

STATES OF FARMING

How a farmer's sales strategy turned her parents' garden into a family business

When the Nyaigoti family came to Massachusetts from Kenya, they brought the seeds they would need to keep growing their favorite vegetables. Those seeds also grew a business.

By **Jocelyn Ruggiero** Globe correspondent, Updated May 4, 2021, 10:57 a.m.



Alexinah Nyaigoti, 3, uses a heavy shovel to help her family at The Flats Mentor Farm. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

The second in a series of stories looking at BIPOC farmers in New England.

LANCASTER — Six days a week, May through October, 33-year-old Henrietta Nyaigoti arrives at Flats Mentor Farm by 7 a.m. She waters the inside of her two high tunnels, checks the progress of the vegetables growing there, and walks her family's 2 acres to assess any damage from pests and weather. During planting season, she puts seeds in the ground, and during growing season, tills weeds and makes any necessary soil amendments. At 2:30 p.m. on weekdays, she drives 15 minutes home, where she lives with her two young daughters, then showers and changes before heading to her job as an assistant program manager at a group home for individuals with traumatic brain injuries. She works there 50 to 70 hours per week during farm season, and 80 to 100 hours in the off-season. All year round, Nyaigoti spends 30 hours a week as a home health aide at an assisted living facility. She recently began a position as a sales coordinator for World Farmers — the nonprofit that operates Flats Mentor Farm — which has so far been a 10-hour a week commitment, though she expects that will increase. And this May, after three years of hard work, she will complete coursework for her Master's in Public Health at Southern New Hampshire University. Nyaigoti says, "I work hard because I have an opportunity that many people don't, especially in Kenya."

Nyaigoti was almost 14 in 2001 when, "seeking greener pastures," her family immigrated to Massachusetts from a small town in Kenya called Rigoma Market. Her parents were teachers and, like everyone they knew, grew the vegetables — managu, chinsaga, amaranth, maize, and kunde — that their family ate. When they packed their bags, Nyaigoti says, "we did ... what a lot of people did back then. We dried our vegetables and traveled with them ... because we didn't know if we were going to find them here. And lo and behold, we didn't. ... So we were glad we carried what we carried." Once they arrived, her father found a job in a factory before settling into a career in the health care field. Her mother washed clothes in a nursing home and worked in group homes while earning her nursing degree.

Their lives shifted in 2003 when Nyaigoti's mother first visited Manny's Dairy Farm in Lancaster. She was delighted to discover something she hadn't seen since her time in Kenya: amaranth. She struck up a conversation with Manny, who invited her to pick the

vegetable. Shortly after, he introduced her to Maria Moreira, the executive director and cofounder of World Farmers, the Lancaster-based nonprofit whose mission is to support small farmers in sustainable agricultural production. In 2004, Moreira offered her a parcel of land at the 70-acre Flats Mentor Farm, where World Farmers provides infrastructure and marketing assistance to small refugee and immigrant farmers — today approximately 25 countries represented — whose ethnic specialty crops (cleared by the government for planting and growing) make their way to more than 15 farmers’ markets, dozens of direct-to-consumer outlets, and a World Farmers’ CSA. The seeds Nyaigoti’s family transported from Kenya grew to such a degree that the family soon bought an extra freezer to store their bounty and shared their harvest with their growing circle of Kenyan friends.



Henrietta Nyaigoti (left), a farmer at the Flats Mentor Farm, works with her family, including her 3-year-old daughter Alexinah, daughter Avah, 9, her sister Violet Guto. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Like most 16-year-olds, Nyaigoti preferred spending time with her friends than on the farm. She helped because she had to, not because she wanted to. But by 2006, she

wanted to help her mother more, who she saw “working crazy hours [at her day job], and still struggling at the farm.” She knew, though, she wasn’t going to farm the way her mother did. She explains, “When we came to the States, we were put into a system where you have to work for somebody in order to survive.” She saw the farm as an opportunity for a degree of economic independence. “When I started working it [the farm], I said, I’m not going to sweat for free.” Nyaigoti’s personal network of Kenyan friends had grown at UMass Lowell, and she was increasingly aware of the wider Kenyan diaspora in the region. She recognized the potential value of their Kenyan crops in this narrow target market.

She began in 2007 with a single Kenyan church. “I would literally just get there, and in 30 minutes’ time, I’m done selling my produce, and I’m heading home.” The more she sold, the faster word spread within the Kenyan community. The demand became so great that by 2008, she didn’t have enough supply to keep up. She went to Moreira, who helped facilitate “farmer-to-farmer sales” between Nyaigoti and approximately 10 Flats Mentor farmers. The growers Nyaigoti subcontracts from are mostly Kenyan, however, she also buys from Tanzanians, Liberians, Burundians, and Haitians.

Confident of her expanded capacity, in 2008, Nyaigoti began marketing to Facebook communities, targeting groups of Kenyan women in Massachusetts and across the United States, shipping her produce as far as California, and on occasion, personally delivering as far as New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In Worcester County, Nyaigoti streamlined her sales and delivery process. She began by identifying a need within a particular community, for instance, an apartment building with Kenyan residents, then designated a single person there to take orders. She then delivered to four to five central locations on a particular day, with upward of 50 people at each.



Henrietta Nyaigoti with her mother, Veroniah Nyaigoti (right), working with baskets of chinsaga spider plant seeds. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

This is how the business operated for 12 years, until COVID. Once CDC regulations prevented large numbers of people from gathering in church parking lots to pick up their orders, Nyaigoti pivoted, fast: “If I know you’re not coming to the church, how can we make our relationship still work? Where can you get the vegetables where you are at? My commitment to people is: ‘Don’t worry about it, I will deliver.’” Her customer-first strategy means that on Sunday mornings, after she and her sister pack and load her father’s pickup truck, their time delivering has at least doubled.

The fact Nyaigoti works with her sister on Sundays is not unusual. Notwithstanding the expansion of the past 13 years, this is still very much a family business. Her parents farm the land at the end of their workdays and on days off. Her father likes to till, while her mother does “almost everything ... and is mostly the one that gives directions.”

Saturdays, Nyaigoti, her children and her sister arrive at Flats Mentor Farm at dusk. The farm is quiet then, so they bring a portable speaker and play music. While the adults harvest and wash vegetables for the next day's deliveries, the girls help a little and run around the farm, playing and looking for worms. Nyaigoti and her sister pack hundreds of individual orders and place them in the large cooler World Farmers provides for Flats Mentor farmers.



Henrietta and Veronicah Nyaigoti work with baskets of chinsaga spider plant seeds. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

For more information on Henrietta Nyaigoti and her business, visit www.facebook.com/Lexavahproducts. To learn more about the Flats Mentor Farm, visit www.worldfarmers.org/flats-mentor-farm.

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