

## Houston and the Republic of the Congo: Fallow Lands of Opportunity

By John Kriescher // Photo by Seth Romo

It is a crisp Saturday morning in early March, and the farmers at Plant It Forward's Fondren farm are taking in new lessons from Training Director Gary Edmondson. English, French and Swahili words intermingle with the brisk breeze and float freely through the air as Gary's deliberate instructions are translated. In the background, the skeletal transmission towers run perpendicular to the three acres of freshly tilled rows of soil. Spring is here and Plant It Forward is hard at work preparing for another fruitful season.

Gary is carefully instructing the farmers how to plant tomatoes using short dialogue and physical demonstrations. The farmers will dig small holes in the prepared soil with shovels, add fertilizer by hand and place the tomato plants in the ground. Fortunately, light machinery was available to expedite the process of tilling the soil, allowing the farmers to focus their attention on planting. Although farming machinery is often taken for granted in the U.S., it is a luxury that most of the Plant It Forward farmers grew up lacking. In place of industrial farming equipment, the resourceful farmers at Plant It Forward learned to cultivate the fields of their homelands using their hands, sweat and hearts.



Constant Ngouala, Plant It Forward's Assistant Farm Manager (pictured above), carefully translates Gary's teachings into French for the other farmers to understand. Standing heads above his peers, Constant's statuesque demeanor commands their respect and attention. Although he is naturally assertive, Constant's voice is considerate and his movements are gentle. Growing up in the Republic of the Congo, commonly known as the Congo Republic, Constant honed his farming expertise. He now learns alongside his peers at Plant It Forward while simultaneously facilitating their growth by providing his own insights and translating Gary's lessons.

At first glance, one may assume that the farming techniques used in rural Sub-Saharan Africa are

entirely unrelated to the methods used in an industrialized city like Houston. But Constant lays this assumption to rest saying, "The technique is almost the same. The only difference is there are some vegetables you can't grow in Africa. Like peas. You can, but you won't be as successful as here [in Houston]." The basic tools Constant learned to farm with in the Congo Republic, which include hoes, rakes and shovels, are the same tools he uses to till the Plant It Forward farms.

Constant asserts that the key difference between farming in Houston and farming in the Congo Republic is the common availability of machinery and irrigation in Houston. Tractors are used to prepare Plant It Forward's plots of land for planting, whereas in the rural

regions of the Congo Republic, farmers use basic tools to till the fields. And contrasting the advanced water system that allows the Plant It Forward farmers to water their crops using a hose, farmers in the Congo Republic must haul cumbersome watering cans throughout their fields to water their crops.

Houston's urban growers are faced with their own obstacles, though. In a city that sprawls over 600 square miles, metropolitan farmland is almost nonexistent. Constant contrasts Houston's lack of farmable land with the vast 40,772 square miles of arable land in the Congo Republic stating, "When you find the land in the jungle or anywhere, it is owned by the State and you can start to farm. When you start, if no one comes to tell you it is their land, you can stay. If someone comes and says it is their land, you can make an arrangement and pay for the land, but that's not expensive." Finding open land to farm in the Republic of Congo is not difficult; according to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, less than two percent of The Congo Republic's farmable land is

being occupied by agricultural activities.

In Houston, it is safe to say that digging up your neighbor's backyard is not an advisable (or legal) practice. Through land donations by Houston property owners, Constant and the farmers at Plant It Forward are able to transform the city's fertile, unused land into productive oases.

After finishing with Gary's lesson, Constant steps aside to teach one of the younger farmers to operate a weed whacker—a piece of equipment that would rarely be seen in his homeland. Together, they walk the perimeter of the Fondren farm with the lumbering, gas-powered weed whacker strapped over Constant's shoulder. The resourcefulness exhibited by the Plant It Forward Farmers, along with their willingness to learn, are the keys to Plant It Forward's successful harvests.

The farmers of the rural fields of the Congo Republic and the urban growers of the Houston cityscape are inherently different, but they share a common struggle: using the available land and farming

means to yield bountiful harvests of sustainable produce. Despite the omnipresence of this glaring adversity in the lives of the Plant It Forward farmers, Constant and his peers will continue to perfect their farming skills to plant for a more sustainable future—for their families; for Houston; for the Congo; for the world.



John Kriescher writes, edits and curates web content for the global accommodation site Booking.com. Inspired by the people and places that make Houston a thriving cultural and economic hub, John also moonlights as a freelance writer to share the stories of local businesses and nonprofits. He hopes to help others find and experience the best places and organizations in the world. John can be reached on [LinkedIn](#) or at [kriescj@gmail.com](mailto:kriescj@gmail.com).

# RECIPES

This week's bountiful vegetable is the tomato! Plant It Forward is growing the following varieties: Sweet Chelsea, Celebrity, Sweet Treats, Phoenix, Solar Fire, Indigo Apple, Better Bush, BHN968, and Heidi. Tomatoes are beautiful, delicious, and nutritious! Tomatoes are part of the nightshade family, which also includes eggplant, peppers, Irish potatoes, and tomatillos.



