

American Vegetable Grower

\$2.75
JULY • 2007

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Tchieng Farms

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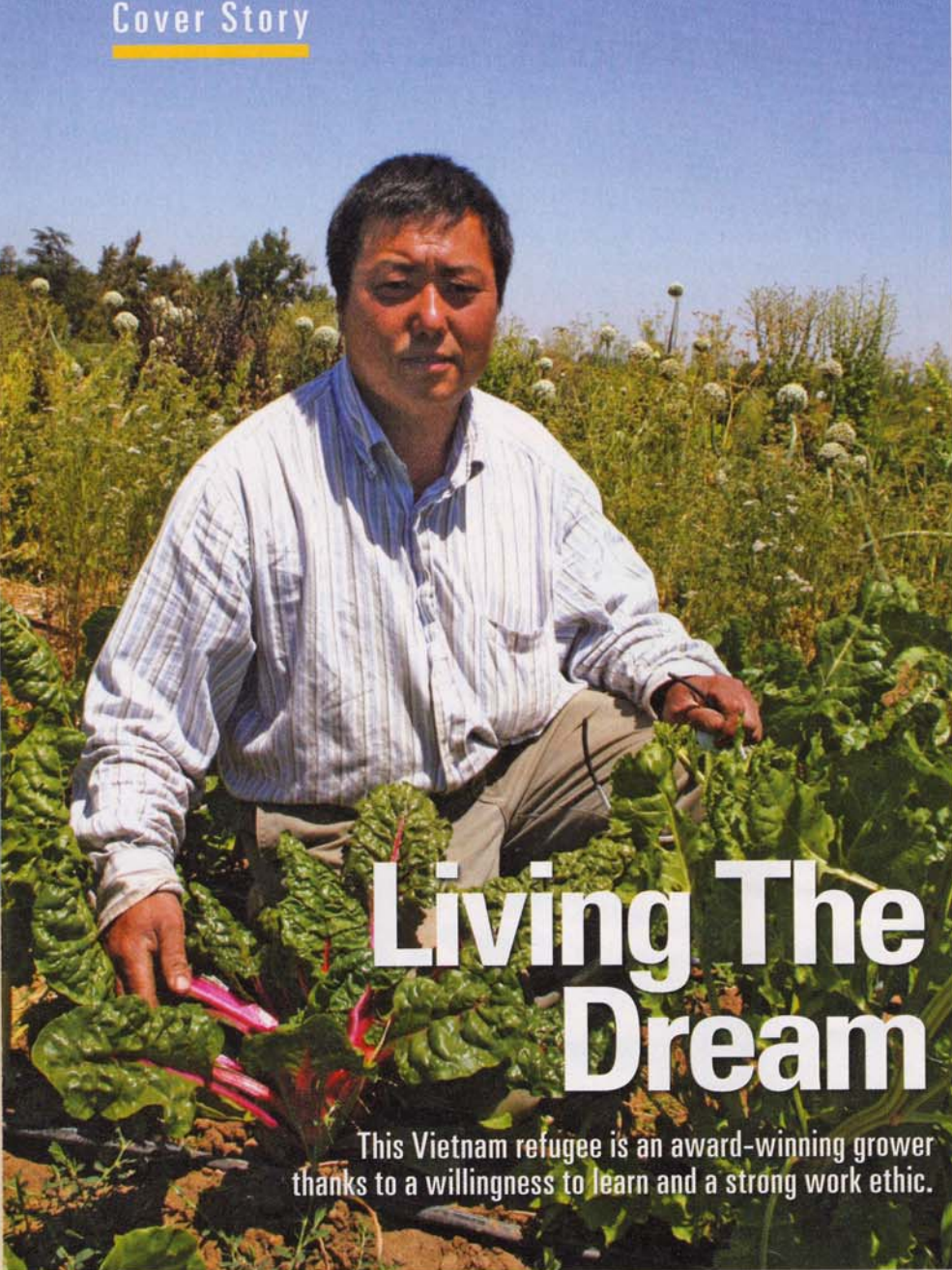


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Living The Dream

This Vietnam refugee is an award-winning grower thanks to a willingness to learn and a strong work ethic.

Photos by David Eddy

By David Eddy
Senior Western Editor

VEGETABLE growers are known for working hard. But Tchieng Fong's schedule borders on the ridiculous. Fong, who farms in Fresno County, CA, sells a lot of his produce at farmers' markets on weekends. Because of that, his weekend schedules get pretty crazy. For example, on Friday nights he's up packing vegetables past midnight, usually until about 1 a.m. or so. Then he gets all of about two to three hours of sleep, because he has to be up by 4 a.m. to make the drive to the farmers'

market near San Jose in Silicon Valley.

"When was the last time you took a day off?" a visitor inquires. Fong, a native of Laos in Southeast Asia, shrugs, and then through an interpreter he explains that it was several months earlier. The occasion? With a shy grin the Hmong farmer says that he last missed a day of work so he could go pick up an award from the University of California Small Farm Program as the 2007 Outstanding Farmer of the Year. "Very busy," says Fong with a shrug.

