RTC-TH Aug 2012 Update

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

ชุมชนตามสิ่งแวดล้อมศึกษาเพื่อการพึ่งตัวเองและยั่งยืนชนบทขนาดเล็กครอบครัวฟาร์ม

You may post questions / comments to the Discussion area of our website

www.neighborhoodlink.com/org/rtcth E-mail: rtc2k5@gmail.com

Farm Fre$h Fruit$ for Fund$

Mom took time away from the farm and village to bring surplus fresh fruit from the farm to sell. With Pi Oi's help she set up in front of our business location in Thawangpha along highway 1080. (We have bananas, but many folks grow them at home so don't need to buy them.)

This is one way to get some spare change after giving some of the fruit with friends and neighbors to maintain good relations or bartering or other things we don't grow or want.

L to R: Wood apples, avocadoes, dragon fruit, and limes. L to R: Rambutan, wood apples, limes, and dragon fruit.

Folks driving, riding, walking by stop and fruit by the kilogram depending on their wants and needs. In the past, cousin Kai sold fruit here if she managed to get a good price on pineapple and other fruits from farmers. Summer is the season for fresh fruit.

Wood apples can have an "extended" life. If not sold, we can pickle them and have a different sort of treat. Other family members enjoy eating this fresh. But the pickled ones are my favorite.

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RTC-TH Co-founders

Greg & Saifon Lee

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Farm Scenes

The fish ponds on our farm are a major asset and an outstanding difference to neighboring farms. The unusually dry start of the monsoon season meant that farmers without adequate water, access to irrigation water, or fish ponds could not begin planting their crops. We get little to no irrigation water. The fish ponds are a key part of the water supply for our rice paddies.

When Saifon's father started the farm, he followed the King's Theory and built a fish pond. He was recognized for his efforts, as being an exemplary farmer. We try to continue his efforts to this day.

The West Fish Pond is more than ¾ full. When full, it overflows to the Central Pond

The Central Fish Pond is nearly full to capacity. When full, it overflows to the rice paddies.

The East Fish Pond is full and is overflowing to the rice paddies.

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Our fish ponds are fed by underground seepage from the protected forest area above the farm and from our terraces. During heavy rains, surface run off enters the Central and West Gullies, then into the respective holding ponds to slow the rush of water to the fish ponds. At the end of July, the Central Gully Holding pond was moist (no standing water). The West Gully Holding pond was about ¼ full. The holding ponds overflow to their respective fish ponds. Any water in the holding ponds can slowly infiltrate the soil and add to the underground seepage to the fish ponds.

The Central Gully holding pond is empty.

The West Gully Holding pond is ¼ full.

The year 2012 may go down in our family history as "the Year of Rice". In addition to the normal 2.88 rai / 1.14 acres of paddy rice, we planted upland rice in the pasture area (~4.21 rai / 1.71 acres) and the Hill Top land (~3.53 rai / 1.4 acres). This gives us a total of about 3.7 times more area of rice than we usually plant.

The family's normal annual rice supply is transplanted in the wet paddies (2.88 rai / 1.14 acres).

This year we planted "dry" or "upland" rice in the former pasture area (~4.21 rai / 1.71 acres).

Fire destroyed the Jatropa curcas crop, the Hill Top site (~3.53 rai / 1.4 acres) was planted with upland ricel.

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Business by Motorbike

A Nestle ice cream vendor

The most common vehicle on Thai roads is the motorbike. Here are scenes from the roads and streets of rural Thailand that are a bit different that what you might see in a US neighborhood---small businesses operating from a motorbike. Officially you need a business license, but it is easy to imagine the number of "gypsy" vendors out there.

Thai fast food vendors on motorbikes are basically self-contained. They are a mini- restaurant on wheels. It is amazing how much they can fit onto their motorbikes. They park, set up, cook to order then pack up and go. In times of emergencies, as long as they are available and have food to cook, they can be out and about catering to the needs of people in the affected villages and neighborhoods.

A mobile coffee shop ("cycle bucks?") is open at night.

A peek behind the "counter" where the action is.

You can only carry so much with you. If you have assistance or are not to far from home, resupply could be a cell phone call away. It seems when many vendors sell out they are satisfied and head for home. We know of one street vendor for a dessert item. He makes a certain number of servings. Once sold out, he's happy and heads for home. He meets his daily quota and doesn't try to make more that day. But most folks are trying to make as much money as they can.

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No doubt about it; bamboo side baskets greatly increase a motorbikes carrying capacity and makes for a wide load.

Individuals and business use cargo side cars

A farmer taking produce to market

Ice cream hits the spot on a hot day!

A bag of rice (with no tie downs) on its way for milling.

This vet made a house call for our dog Guay Jing.

An independent ice cream vendor on motorbike.

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Here are two of our favorite vendors: yogurt and roti. The yogurt lady has yogurt and yogurt drink (available in two sizes). I use yogurt as a "food fire extinguisher" in case I encounter some spicy dishes.

The roti man is popular for his dessert dish. He makes his daily rounds, stops, fires up the grill and makes roti on the spot. We often see him at public events such as festivals various fairs.

These businesses are a marvel of compactness and efficiency.

