



Rural Training Center-Thailand (RTC-TH)

Summer 2008 Farm Update 1

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Community-based Environmental Education for the Self-Sufficiency and Sustainability of Small Rural Family Farms

HAVING SAFE FOOD TO EAT

Food security is a topic of concern for many people. The news is full of stories of contaminated food. *E. coli*, salmonella, toxic chemicals, tainted meat (e.g. mad cow disease) and genetically modified food all pose a threat to public health and safety.

Governments can only do so much to inspect and monitor the food. No system is perfect. Food safety statistics are meaningless when you become ill or die from eating contaminated food.

One way to get safe food to eat is to grow it yourself. You have a better chance to avoid chemical and biological contamination. This is easier for rural farm families. But city dwellers can grow some food in window or balcony boxes. Some cities promote roof top vegetable gardens.

Grow your own food using sustainable methods. You get better food. An improved diet means a chance for improved health. Get good health and you have a better life.

When you grow your own food, you reduce the distance from farm to fork. This means big savings in transportation and handling costs. So you save money as well. (And everyone could use some extra cash these days!)

This issue shows some of the food on the RTC-TH family demonstration farm. We also have a small garden at our family home. It's just a few steps from the kitchen to the garden. It's like having "instant" fresh fruits and vegetables on hand. And if you have children, the garden is a way to learn practical science together as a family. It is hard to imagine anything better than this. It's a good life. 🌱



Unsafe food seems to be common news these days.



Fresh Thai basil close to the kitchen.

In This Issue

Farm Fresh Fruits	2
Garden Fresh Vegetables	3
Fish Ponds Full of...	4
Food From the Forest	5
Value Added for Increased Earnings	6



Pi Nhum, AOi's second son, harvests dragon fruit.



Wood apples with newspaper fruit fly protection.



Giant Passion fruit on our farm.



Farm Fresh Fruits

Fresh fruits from our farm fields include rambutan (*Nephelium lappaceum*), papaya (*Carica papaya* L.) and longan (*Dimocarpus longan* Lour.), and wood apple, (*Feronia limonia* Swingle). Most of these existed on the farm before the RTC-TH was formed. We introduced Giant Passion Fruit (*Passiflora quadrangularis*) and dragon fruit (*Hylocereus undatus*),).

We love to eat these fruits. And this year we have an abundant crop. We sell some of the extra fruit at a table in the drive way at our home in the village. If we are going to the local market, we might take extra fruits along to sell. We use the extra cash to buy things we don't grow on our farm.

Some local people have bought cuttings from our dragon fruit plants. But it seems the magic of composting in our gardens and farm let the dragon fruit grow larger than most others in our area.

While many dream of having fresh fruit with their meals, it is the reality for us. What most people call fresh fruit is rarely farm fresh. It has traveled many miles to get to the table. Many people are concerned about the rising cost of food. The fuel and transportation increase the costs. For us the distance is a few meters to the garden, or about 1 km from the farm. One of the factors affecting the price of food is the fuel costs involved in moving the food many kilometers from the field to the markets and tables of consumers. Families living on farms don't have to pay these costs.

And we have one other advantage. We know the quality of our food. We don't have to worry about contaminated food or synthetic agricultural chemicals. We grow what we eat and eat what we grow. 🌱

(Left): Papayas and Longan ready for the ride home to the dining table.

Our food only travels a maximum of 1 km from field to table

(Right): AOi selling rambutan and dragon fruit at home in the driveway





*(Left) Chili peppers are standard for Thais.
(Right): Cucumbers are another basic garden vegetable in Thailand.*



We started growing asparagus



Fresh morning glory (in the water).



Thai egg plant widely used in Thai cooking.

Garden Fresh Vegetables

There is a popular saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” This applies to the self-sufficiency and sustainability training at the RTC-TH. So rather than talk about the ideas of self-sufficiency and sustainability, RTC-TH family members try to put the ideas into practice in their day to day lives.

For example, rather than talking about the benefits of composting, the family home garden becomes an informal outdoor classroom. Our family garden at home is just as much a demonstration training center as the family farm. Seeing the good results of composting transcends the language barrier. People passing by or stopping for a visit can see first hand the results of composting. They can see the garden. And some get a chance to sit and have a meal with the family to taste the results. Visitors are free to ask for and get information and advice about garden composting.