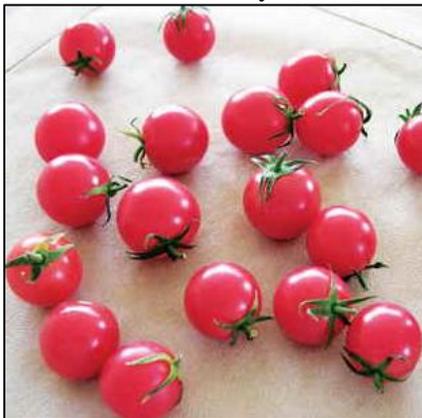
Celebrity



Indigo Apple



Sweet Chelsea



Sweet Treats



Phoenix



Heidi



Better Bush



Solar Fire



BHN968

Read about tomato nutrition [here](#). Tomato recipes are below. Crops coming up in the next few weeks: okra, Malabar spinach, eggplant, sweet peppers.

### Spaghetti with Squash and Tomatoes

2 Tablespoons olive oil  
1 1/2 cups sliced fresh fennel (could also use celery and 1 tsp. fennel seed)  
1/2 cup diced green onion  
1/2 cup diced sweet red pepper  
1/2 cup diced green pepper  
2 Tablespoons minced garlic  
1 cup diced fresh tomatoes  
6 Tablespoons cooking sherry  
Salt and pepper to taste  
1 package spaghetti  
20 oz. squash- flying saucer or zephyr, chopped  
6-8 oz. of bottled or canned tomato sauce  
1 1/4 lb. sausage (optional)

In a large skillet, sauté the fennel, green onion, red and green peppers and garlic until tender. Add the squash and sauté until tender. Add the tomatoes, sausage if using, and 3 tablespoons sherry and tomato sauce; cook and stir until heated through. Add salt and pepper to taste. Just before serving, stir in remaining sherry. Serve hot over spaghetti.

Inspired by: <http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/Sausage-Peppers-and-Spaghetti-Squash/Detail.aspx>

### Beet and Tomato Salad

3 red beets, trimmed, halved lengthwise  
Extra-virgin olive oil, for drizzling  
1/2 teaspoon coarse salt  
3 to 4 ripe tomatoes (about 1 pound), cut into wedges  
Juice of 1/2 lemon  
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper  
1/3 cup small mint leaves

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place beets, cut sides up, on parchment-lined foil on a rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle with oil, and sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon salt. Fold foil over beets to enclose, and crimp edges to seal. Bake until tender, about 35 minutes. Let cool. Peel, and cut into wedges. (Beets can be refrigerated in an airtight container overnight.) Arrange beets and tomatoes on a serving platter. Drizzle with oil and lemon juice, and season with remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt and the pepper. Scatter mint over top, and serve.

## Eggplant Appetizer

6 ¼" thick slices of eggplant  
1 tsp. olive oil  
6 ¼" slices tomato  
2 oz shredded mozzarella cheese  
Basil  
Black pepper

Place eggplant slices in a single layer on a nonstick baking sheet.  
Lightly brush slices with ½ tsp olive oil.  
Broil until eggplant is browned.  
Turn eggplant sliced over, brush with remaining oil, and broil until lightly browned.  
Top each eggplant slice with a tomato slice and broil for another minute.  
Sprinkle with mozzarella cheese, basil, and pepper.  
Broil until cheese is melted and golden brown.

## Summer Vegetable Curry

1 small squash or ½ large squash  
1 ½ lbs. of eggplant  
1 Tbsp. olive oil  
½ bell pepper, chopped  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
1 green onion, chopped  
1 piece fresh ginger\*, about 1 in, minced or shredded  
1 Tbsp. curry powder  
1 cup diced tomatoes  
15 oz. frozen or canned garbanzo beans  
1 14 oz. can coconut milk  
1/2 cup fresh cilantro, mint or sorrel for garnish  
2 tsp. salt  
1 hot pepper\*\*

Chop eggplant and squash into 1 in pieces.  
Mince, chop, and shred/mince the garlic, green onion, bell pepper, and ginger.  
Dice the tomato.  
Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat.  
Add the eggplant and onion and sauté for 5-7 minutes or until eggplant softens.  
Add the garlic and bell pepper and cook for 2 more minutes.  
Add the squash, ginger, curry powder, and tomatoes.  
Cook for 2 more minutes or until squash is tender, then add the chickpeas and coconut milk. Cook on medium heat until all ingredients are heated through.  
Serve with hot rice and fresh herbs for garnish.

\*Fresh ginger can be kept in the freezer and taken out as needed. \*\* If you like spice, add in a chopped and de-seeded Serrano pepper or similar at the same time as the garlic.

Check out our [Newsletter Archive](#) for additional recipes.