Beginning Farmers: Hmong Grower Meeting Series

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Introduction and Background

Hmong are a people group originally from Laos, a neighbor to Vietnam, whom immigrated to the United States as a result of persecution in their home country after their support of the United States during the Vietnam War. Originally immigrating to areas in the Midwest, Hmong have recently relocated to Florida where they find themselves unfamiliar with new climate and soil conditions. In their home country, most Hmong have subsistence family gardens where rice, leafy vegetables and Asian vegetables, such as bitter melon, are grown. Now in Florida, Hmong growers have organized to form the Florida Hmong Community, Inc., to maintain cultural links and assist each other in transition to their new surroundings. The Florida Hmong Community contacted a legislator for assistance in growing their traditional crops in their new location. Extension administrators were contacted on their behalf, and enlisted local Agents to provide education to help these new Florida residents adapt their native farming practices to their new climate and soil.

Problems Faced by the Target Audience

Hmong growers along the I-4 Corridor of West Central Florida were the target of this program. Exploratory tours of Hmong farms were conducted, where small plots of rice growing in dry fields and other practices unfavorable for production in Florida were observed. It was also observed that the Hmong community were generally concentrated along the I-4 corridor from Polk to Manatee County. In addition to Hardee and Pinellas Counties. Growers face many problems related to inexperience with modern farming methods and lack of awareness of opportunities including:

- Modern irrigation, weed control, and commercial fertilization methods
- Florida soils, and cultivars suitable for Florida
- Funding opportunities
- Marketing opportunities
- Pest management; pest identification and management including product selection

Educational Approach, Curriculum, and Programs Offered

A five month series of two hour Saturday programs, translated into participants’ native language ensued. The program was organized by the vegetable Agents of Hillsborough and Manatee Counties and the small farms Agent of Polk County. Instruction was a collaborative effort of 4 Agents, 2 Specialists, local USDA and a successful Asian vegetable grower.

Teaching methods used by the team include:
- Classroom style presentations
- Demonstrations of applied entomology
- Interactive question and answer periods
- Equipment displays

Curriculum Topics

- Chosen based on interests expressed through a written survey of the participants.
- Vegetable production for farmers markets
- Incorporating small animals
- Establishing a co-op
- Worker Protection Standards, pesticide licensing, insect pests, diseases, plant nutrition
- USDA resources
- How to use the Vegetable Production Handbook for Florida

Objectives

- The objectives of this program were to increase the awareness of farming practices and opportunities in Florida:
  - Governmental regulations
  - Farming practices
  - Economic funding opportunities
  - Marketing strategies
  - Introduce Extension resources to the Hmong community

Outcomes and Impacts

- 100% (n=8) increased awareness and understanding of agricultural concepts and opportunities.
- 88% Plan to apply the concepts learned.
- 78% Strongly agreed the series will help them make better decisions regarding their small farms.
- 47% Expected increased sales to others as a result of the series.
- One grower joined the Polk County Small Farms Advisory Committee and participated in a video on the small farms of the County.

Pros and Cons of Adopting this Program in Another County

Pros
- Reach a non-traditional audience and learn new cultures
- Potential to have a significant impact on practices and success
- Identify new crops
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- Potential attrition over time
- Establish commitment checks and evaluate progress at predetermined designated periods over the length of the program
- Using Turning Point System with explanation at each slide may increase evaluation responses.

Cons
- Limited funding
- Limited time and personnel resources
- Limited economic funding opportunities
- Limited access to marketing opportunities
- Limited access to government regulations
- Limited access to extension services
- Limited access to local USDA resources

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