Rural Training Center-Thailand



2010 RTC-TH Mar Update

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Community-based environmental education for the self-sufficiency and sustainability of small rural family farms ชุมชนตามสิ่งแวดล้อมศึกษาเพื่อการพึ่งตัวเองและยั่งยืนชนบทขนาดเล็กครอบครัวฟาร์ม

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Miss Christina Visits Na Fa Elementary



Christina, Mr. Wittaya and Mr. Sakorn Kamwong, an Educational Supervisor, Nan Provincial Education Office.

Christina Hayden (the daughter of Mark and Carolyn Hayden, long time friends and supporters of RTC-TH activities) visited Na Fa Elementary School. Christina works with resettled refugees at the Hser Ner Moo Community Welcome Center in Salt Lake City, UT. Many of the families are Karen Refugees from the Mae La Refugee Camp in Tak Province, Thailand.

We shared many REEEPP lessons with Christina to use with her students. After a recent trip to Mae La Camp, she came to visit Na Fa.



Mr. Wittaya and Christina after lunch with students from several classes.

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Christina's love of children is obvious as she makes instant new friends with the Kindergarten students.

One item on Christina's wish list was to start a pen pal effort at Na Fa Elementary. She recruited several teachers in Salt Lake City to get students to write letters seeking pen pals in Thailand. She brought the letters to Na Fa. With Mr. Wittaya's help, they launched the project.





With Mr. Wittaya's help, Christina introduces pen pal letter exchanges between Na Fa and Utah students.





The curiosity and excitement could be just the thing to stimulate an extra effort to study English.

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The excitement continues after class on the veranda as some students have letters ready for Christina.



Eager volunteers help distribute letters in Mrs.

Duangnapha's class





The curiosity and excitement seem contagious. Many students are able to read the letters and get have a general comprehension of the contents.





Another class and a brave volunteer learns about the pen pal exchange program

Admittedly there are many challenges to starting a pen pal exchange. It won't be easy for Na Fa students to write in English. As teachers we do our best to create opportunities for students to learn. For those who try and persevere, this is another chance for them to practice English with native speakers.

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For many students this is the first chance to have an English speaking friend.





A few days later, some recently graduated Na Fa students stopped at the school to visit. They were promptly recruited to join the pen pal exchange project.

There are many challenges for this project---more than enough to go around. These range from the basics of postage costs to the usual language barrier. There are options for group mailings to reduce postage costs for the individual students. The use of the internet may be explored, but this would most likely take the form of scanning letters and photo to be sent between school coordinators for distribution to students. This would prevent entanglements with internet privacy concerns for children. Scheduling and timing is another challenge. The American students may have an unusually long wait to get a reply. As we go to press with this report, the Thai students will commence their 2 month "summer" vacation. And just as the first wave of Thai letters reach the US, the American students will begin their summer holiday.

The project coordinators have other options in mind, but will wait to see what happens with the first contact letters. On the Thai end, we are brainstorming on ideas to help overcome the individual shyness or reluctance of Thai students to write individual pen pal letters. No doubt this project will have many growing pains. A successful outcome is unknown at this time. What is clearly known is that if we don't try, we won't get off the ground to try to be successful. And for the Na Fa students, it is important that they see we, their teachers, are always striving to create opportunities for them to learn.

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Christina at the Farm



Up close a Thai turkey looks just like a turkey ought to.

Christina is involved in community gardens in Utah. After her visit to the Mae La refugee camp, she is hoping to get the Karen re-settled refugees in her community to combine the RTC-TH compost and garden methods with the ways they gardened in the refugee camps.

Coincidentally, many of the RTC-TH composting / gardening lessons resulted from gardening experiments conducted in southern California (which as an arid climate like Utah).

Christina's visit is further proof that

Networking is better than not working. She is the daughter of Mark and Carolyn Hayden, close friends of the Greg and Saifon, the RTC-TH co-founders.





Composting was a key interest for Christina. She hopes to use in community gardening efforts in Utah.





Overhead trellises caught her eye as a way to shade gardens from the strong Utah sun.

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Dry Season Harvest: Chilies, Corn, Tobacco

The harvest of the dry season crops has begun in earnest. In our area, chilies, corn, and tobacco seem to be widely grown.

During the hot season, shade is at a premium. Picking chilies calls for being in the sun, stooping over, going through the field selecting the chilies to be picked. It's possible to go through a field several times as the chilies ripen.



The only shade is your hat as you search the field for the right size and quality to harvest.



Seeking chilies of a certain size may call for repeated passes through a field over the harvest period.



Sorting the chilies for size and grade can take place in a "sala" or rest structure in the field...if you built one.

Corn is a popular cash crop. Its tall stature dominates the landscape, often masking the lower chili plants. You can by boiled or steamed corn on the cob in the local markets. But most of the corn is not grown for food. Corn is an industrial crop. Small farmers



Manually harvest corn: cutting the stalks and picking the corn one by one. Shade? What shade?



This partially cut corn field is being harvested, but in a different way than the field in the photo to the left.

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tend to harvest, shuck, shell, and dry the corn by hand. Once dried appropriately, it is bagged and taken by pickup truck (often overloaded) to a depot for sale.

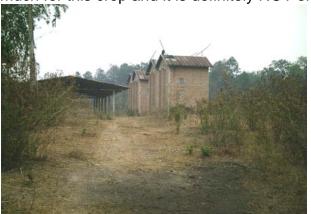


Shade for Shucking: This clever use of corn stalks saves the need to carry and set up an umbrella.



Awww shucks! We missed the corn shuckers. But here's the temporary shade tarp, husk, ears, and bags of corn.

The anti-smoking campaign in Thailand has been very effective. However, in the last 2 years, many farmers in the area plant tobacco for export to China. We don't care much for this crop and it is definitely NOT on our farm.



Old abandoned brick tobacco drying sheds left over from the past heyday of big tobacco.



Uncut Tobacco in the background; cut tobacco in the field waiting for farmers to strip the leaves from the stalk.



Farmers working in a temporary shade structure bundling tobacco leaves.



Other farmers at home in the village bundling tobacco leaves.

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Low-Density Shade Mulch Trials



Young papaya trees with wilted leaves showing signs of heat stress. The original mulch is hard to see.

First we saturated each tree well with water. The prior composting and mulching paid off. No run off or puddling occurred. The soil readily absorbed the water.

We used rice straw as the low density mulch (as opposed to chipped/shredded tree limbs). The material was "fluffed" up 30 cm or more and wrapped around each tree.

Normally, mulch should not touch the tree trunk. However, the low density of the dried rice straw is more like a fibrous shade net (unlike the denser wood chip mulch). The idea is to make a larger shaded area for the tree well.



Our young papaya trees were doing well. But as the hot/dry season began, it was troubling to see their leaves wilting. The hot/dry season was stressing them. They were well composted and mulched at the start and got going quickly. They are less than 1.5 m tall and some are already loaded with fruit. But the heat stress was NOT a good sign.

We decided to try using a low-density shade mulch to reduce soil evaporation. The original mulch layer had had broken down and settled, reduced to 5 cm thick.



The low density shade mulch mound is a noticeable difference for the low level mulch in the earlier photo.



We hope the increased shade of the tree well will reduce soil moisture evaporative losses and help our new fruit trees to make it through their first hot/dry season (which some say may be the worst drought in 30 years).