

Somalis in Maine

COLLABORATING ON GARDENS AND NUTRITION

by Kirsten Walter, St. Mary's Health System



Photographs: St. Mary's Health System

The children's garden at Hillview Apartments is nestled between the basketball court and the playground. On any summer day, children and teens can be found working in the garden they helped to plant, while many of their mothers maintain plots in a nearby community garden. The children quickly learn to ask the important questions: Is that a plant or a weed? Can I water now? When do we get to eat this?

Similar scenes are found in other neighborhoods in Lewiston, Maine, an old mill town of 38,000 on the Androscoggin River. Scattered across the city are 15 community gardens that provide fresh food, neighborhood pride, and a platform for youth and adult education and training. Lewiston's gardens are part of a nationwide movement bringing nourishing food to neighborhoods that need it, but they differ in an interesting way from most such gardens in rural New England. In Lewiston, the gardens have become important places for the city's Somali and Somali Bantu refugees.

Planting and Growing

The gardens started in 1999 at Hillview apartments with the support of the Lewiston Housing Authority and Bates College. That year, 14 families grew food in community

plots, and dozens of children came out daily to the children's garden. In 2000, St. Mary's Health System led an initiative to hire local teenagers to replicate the gardens in neighborhoods with poverty levels up to 46 percent. The Summer Youth Gardener crew, with the enthusiastic help of neighborhood children and volunteers, tackled a dozen vacant lots, replacing old cars and trash with safe, vibrant green spaces. The "Lots to Gardens" initiative was born.

Summer 2001 saw an expansion to vegetable stands, weekly harvest dinners—and job training and leadership development for the Summer Youth Gardeners. Meanwhile, the first Somali families began arriving in a city that the 2000 census showed was 97 percent white.

Sambusa and Whoopie Pies

Mumina Isse was the first Somali woman to start gardening at Hillview. A confident young woman with two small children, she had never had her own garden and wanted to learn. As she joined in gardening sessions, her quick smile and agreeable nature made it easy for other gardeners to talk with her.

Many Hillview gardeners were curious about the Somali refugees, and the garden became a place to learn. Why did they come

here? What language do they speak? What does it mean to be Muslim? Unoffended by the questions, Mumina gracefully served as ambassador. She shared her thoughts with other gardeners and began to break through some mistaken assumptions. People worked side by side, finding common ground.

Mumina acted as both an ambassador and a scout. The next spring about 10 Somali women came along to garden. To help with language barriers, Mumina became Resident Garden Coordinator, joining three other garden leaders and Lots to Gardens staff in managing the community gardens and teaching. The Somali women soon allowed their children to join in the children's activities. The garden programs became a place where the youth of Hillview could navigate questions similar to their parents' questions in ways that were constructive and positive. Conversations about respect and diversity might arise from observations about how much variety is needed for a good garden, or from exploring foods of many cultures.

As more Somali families moved to Hillview, delicious summer aromas wafting outside the apartment complexes were also mingling—barbeque chicken from one back door and spicy curry and cilantro from

another. Sharing of gardening tips expanded to sharing of recipes and meals. Neighbors loved Mumina's vegetable sambusa (a pastry with a savory filling), and some gardeners asked how to make them. One day Nancy Davidson, another Resident Garden Coordinator, explained her pumpkin whoopie pie to Mumina, and the women latched onto the idea of a community garden cookbook. The recipes would use garden produce and would celebrate Lewiston's diverse cultures, with some recipes translated into Somali. With support from Lewiston Adult Education, the Resident Garden Coordinators successfully produced *Sharing the Harvest Cookbook*.

Growing Up While Growing Food

Soon other young women from Hillview were following Mumina's lead. In 2004, Ayan Qanyare became the first Somali teenager to join the Summer Youth Gardeners (SYG) program. A positive role model for peers and younger children, she soon became a cultural liaison supporting adult Somali gardeners.

As for Filsan Hirsi, by the time she joined SYG in 2006, the youth crew was nearly 50 percent Somali. About 90 percent of the adult gardeners were Somali or Somali Bantu, too, a reflection of the changing demographic in the public housing community. Filsan spent three years in the youth programs, then went on to Augsburg College in Minnesota, where she has passed along her Lewiston experience by serving as a Garden and Education Intern and a Community Education and Nutrition Intern for the Campus Kitchen program.

Another success is Rahma Odawa. Although her family is from Somalia, Rahma grew up in Hillview and began participating in the children's garden programs at age 9. When she turned 14 and could get a work permit, she applied to become a Summer Youth Gardener. At 15, she became one of the youngest Youth Interns at Lots to Gardens, serving as a peer leader for other youth on the crew and teaching workshops about hunger, food systems, healthy communication, and diversity. Rahma's father represented Lewiston when it received All-America City in 2007 and has been very supportive of his daughter's leadership activities. She was on the organizing committee for the 2009 Rooted in Community national conference, which Lots to Gardens cohosted, and she helped bring 120 youths from across the country to see the innovative work in Maine.

The community garden experience has spread in other ways. With their agricultural

backgrounds, Somali Bantu gardeners have sought more growing space for cilantro, collards, tomatoes, onions, okra, spinach, carrots, and hot peppers. Several have joined the New American Sustainable Agriculture Project (NASAP), which assists immigrant and refugee farmers to build successful farm businesses that are consistent with their culture. With NASAP training and support, many Somali Bantus are selling produce at the Lewiston Farmers' Market. And in another example of outward ripples, a New England Regional conference called "African Refugee Health: Best Practices," co-sponsored by St. Mary's Health System, was organized for October 2010.

Food as Medicine

In late 2006, Lots to Gardens joined with St. Mary's Health System's Food Pantry, adding interactive cooking and nutrition education programs to form the Nutrition Center of Maine. A community health program, the Nutrition Center is founded on the belief that good health relies upon access to healthful food.

The center tackles the vicious cycle in which poverty leads to food insecurity and poor health—for example, when poor people buy cheap, calorically dense foods to allay hunger and then develop obesity issues. The center's preventive approach helps people gain the knowledge and skills to make better food choices.

High risks of hunger, obesity, and nutrition-related diseases such as diabetes cross cultural and class lines, but there is a clear need for culturally appropriate responses. In 2009, the Nutrition Center became home to the Somali Nutrition Education Initiative, a partnership with the Maine Nutrition Network. Along with four other women, Mumina has been trained as a Community Nutrition Aide, providing peer education to refugee women. The five women bring both expertise and community connections. They know the owners of the dozen Somali-owned Halal stores in Lewiston and what times are best to conduct outreach. In one year, they taught more than 200 women.

As peer leaders, they have also helped with hunger and nutrition research. Kiin Issa and Azeb Hassan were trained to conduct interviews for the Somali Physical Activity and Nutrition Needs Assessment (SPANNA), a collaborative research project between St. Mary's Health System, the Maine Nutrition Network, and Muskie School of Public Service. Preliminary

findings indicate that up to 67 percent of Lewiston's refugee families could be suffering food insecurity. Mumina has been trained as a Community Action Researcher for a collaborative community food assessment led by the Nutrition Center in collaboration with academic and public health partners. The results will help in developing a communitywide response to Lewiston's food and nutrition needs.

Mumina has become a leader whose impact goes further still. She is involved with several community organizations, is a mother of three, and is recently the recipient of an Auburn Adult Education high school diploma. At the graduation, she received a scholarship to support her goal of pursuing a college degree in nutrition. After the ceremony, she was surrounded by other Somali and Bantu families, the flowers piling high. Clearly Mumina, along with a dedicated group of individuals and organizations, is helping to make Lewiston a healthier city, one meal at a time.

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