You get the feeling Fong wouldn't have it any other way. He came to the U.S. as a Vietnam War refugee with next to nothing, and today is a success-

Outstanding Educator

EACH year the University of California (UC) Small Farm Program names both an outstanding farmer and an outstanding educator. This past March the awards, which are named for Pedro Ilic, a Fresno County small-scale farm adviser who died in 1994, were presented at the California Farm Conference in Monterey. The outstanding educator award went to Mark Gaskell, a small farm adviser for UC Extension in Santa Barbara County for the past 12 years.

Like the outstanding farmer, Tchieng Fong, Gaskell was also nominated by Richard Molinar, a UC farm adviser, as well as Molinar's colleague in San Joaquin County, Benny Fouche. "Mark is truly an exceptional small-farm educator," they wrote in the nomination. "His research and educational meetings are focused on California small farm issues and he is always willing to share his information at meetings throughout the state."

ful specialty crop grower. Fong farms numerous specialty crops on 20 acres, selling his produce at farmers' markets, a couple of packinghouses, and a roadside stand his wife Xiong runs during strawberry season each spring from about mid-April to mid-June.

Amazing Diversity

Fong was nominated for the award by Richard Molinar, a University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Adviser in Fresno County. Molinar says Fong has shown a keen interest in improving his production practices by attending grower education courses offered by Cooperative Extension. Fong consults frequently with Molinar, and is also generous about sharing his own experiences with other growers.

"Tchieng is a progressive Hmong farmer," says Molinar. "He isn't just sticking with traditional Southeast Asian crops. He's diversified his crops to cater to the tastes of a diversity of customers."

The diversity of Fong's crop mix truly is outstanding. He has a lot of Asian customers, so he does grow a wide variety of Asian vegetables,

such as gailon, bittermelon, sinqua, moqua, lemongrass, mustards, water spinach, yam leaves, snow peas, and bok choy. But as Molinar says, he also grows many traditional American vegetables, such as artichokes, carrots, onions, asparagus, and broccoli, as well as fruits such as blackberries, blueberries, and strawberries.

But there are many, many more. They can vary all the way from bamboo shoots to a vegetable that most Americans think of as a sponge, luffa. In fact, when you ask Fong exactly how many crops he does grow, and he shrugs and replies "40 or 50," you get the feeling that even he really isn't sure. That's partly because though he grows a lot of certain crops, such as sweet peas, he has very small amounts of others. For instance, he grows just a few trees called "yuj" in Hmong, and Fong sells four

small stalks from the tree for a dollar, which the Hmong will use to make tea.

Mostly Organic

Fong's farm looks very different from the average American operation. The vast variety of crops in such a relatively small area is immediately apparent. In addition, there are more weeds here and there, though that is, strangely enough, mostly by design. (Yes, some weeds are desirable on a Hmong farm. See sidebar, "That's No Weed.")

But weeds are also Fong's biggest headache, which is not really a surprise as he farms as much organically as possible. Fong has no employees per se, but gets a great deal of help from his extended family. They do battle with the weeds with a Hmong hoe, which is like an American hoe, but larger.

And while family members do help out a lot on the farm, his own kids have become quite Americanized. (He and his wife have four children, ages 16 to 27.) In fact, their reaction to their parents' move to the U.S. and subsequent successful



Tchieng Fong and his wife Xiong run a farmstand for the two months it is open during the San Joaquin Valley's strawberry season, which lasts approximately from mid-April to mid-June. Behind them is a poster saluting Fong for being named "Outstanding Farmer of the Year" by the University of California Small Farm Program.

foray into farming has been something less than overjoyed. Asked if his children show any interest in taking over the family farm, Fong looks at his visitor in feigned wonder. Then he lets out a big laugh, shakes his head, and says simply, "No." **AVG**

Direct comments or questions about this article to daddy@meistermedia.com.



Your eyes aren't deceiving you. That's a large nightshade plant in front of University of California Cooperative Extension's Michael Yang, who is crouching in a pea field. Hmong growers actually sell nightshade to Asian markets, where people buy it to eat or make tea.

That's No Weed

UNIVERSITY of California Cooperative Extension Farm Adviser Richard Molinar found out just how different the Hmong culture was when he first started the job in Fresno 10 years ago as he was out touring a Hmong grower's strawberry field. He was walking the field along with an office colleague, Michael Yang, who is himself Hmong and serves as a liaison of sorts to the Hmong farming community. Molinar bent down, and just as a matter of reflex, went to pull a weed, black nightshade. "Suddenly Michael says 'Richard, don't pull those out, those aren't weeds, he's growing them as a vegetable,'" Molinar recalled.

The Hmong eat the leaves of the nightshade, or more commonly boil them and drink the juice. They believe that consuming nightshade lowers blood pressure and cholesterol and just generally improves their health. They draw the line at the plant's fruit, as after all, nightshade is in fact poisonous. But Yang said that back in Southeast Asia they utilize the nightshade fruit to kill leeches that attach inside the noses of their animals, such as dogs and water buffalo. It's a different culture all right, but surely Yang can't still believe that the poisonous plant is actually good for you?

"Oh yes, nightshade is good for your health," he insists. "After you try this, you feel sweetness."