

## Amos Owen Garden is revitalized as source of vegetables for Campus Kitchens

The Hmong Student Association is revitalizing Amos Owen Garden as a much-needed source of fresh vegetables for the Campus Kitchens project.

By Robb Murray, Free Press staff writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 6/1/2006]

Photo by John Cross



Neng Thao (right) was among the dozen or so students from the Hmong Student Association this week who helped take a plot of unused land and turn it into a garden. At harvest time, all the tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini and other vegetables will be donated to the Campus Kitchens program.

MANKATO — A garden plot at Minnesota State University that has sat dormant for several years is now being resurrected for a good cause.

The Amos Owen Garden of American Indian Horticulture, which hasn't been tended since its founder retired, was invaded by a dozen members of the [Hmong Student Association](#) this week.

Within a few hours the students hoed away the weeds, installed short fences to keep out rabbits and put a few dozen tomato, zucchini and squash plants into the ground, along with seeds for lettuce and other vegetables.

Come harvest time, the benefactor will be the [Campus Kitchens program](#), the volunteer-driven effort that takes unused food from the university's cafeterias and distributes it to the city's poor and homeless.

The Hmong students and the Campus Kitchens program came together when Mee Yang approached Kelly Meier, director of the [Student Leadership Development and Service Learning office](#), about possibly starting up a student-run flower garden on campus.

Meier suggested the vegetable garden project, and the Hmong Student Association jumped at the chance.

"I thought it was really great," student Neng Thao said. "We can do something for MSU and the community, too."

The garden, named after the highly respected Dakota spiritual and community leader, sits between the Taylor Center and Trafton Science Center. It is about 900 square feet.

Photo by John Cross



The garden planted this week by the Hmong Student Association is on the site of the Amos Owen Garden of American Indian Horticulture, a project maintained for years by a now-retired professor. The plot, which used to contain plants and grasses used by American Indians, has been dormant for two seasons.

Student Leadership office representatives Tarah Bjorklund and Samantha Eckerson said one of the biggest needs in the Campus Kitchens program is fresh fruit and vegetables. With the garden's tomatoes and cucumbers, they can provide healthy salads. Tomatoes also can be

used in preparing pasta sauces.

So far the program has served nearly 2,000 meals to the needy, and hundreds of students have stepped forward to volunteer. The program also partners with instructors to incorporate the program's needs into its teaching. [Business students](#), for example, learned the basics of setting up a charitable organization while launching [Project Apple](#), which will collect apples from residents and give them to Campus Kitchens.

The garden, though, will be chiefly run by the Hmong Student Association. They've vowed to water it daily, weed it weekly or as needed, and, in the fall, harvest it.

For some of these students, gardening is in their blood.

"I've been gardening for a long time," Kay Xiong said. "I grew up working in a garden with my family."

Thao says most of the students in the Hmong Student Association were born in refugee camps in Thailand, although at least one was born in Minnesota. As a group they have enrolled in the state's [Adopt-A-Highway program](#), host an annual Culture Day event and are available to give presentations to high schools.

Association members who showed up for the garden project this week either stayed in Mankato for work or are taking summer classes.

Some of what will go into the garden this year has been donated. [Drummers Garden Center and Floral](#) donated half the plants. The rest were purchased by the Campus Kitchens program. Home Depot threw in a hose.

Hopefully, said Bjorklund and Eckerson, they'll be able to get all the supplies and plants donated next year. They'll also spend a few bucks to put up a new sign.

The rest, Bjorklund said, will be up to the students.

"They're the ones that have the experience," she said. "They know what they're doing."

Indeed. Within an hour after their arrival, they already had the entire plot weeded and ready for planting.

"This just betters the campus," Bjorklund said. "And it's better than a dirt pile."

- Amos Owen Garden started in 1976 to celebrate American agriculture
- The Amos Owen Garden was the brainchild of Michael Scullin, a now-retired Minnesota State University professor.
- "It started as part of a project a group of students and I did back in 1976 for a bicentennial celebration of American agriculture," says Scullin on an MSU Web page. "It had occurred to us that the contributions of American Indians to agriculture were probably going to be overlooked."
- From 1976 until 2004, the garden moved around a bit, spending nearly 20 years at a spot between the Taylor Center and Trafton Science Center. Visitors who chose to hang around a few minutes could read the display, see a labeled map of the garden's layout and read about the native plants included in the garden.
- It remained that way until a few years ago. After Scullin's retirement, the garden was no longer maintained, leaving the plot open to other uses.
- The garden was named after the highly respected Dakota spiritual and community leader Amos Owen, who worked to improve communication between Indians and non-Indians. He died in 1990.