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River Water Levels: Then and Now

Many will find it hard to forget the 2011 floods. In contrast to the high water levels in our local rivers, many people are now saying they cannot remember the water levels being so low for this time of the year. Here are some contrasting photos taken about this time last year next to recent photos from this year.

For the Nam Yang, two differences are readily apparent: the water level and the color. Last year, in flood, the water was high and very muddy indicating that erosion was removing soil. This year, the water in the Nam Yang is low and fairly clear. The low sediment loads tell us that soil erosion is lower than we expect for the season.

Nam Yang at Ban Na Fa (looking east, upstream), 2011

Nam Yang at Ban Na Fa (looking east, upstream), 2012

Nam Yang at Ban Na Fa (looking west, downstream), 2011

Nam Yang at Ban Na Fa (looking west, downstream), 2012

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The Nan River (in contrast to the Nam Yang closer to our farm) water during the 2011 flood and this year is heavily silted. The reddish muddy water appears as if the land were bleeding to death. Since there are many tributaries entering the Nan River, what we are seeing is the accumulated erosion from the land upstream of the Hwy 1148 bridge. The differences in water level between 2011 and 2012 is stark.

Nan River from the Hwy 1148 bridge (looking north, upstream), 2011

Nan River from the Hwy 1148 bridge (looking north, upstream), 2012

Nan River from the Hwy 1148 bridge (looking south, downstream), 2011

Nan River from the Hwy 1148 bridge (looking south, downstream), 2012

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Trash Reborn as Bird Chasers

Empty product packaging becomes mere trash.

Modern product packaging has been a boon for manufacturers, consumers, and product quality. But these same empty packaging materials become litter and trash in the environment. We seek out the packaging that is silver on the inside.

In the past, we showed how they can be used to keep your "smart cards" (i.e. bank, debit, credit cards and passports with an embedded RF chip) safe from theft by clever crooks using passive scanning devices to read the air waves and capture your personal and financial data. But since planting season began with the monsoon rains, we have found yet another practical use for this type of trash: bird chasers.

Last year we tried using discard CDs and DVDs. But they didn't seem to reflect light consistently to get that bright flash of light we hoped would startle birds. Of course, not all "silver" packaging materials is created equal.

Simple bird chasers rely on reflected sunlight and wind to create flashes of light to scare birds.

It seems that snack food packages such as chips have the shiniest silver lining for use as bird chasers. With a bamboo stick, reinforcing cardboard strip, staples, and some string you can make this simple bird chaser in about 5 minutes or less.

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Food in Compostable Wrappers

We couldn't eat our home grown bananas fast enough, so Pi Oi decided to make *khao tom kluay* (a northern Thai sticky rice and banana snack). In direct contrast to the environmentally intrusive product packaging, she relied on traditional Thai food wrapping material: the humble banana leaf.

Fresh banana leaves are torn into the size she needs for the wrappers.

She starts with a banana leaf wrapper, adds a half of a banana (sliced lengthwise), adds 2 tablespoons of sticky rice (soaked, uncooked), then folds to close the wrapper. (No sugar is added.) Our rice is from our farm. The bananas

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and leaves are from our driveway at the town location. While some folks think it is easier and cheaper to buy this snack in the market, we keep the money in our pocket for other things. Making use of what we have to feed ourselves helps reduce our off farm spending.

The first fold is on the long axis and forms a flattened tube to enclose the rice and banana (see right photo). The second fold closes the bottom of the flattened tube (see photo below). The

last fold closes the top (see photo above and to the right). Pi Oi's practiced eye and deft hands makes short work of the wrapping process.

When all the banana halves are wrapped, they are steamed for about 30 minutes. The finished snacks are ready for hungry eyes, mouths, and stomachs! The wrappers are discarded. In our house, that means the compost heap. But many Thais toss them along the road, path or in the fields. NAP (Not A Problem). Banana leaves are environmental friendly food wrappers and readily break down. Thai people have been doing this for eons. So you can see how old habits are hard to change. Many people fall back into routine patterns and simply toss food wrappers aside once they've eaten the goodies. But when the food wrapper is modern packaging material, the old habits create new problems of litter and trash cluttering the environment that persists for many years or even decades.

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This Is The Fish That Jack Caught

What a BIG surprise when cousin Jack showed up with a BIG catfish. It weighed about 8 kg (about 17 lbs; like a small baby). It was doubly surprising that he caught it in the Nan River with a throw net!!

The catfish (*plaa duk*) in our fish ponds are but mere minnows in contrast to this larger variety (*plaa buk*) that Jack caught. Saifon said in the past, Jack caught even bigger catfish than this one.

Usually fish size is not a main criterion when buying fish in the market. Northern Thai style cooking commonly reduces catfish to small pieces or even a crumbly texture suitable for finger food. Normally they don't serve one fish per person; its communal dining by hand. Saifon once said that this approach avoids the issue of not having enough fish for everyone (especially in poor families). The communal dish means everyone shares something.

When eating, northern Thais roll a small ball of sticky rice, holding it in their fingers, and at the same time take a pinch of the meat or fish dish, or dip the rice ball into a sauce before popping it into their mouth. Needless to say, most dishes are cold or cool to the touch. Hot (Temperature) food is not so conducive to finger dining. I guess that's why they use chilies to make "HOT" dishes, where the heat is on your tongue not your fingers.

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