

Gardening in the Third World



Many of you know that I travel to Haiti regularly to work with a couple different organizations in Haiti. Of course while I'm here, one of the things I always have on my mind is food, namely food production and food systems in general.

Here in Haiti, there is not enough food for everyone to eat regularly. There is also not enough water. Much of the water currently is being subsidized by other countries, as Haiti is one of the most water-starved countries in the world.

It not only makes me grateful for the abundant food supply of North America, but makes me think about how Haiti got here in the first place.

The history of Haiti is full and dark. The wars and bloodshed, the exploitation of people and resources to the point of extinction of both the Taino Indians who once populated this island, and the many plants that thrived here, are just a few of the reasons why Haiti is in such turmoil when it comes to feeding its people.

The nations of Europe and North America are strong, the chances of us ever being taking advantage of like Haiti, are slim to none, yet our food systems are more fragile than ever before. I won't go into great detail, as many of you have already heard the spiel of the horrific CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operations) that produce something akin to meat. You've heard that minerals are being stripped so cleanly away from certain parts of the earth that nothing will grow, and that genetically modified (GMO) crops are polluting heirloom strains of plants, forever altering their genetic makeup which otherwise would have remained unchanged forever. It is truly overwhelming.

But there is **one simple step** we can take to really be prepared as individuals to never have to face the reality of many Haitians, which is to wake up each day knowing that one of their most pressing priorities is to feed themselves and their families.

That step is to plant a garden.

It sounds romantic to many of us. Conjuring up images of flowered work gloves and expensive waterproof gardening shoes and tools -- maybe a straw sun hat to go with it. For much of the world, though, it is the only solution to starvation.

I get asked often why Haitians just don't grow gardens. When I traveled to Ethiopia to help with gardens, people also asked me the same thing:

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“What’s so hard about growing a garden? Why don’t they have that knowledge?”

To really answer those questions, let me present YOU with some questions. Do you know how to plant a garden? Do you know what seeds will do best in a dry soil? Clay soil? Sandy soil? How would you keep your garden alive if you suddenly found yourself without a water source other than random torrential rains? What if you had no money for seeds? What if you had never planted a seed before, or even seen a garden because you had grown up in a family that had survived on foreign aid or had lived in a refugee camp because you were displaced from your traditional village by war or famine?

These are the questions that much of our world are facing, but WE are not at this moment facing any of these crises. We have the internet as a learning source. We have community classes. We have access to more seeds than we could ever even hope to name and perhaps most notable, we have access to an abundance of water.

When we learn to garden, to really grow our own food, we become a bigger part of the human race. We connect with our ancestors, who, unless they were kings or queens, also had to grow their own food, and more importantly, we become capable of feeding ourselves and our families. Once we have that knowledge, it should be our duty to teach

children and to tell them how important it is to teach their children.

Feeding ourselves is knowledge that no one should go through life without gaining.

I learned a great lesson about this passing down of knowledge through the generations in Ethiopia.

Several years ago, I was able to travel with an NGO to Ethiopia to work on setting up sustainable garden systems. We were in Northern Ethiopia, close to the capitol, Addis Abbaba. This area of Ethiopia has suffered much war and famine. I remember seeing the news on TV as a little girl, hearing that Ethiopia was having a great drought, leading to crop failures, starvation, and disease across the country. I never dreamed I would someday go there.

We arrived in a village that seemed the epitome of what I’d seen on the TV when I was little: desolate and desert-like with very little vegetation, but beautiful nonetheless. We had been told the village was a sort of conglomerate of several villages that had been placed together in this area when either war or famine had visited their traditional villages. Fortunately, they had a great set of leaders here. It seemed that this tribe was ready to work together and glad that we had come to help with building and gardens. The organization I went with, was known for holding medical clinics, but it also helped build wood ovens and a school for the village. I was

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specifically in charge, with another man, of the gardening project.

Again, this tribe had come together with little more than the clothes upon their backs. I suspect that some people were already there before this onslaught of new people had arrived, as there were a few wonderful mud huts where people had goats and grains and seemed to prosper. The problem for much of the village, though, was lack of seeds and knowledge because of the displacement. Not only had elders been either killed or lost, there was a serious lack of resources.

Because of this, we brought seeds to the village and a couple basic irrigation systems which consisted of a series of long, flat rubber hoses that had small holes set equally in them and then ultimately connected to a bucket. The bucket was meant to be set upon a large stick buried into the ground. The hoses were to be set along the rows of plants, thus creating a drip irrigation system that allowed for less water usage and got water straight to the roots of the plants. All the farmers had to do was to carry water to the bucket and it would stream down into the hoses. Our team ended up starting three large gardens in the village, teaching leaders how to plant seeds, harvest and then save seeds again.

When we were done in that village, we had the opportunity to tour the South of Ethiopia. The

contrast between the village we had just been in, and the villages I was seeing in the south were striking. War and famine had not touched these areas at nearly the same level as in the north. I saw thriving gardens of sunflowers and peas. Systems of government and law put into place in indigenous villages that had been in existence since the beginning of time. It was extraordinary to see the possibilities of what could be, but also sad to realize the villagers in the north had gotten this sustainable existence taken away from them and would now struggle for years to get to that level again.

I left Ethiopia understanding more than ever what can happen when knowledge that has been gained and has evolved over thousands of years is lost.

When I returned home, to the glorious United States, **I renewed my commitment to learning sustainable life-giving practices for my own family and community**, and ever since, gardening has been a large part of my personal world.

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