

Issue 14

Winter 2024

THE Garden's EDGE



gardensedge.org

Dear Friends,

For 20 years, I've worked alongside survivors of the Guatemalan genocide. My first mentor, Cristobal Osorio Sánchez is from Rio Negro. He lost 444 members of his village in a series of massacres that took place to make way for a hydroelectric dam funded by the World Bank.

Every time I journey into this river valley, I learn more about the horrific story that unfolded there. I also learn about resilience; how the land protected the survivors who went into hiding. For two years they moved from cave to cave, covering their footprints and eating roots, wild honey, and tree bark. Homes were looted and burned, animals stolen and slaughtered, fields burned, and some children were taken as slaves to a nearby village. When they finally felt it was safe to come out, their clothes were in rags, and they were forced into tiny houses in a resettlement village.

Cristobal began gathering cow manure from a nearby farmer, making compost, and selling it. The first thing he was able to buy was a "corte" (traditional skirt) for his wife to replace the tattered one she wore after living in hiding.

I met Cristobal when I was 25. He had received training and was involved in the "farmer to farmer" movement. He asked me to help him start an organization for families in his region who had survived similar horrific atrocities. I was going to stay one year; it's been over 20. Working to rebuild the social fabric of a community doesn't happen overnight, in a year, or in a decade. It moves slowly, it's painful, but it can also be beautiful. We started Qachuu Aloom "Mother Earth" (QA), a community-based organization run by local Maya Achi farmers. Then I started Garden's Edge (GE) to help support their efforts and share their stories of seeds and resilience internationally.

There is a different way we can be in solidarity with each other that follows a similar horizontal model as "farmer to farmer". Modernity creates hierarchies where certain people and knowledge are valued over others, but it doesn't have to be this way. I've seen it. From handfuls of seed that had almost disappeared, we've brought back entire food webs and passed those seeds on to other regions of the country, and beyond.

Thank you to everyone who helps us, all those who travel with us to hear and learn from the stories. Together we find ways to work through our heartbreak. If you are feeling broken hearted and in despair, find beauty in nature, plant a seed, ask an elder what foods they remember growing, then find those seeds, tend and share them. Or learn a craft. Many young people like Josselin, Sabina, and Daniel, guided by their elders, have new ideas and are passionately moving the work forward.

Together we can take little steps to create stronger, more resilient communities.



Seed Travels

In 2004, we planted the first cultivated Amaranth that people could remember in Rabinal. We could have never imagined that a tiny handful of seeds would lead to an international movement of rediscovering the magic, stories and potential held within each seed. We call these Amaranth sharing journeys across borders **Seed Travels**.

Since then, we've planted Amaranth in community gardens throughout CA, NM, and NY. You can visit Amaranth from Rabinal growing at the [Armory in Pasadena](#), part of Southern California's landmark arts event, [PST ART](#).



QA farmers planting the first Amaranth seeds. La Ceiba, Guatemala, 2004



Hopi artist and Seed Travels collaborator, Kyle Kootswatewa created this traditional pot, known as "komo" in the Hopi language, to hold amaranth seeds. The pot, currently at the Armory in Pasadena, holds seeds from past Seed Travels harvests. Visitors can add or take amaranth seeds. In 2025, the pot and seeds will journey back to Guatemala where more seeds will be added by farmers there. The pot will travel continuously with seeds going in and out, a blend of the hopes and dreams of many farmers and gardeners, current and future seed keepers.

Thank you to all our monthly donors! If you haven't signed up, this is a great way to support our work. Visit our website to sign up or send your annual donation today for our 2025 programs!

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Solidarity Tour

In November, 16 Garden's Edge supporters, ages 22-75, traveled to Guatemala on a Solidarity Tour. We visited the community of Rio Negro and stayed at their Visitor's Center. During the 40-minute boat ride from the Chixoy Hydro-Electric Dam to the community, our guides pointed out the locations of several now-submerged villages and sacred sites. Hearing the testimonies of survivors and visiting their museum made for an impactful beginning to our Solidarity Tour.



The next day we traveled to Rabinal where we met with Qachuu Aloom agricultural promoters, growing vegetable gardens in rural communities, and we visited Aurelia's home apothecary and rural clinic for traditional medicine. Another highlight was a hike with Community leaders from Chixolop to the Sand Dam where they showed us how this appropriate technology provides what they call, the "vital liquid of life," to their drought-struck community.



