

# A different sort of farm share

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LANCASTER — Maria Moreira, 62, is fond of the proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention.” When her kids were

small and she and her husband had a dairy farm in this Central Massachusetts town, she had plenty of milk, hungry kids to feed, and a need to make a little money. So she started a business making a soft Portuguese cheese — she calls it simply Portuguese fresh cheese — that reflected her roots in the Azores, where she was born.



A Hmong man tends to his crops at Flats Mentor Farm.

JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

using a small corner of the field to grow her own crops. Soon, word spread, and little by little the entire field was given over to immigrant farmers, each in charge of his or her own plot.

Today, says Moreira, 275 farmers are growing more than 75 kinds of vegetables at what is now called Flats Mentor Farm. (The name derives from the fact that the farm is in the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management area — the only privately owned land within the “flats” area.) The first group was mostly Hmong, who grew many locally unfamiliar greens and introduced them to eager consumers at farmers’ markets. Then came waves of other immigrants, says Moreira, reflecting strife around the world. “War produces refugees,” she says, “and Massachusetts is a welcoming state to immigrants and refugees,” noting that it was the fallout from the Vietnam War that sent many Hmong here. Now, she says, unrest in Africa has led to an increase in Flats Mentor farmers from that continent.

The whole enterprise sprouted as quickly and readily as the amaranth and bok choy and pea tendrils that now fill the fields — but with less design. “I didn’t sit down one day and say, ‘I think I’m going to do this,’” says Moreira. “I just kept going, one step at a time, with one very, very clear mission: I’m going to make the lives of immigrant farmers better. End of story.”



Kenyan Henrietta Nyaigoti grabs kale  
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Tanzanian Sangiwa Eliamani holds a beet.

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Gus Schumacher, former Massachusetts commissioner of food and agriculture, came to know Moreira's work when he served as a USDA undersecretary in the late '90s. He notes that she was among a handful of leaders — others included John Ogonowski (one of the pilots killed on 9/11) and Jennifer Hashley, of New Entry Sustainable Farming Project — supporting refugees and immigrants in establishing themselves as farmers and market gardeners. It's a movement that has since gained momentum nationally, he says. "But it all started in Massachusetts."

Moreira herself arrived in this country at age 12, unable to speak a word of English. She learned the language quickly — the first in her family to do so — and soon she became, she says, "the family interpreter — the one who spoke with doctors, paid the bills, spoke with teach-



Maria Moreira, of Flats Mentor Farm, holds some lemon basil.

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Henrietta Nyaigoti gets help from daughter Avah Delcaruz and nephews Isack Onchiri and Barack Kaffa as they harvest chinsaga.

JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF

ers for my younger siblings." The challenges she overcame are very much on her mind as she mentors immigrant farmers. "I totally identify with the hardships these farmers face," she says, adding that she is saddened that many also experience racism on a daily basis.

Her mission includes becoming part of a three-phase program Moreira has instituted at the farm. It offers support, guidance, and infrastructure.

In phase one, aspiring farmers are given, free of charge, a small plot —  $\frac{1}{8}$  of an acre — and the necessary training and tools to raise crops. That first year, says Moreira, is a self-assessment tool. Some, discouraged by the hard work and steep learning curve, don't come back; those who do enter phase two. At this stage, farmers pay \$50 for the use of the land for the season and continue to learn about production and about handling and marketing their crops — some of it through formal training, some through informal mentoring of one another as they learn. The amount of training they receive depends on the amount of funding and support Moreira is able to secure, which varies from year to year. Sometimes there is money from the US Department of Agriculture or the University of Massachusetts



Nyaigoti clears a patch of land.

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Extension programs, but “this program goes on whether we have support or not,” says Moreira.

By phase three, farmers are close to the goal of becoming independent farmers and entrepreneurs. “At that point,” says Moreira with evident pride, “they are ready to fly. They are ready to go to other states and purchase land and have their own farms.” Over its 30 years, Flats Mentor has provided training to more than 1,200 beginning farmers.



Tanzanian Sangiwa Eliamani holds some amaranth.

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A stalk of “African corn.”

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On a recent Friday, three generations of the Nyaigoti family, from Kenya, were working in the hot sun, harvesting collards and pulling weeds. Henrietta Nyaigoti, 28, stripped the collard leaves from the stems, explaining that the leaves would later be shredded and cooked with tomatoes, onions, and spices. “With cornbread, it’s a staple meal for us,” she says.

In a nearby field, Sangiwa Eliamani, from Tanzania, is tending to a bumper crop of amaranth. Eliamani was a farmer back home, and he hopes to be one again. Meanwhile, he balances this work with a day job in construction. “It’s hard,” he says, “but that’s why we’re here at Flats Mentor Farm. I believe it provides opportunities to expand. Right now I cannot say exactly how it’s going to happen, but I believe it will. She makes things happen,” he says, indicating Moreira, and laughs.

The claim is indisputable. On 70 acres, with little in the way of a plan or funding, Moreira — who says she’s never turned away an aspiring farmer — has launched the agricultural careers of dozens of immigrants. The farm was born of necessity, she says again. “But then, if you get excited about what you’re doing, if you love what you’re doing,” she says, “good things happen.”