The success of this informal education method is based on two related factors: self-selection and self-motivation combined with community spirit. The RTC-TH freely provided the information and access to the information in goodwill for the community. It is a well established principle that information is more useful and powerful when it is shared.

Feedback from the people provides the RTC-TH with valuable insights to locally varying environmental conditions. This becomes input to revising and adapting lessons. And the cycle of renewal and improvement continues as a collaboration and integration of diverse ideas and experiences.🌱

Fish Ponds Full of...

Water: The rainy season is here. The fish ponds are full of water. As the ponds overflow from the heavy monsoonal rains, the water is diverted to the wet rice paddies. The nutrient-rich waters enhance our rice production.

Fish: The three fish ponds are also full of fish. The smallest pond has mainly catfish. It is amazing to see them cavort at feeding time. The central pond has a mix of tilapia and catfish. The pond to the east has mainly tilapia. Fish are now the primary animal protein source from our farm.

As subsistence farmers, we grow what we eat, and eat what we grow. We are not commercial farmers. However, the abundant supply now helps us to generate some extra revenue. And every family needs to have so cash on hand.

Food Security: The idea of a self-sufficient, sustainable family farm is food security. In these times of rising prices and stagnant wages, or perhaps unemployment, people still need to eat. With a family farm, food is close at hand.

A well-balanced sustainable small family farm means you can walk out the door and pick garden fresh vegetables, catch pond fresh fish, and never have to go very far for a meal. This is in contrast to city dwellers who depend on food transported several tens if not hundreds of miles from field to table. 🌱

Photos courtesy of Khun Kasam (top) and S. Lee (bottom two photos).



Food From Forest

Our family farm is fortunate to have a protected forest watershed on its upslope boundary. This is vital to the water supply on our farm. And it also provides a bounty of natural food as well.

With the coming of the rainy season, it is time for hunting mushrooms! And mushroom hunting is a favorite activity for some family members. The reward for hiking in the forest is a basketful of fresh mushrooms. Many of these mushrooms have not been cultivated. You can only get them in the wild. Mushroom hunting does not destroy the forest or watershed. This is a sustainable multiple use of the forest. At the same time, we can monitor the quality of the farm's watershed.

We also raise some mushrooms on the farm. There is a small shed near the central fish pond for this purpose. It is shaded and moist inside. This is just right for some varieties of mushrooms. All materials to build the shed come from the farm itself.

Fallen wood collected on the farm is used as the base to raise the mushrooms. The shade from the coconut trees and the damp soil near the fish ponds make this an idea location for the mushroom shed. Mushrooms collected from the forest can be used to inoculate the wood. The nature takes its course.

We are able to enjoy both wild and cultivated mushrooms growing on or near our farm. 🍄



Some of the wild mushrooms fresh from the forest. It also provides an opportunity to monitor the farm's watershed.



Wild edible mushrooms add to our food supply. Any extra can be bartered with others or sold to earn cash.



A simple mushroom shed near the central fish pond.
Photos courtesy of Khun Kasam (left) and S. Lee (right column).



Some mushrooms growing in our mushroom shed.



Many Thai farmers raise pigs and sell piglets. Farmers also sell pigs for slaughtering but may not sell the pork.



Raw pork is a common retail item. On a per kilogram basis, retailers will earn much more than farmers



Pork made into sausage sells for more than raw pork.

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Value Added for Increased Earnings

It is widely known farmers' earnings are low in contrast to retailers who sell the crops in stores. To boost their earnings, farmers should consider adding value to their goods.

For example, many Thai farmers raise pigs. Typically, they sell baby pigs to other farmers, sell grown pigs to markets, or rent their boars for stud services. Some slaughter the pigs and sell the raw meat.

The raw meat must be sold quickly or it may spoil. Refrigerating the meat prolongs its salable life, but adds to the cost of keeping the meat. Making the raw meat into a meal adds value to the meat. A cooked meal costs more than the raw meat used to make it.

Making the meat into sausage is another way to add value. The sausage keeps longer, and is sold at a higher price than raw meat. If the sausage is cooked and served as a meal, another level of value is added.

For the RTC-TH, the main goal is to feed ourselves. If we make sausage, it's because we like to eat it. If there is any extra, we can exchange it for other things we want but don't have on our farm. Or we can sell it to earn extra cash. We also have relatives who have a restaurant. We can sell sausages to them. They can cook the sausage and serve meals sold at a higher price.

Value added helps farmers earn more. 🌐



A restaurant meal of sausage costs more than in the market.