We were fortunate to celebrate the Corn Harvest with Qachuu Aloom members, which has grown to include many young people who are learning side by side with Qachuu Aloom elders.

A Note from Becky Sandall, Emily Sandall Foundation

I am here to celebrate 20 years of Qachuu Aloom and Garden's Edge and to share why we so enthusiastically support this organization! Our daughter Emily was passionate about education and organic farming. Eighteen years ago, we heard about QA/GE and it seemed a great fit. Ten years ago, we visited QA, met scholarship students, and saw gardens. The organization felt very close to Emily's ideals. We continue to support scholarships, nutrition, and Creative Solutions Projects. Sarah sends us detailed reports and keeps a photo of Emily in the Rabinal office. I feel Emily is well-honored through this work. **We plan to support them for many years to come! Garden's Edge is a very well-run organization with a big heart that has helped QA develop the skills to manage and flourish independently.** Thank you Garden's Edge. Job well done!



Thanks to the Emily Sandall Foundation and individual donors, we supported 9 scholarship students in 2024.

Qachuu Aloom Updates

This year, Qachuu Aloom added 25 new gardens to their programs. In the photo below (left), agroecology promoter Juana Raxcaco holds the first radish harvested from one community garden where 8 new families have joined together to plant!



School gardens led by Qachuu Aloom promoters inspire next generations to eat healthy while caring for the land and seeds.

Celebrating One Year of Our Community Health Visits

Over the years, the use of traditional medicine has been devalued. Little by little, people are forgetting the wisdom of our ancestors. - Josselin Chun, Garden's Edge Program Coordinator

In 2023, we began a Community Health program to help people in Maya Achi villages outside of Rabinal. We focus on education and prevention with alternative therapies like acupuncture, natural medicine, and physiotherapy, attending patients in their native language. We evaluate their needs, using a health history questionnaire that tells us what treatments can be applied. If we can't treat people, we recommend them to a doctor.

We begin and end our sessions with guided meditation to help people relax. During repeat trips to these communities people have reported an improvement in stress-induced health problems like insomnia, headaches, neck, back, and knee pain.



Physiotherapist Daniel Chen and Naturopath Aurelia Xitumul, both recipients of Creative Solutions grants, learning from one another as they attend patients side by side in rural communities.



Health visits are organized by community leaders. Small groups gather at their homes. It can take up to an hour to reach the remote villages and the group sessions last 2-4 hours.



"Thank you. Before therapy, I suffered from a lot of stress. I had limited mobility in my arms and severe pain in my knees. Cupping, acupuncture, and physiotherapy helped me a lot."
- Don Isidro, Los Encuentros

Traditional Pottery Classes with Youth



Traditional pottery making is vital to Maya Achi peoples' cultural heritage. To prevent this and other crafts from disappearing, we support intergenerational skills camps. In a week-long class with Francisco, age 70, the last ceramicist from the Alvarado family, we learned to make traditional bean pots.



Native tomatoes successfully return to Rio Negro and Pichec!



These Guatemalan seeds were collected from the USDA Seed Bank and grown by Garden's Edge on our farm in NM. We returned them to Guatemala in 2022 as part of a repatriation project. Repatriation is when seeds that have been lost from their place of origin are returned. Sebastian Iboy was still a teenager when his family was killed in the Rio Negro massacre. He was one of the first of the survivors to move back to Rio Negro, where he is now growing these tomatoes.

Creative Solutions Projects are Small Grants for Inspired Leaders

We fund projects that support cultural or environmental preservation and community health and well-being with long-term accompaniment. Claudia Garcia wanted for healthier snack options in her local market. She used her Creative Solutions grant to create granola with local seeds, dried fruit, and honey, baked in a traditional adobe oven. Her goal is to provide families with a nutritious alternative to the highly processed and sugary cereals found in the market.

Sabina Ajcot's dream is to establish a school for teaching Maya traditions with the help of Guatemalan elders. Her Creative Solutions Project involves a two-month program for 10 students from San Lucas Tolimán, Sololá. During their first field trip, students learned about Maya cosmology and colonization, with visits to Iximche, the historic capital of the Maya Kaqchikel and the city of Antigua.



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