities and through organizations like the Horticultural Therapy Institute, a Denver non-profit that provides training in the practice. Rebecca L. Haller states in *Horticultural Therapy Methods: Making Connections in Healthcare, Human Service and Community Programs* that the participant suffering from depression or anxiety needs to have a different view of reality, and horticulture therapy can provide that. “Through competent performance of an activity,” Haller wrote, “the individual can begin to improve self-concepts and break negative cycles of real or perceived abilities and control.”

Horticulture therapy is seen by practitioners as a way to give clients a sense of pride in what they can accomplish, even after major losses. It gives those who have lost loved ones a sense of community again when they have community garden plots or work in a group. Painter of Global Gardens cited a prime example: Two groups who traditionally warred with one another in Africa, the Tutsi and the Hutu, work side by side in their Idaho gardens. Painter also said the gardens provide a place where families can talk and learn about the culture in which their parents came from. Children are often victims of the events that caused their families to flee and this time together helps open lines of communication that were once closed. Parents can also show their children that they are capable of more than the menial work of the entry-level jobs they often find here.

Success at gardening and farming not only improves a refugee family’s self-image, but it can also improve their image within the host community. Often perceived as draining the welfare system and other public assistance programs, refugees can demonstrate self-reliance by growing food for themselves and selling their produce at public markets. This leads to more buy-in and a better understanding between the two communities.

As well as acting as an emotional salve and cultural bridge, gardening also provides practical, day-to-day benefits to refugees. Newcomers like Nuro had little education before they came to America. As Nuro said, “When your belly is not full, you do not care about learning, only getting food.” Selling produce at markets teaches refugees to count change, practice English language skills and get to know the customs of the larger community. Many women in the program have mentioned to Painter that they learned to drive

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and have a reason for driving because of the farm program, a skill they might have otherwise gone without.

Gardening also helps children learn the importance of working hard, according to Nuro. Not just working your mind, but also how to work with your hands, he said. When you read a book, you get an idea of the thing you are learning—how corn grows, for instance. However, when that same person plants a seed, waters it, watches it grow into a plant, takes the bugs off of it and then picks it, husks it and eats it, then he knows about corn. Global Gardens helps refugees in numerous ways, but the program itself faces challenges. Like most non-profit organizations, funding is a constant problem. This year Global Gardens will be ineligible for certain funds earmarked for newer programs. Due to its longevity, Global Gardens can no longer be considered new; thus, the ongoing search for new sources of funding.

Land is another issue. Global Gardens always has more people who want to garden either as entrepreneurial farmers or as community gardeners than they have the land to accommodate the increasing demand. More land will be needed in 2013 to help keep the program running at its current level. Since the program leases the land it uses, often from businesses that might eventually develop it, the land is not always secure. In 2012, the program lost the use of two acres of land because of a change in ownership.

"It is not easy until you work hard," Nuro said. Many people told him he was going to love living in America because it is easy to live here. He talked to other refugees who did not want to move to Boise because the assistance programs did not provide enough for them. Nuro couldn't understand that. He said he works hard to provide for his own family and for his own people. He is now president of the Somali Bantu Zigua Community, a refugee organization, and an American citizen because, as he proudly states, he worked for it.

When Nuro speaks about his garden, his face softens. He smiles and becomes animated—the obvious pride welling up in his eyes. As he flexes his arm, he says that his garden makes him strong. He says he will die a strong man because he knows how to work—and he gets to work. I look around at the various plants in the garden and think about Nuro's strength in planting them, the strength of the plants as they grow and the strength of the community that succeeded in building a strong bridge between their two worlds. Nevertheless, only a couple of the refugee gardeners who worked their way through the Global Gardens program have gone on to full-time farming. For most, a full-time farm is not a viable financial option because of the upfront capital it takes to get acreage and equipment.



Ali Outadi and his son Abbas, both refugees from Iran, raise sheep for Muslims in Boise; they pasture 25 sheep on 10 acres near Boise. Word-of-mouth, they sell mostly to Muslims in Boise.

Dadiri Nuro has other plans. He hopes to eventually introduce Boiseans to food from his homeland by opening a Bantu restaurant, one supplied by produce from his community's garden. He wants to also teach Boiseans how to cook Bantu-style food and encourage them to eat more fresh (meaning fewer canned) foods. Nuro takes another bite of *mchicha*, that plant I thought was a weed. He says he believes providing good food is a major part of a good life and he wants to grow his food well. "The way you grow," he says, "is the way you live."

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Tonya Nelson grew up in the Boise Valley. She will graduate with a degree in History in May 2013 and intends to pursue a master's in Community and Regional Planning.