

NEW BEGINNINGS

## Growing hope

African refugees work small farms in the middle of Houston

By Alyson Ward

"I tear it off like this," Alain Banoungouzouna says, giving swift tugs to the curly green leaves on a squat kale plant. He gathers a large handful and holds it up: "\$2, a little more."

It's harvesting day at Plant It Forward's 3-acre farm in southwest Houston. The farm is a modest strip of land, power lines on tall towers run down the middle of it, and cars speed by on nearby Fondren. But there's plenty to harvest: Dozens of raised beds in neat rows are thick with kale, beans, squash, peppers, onions, tomatoes, arugula, radishes and more.

Banoungouzouna and his fellow farmers are picking vegetables just as fast as they can, tossing the day's haul into buckets and wheelbarrows. Most of it will be sold at farmers markets. Some

will land on the plates of Houston's most buzzed-about restaurants. And the money from the crops will help Banoungouzouna and the others — all refugees from Africa, all of whom have jobs — make a better living and support their families.

The refugees just finished a year-long training program with Plant It Forward, a fledgling Houston nonprofit. On Saturdays, they learned how to farm organically in this region and climate. Other days they tended

the farm, getting paid to plant and harvest for five to 10 hours each week. Plant It Forward's goal is to give each refugee the use of a small plot of land — a half-acre in the city they can farm and earn enough to become self-sufficient.

At the same time, they'll provide Houstonians with more fresh, local and organic fruits and vegetables.

**These guys are farmers**  
 "I don't know anything about

farming," says Teresa O'Donnell, who created the nonprofit last summer.

Or, rather, she didn't. She was looking for ways her company, Bridgeway Software in Bellaire, could give back to the community when a newspaper story raised her interest in Houston's refugee population. O'Donnell contacted Catholic Charities and learned that refugees from African countries often struggle the most to resettle and find jobs that can support a family.

"I always try to picture myself fleeing my country, ending up somewhere where I don't speak the language and have no marketable job skills," she says. "I don't know what I'd do."

She also didn't know how she could help, but then another article sparked her imagination. Bob Randall, co-founder of Houston's Urban Harvest, **Farm continues on G3**



Eric Kayne photos

Green beans and onions are among the crops harvested at the Plant It Forward farm, which is tended by refugees from Africa.

## Hoffy reporting for training

**KEN HOFFMAN**  
 Sunday Mail Delivery



I just made a donation to Patriot Paws — even though they give their dogs goofy names. "Hoffy" the dog is going to need more training than normal because with that moniker, it will no doubt be predisposed to steal doughnuts and pizza off the table, bark uncontrollably in fast-food drive-

throughs, at camels and whenever a weatherperson comes on TV.

Ron Cook, Houston

This is the first time your column brought me to tears. Having a service dog named for you — I can't think of a better honor than what you have received from those grateful. **Hoffman continues on G2**



Hoffy, a 10-week-old Lab, will be trained by Patriot PAWS to be a service dog for a wounded veteran. He was named for columnist Ken Hoffman.

Patriot PAWS



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STAR

# Busy city sidewalks need shady spaces

Houston's brutal season started late this year, but start it did, and we all know how well what that means. From now until October, walking outdoors will feel like walking into something's mouth. Hair frizzes. Relationships fray. Your soul cries out for shade.

Mine, at least, was crying out last week. On Tuesday, I sneaked out of my over-air-conditioned, fluorescent-lit office downtown, out the building's front door and over the sun-beaten wasteland that passes for our front plaza. As soon as I crossed the street, I entered the deep sheltered walkway in front of the Post Rice Lofts, originally known as the Rice Hotel: a block-long stretch of the city's best shade.

Under that wide, roof, the difference was astounding. On the brick pavement to my left, behind little fences, were outdoor dining rooms, two tables deep, with diners and iced-coffee-drinkers lounging outside in broad daylight, even in late May. To my right, a colonnade of Victorian iron posts stood like soldiers, and outside those posts, skinny street trees lined the unsheltered brick sidewalk, hiding the traffic behind leaves and providing yet more shade.

It's no wonder that people hang out on that walkway, and no wonder that I wanted to stay. The wonder, really, is this: If Houston knew how to create

LISA GRAY  
Commentary



such excellent, pedestrian-friendly shade in 1912, when the Rice Hotel was built, why don't we make more shady places like that a hundred years later? Where are new buildings' sheltered walkways, their canopies and loggias, their arcades and awnings? Where's our shade?

I know, I know — a few buildings offer shady patios, and a tiny number of the new pedestrian-friendly high-rises shade their sidewalks. But why only a handful? And why are we so stingy with the shade we now provide? Why do we make do with little patio umbrellas, scrawny canvas awnings over doorways, narrow overhangs that work only if you hug the building at noon?

Houston is hotter than ever, and shade is still cheap, efficient and delicious. Did airconditioning make us forget how sweet it is? And could we please remember again?

**Sleek. Shiny. Shadeless.**  
"In the early 19th century, before mechanical cooling," architectural historian

Stephen Fox said on the phone, "shade structures were a key technology in making buildings habitable in the Gulf Coast region's hot months."

In the 1800s, the shade that frontier Houston built tended to be rickety and ragtag, like the city itself. But with the dawn of the 20th century, both the city and its shade grew more ambitious. The Rice Hotel, designed by St. Louis architects Mauran, Russell & Crowell, had that deep iron-columned canopy. On the first floor of that sheltered sidewalk, the hotel provided rows of rocking chairs from which guests could monitor whatever might be happening on the street or its sidewalks. The top of the covered walkway doubled, as it still does, as a second-floor terrace.

In a similar vein, the old Texas Building (720 San Jacinto) and Rice University's first academic buildings sheltered pedestrians with the grandeur of carved stone. Through the '40s, even humble downtown shops shaded passers-by with retractable canopies, says David Bush of Preservation Houston. If you look at old buildings, you can still see the brackets.

But then technology rocked the world. Airconditioning, once the preserve of movie theaters, spread everywhere. Americans, in love with cars, stopped building their cities with pedestrians in mind. And



The Post Rice Lofts building provides shade for outside diners at Sambuca restaurant.

reflective glass meant that skyscrapers no longer had to shade even their windows, much less the street.

Downtown Houston became a sleek, shiny place. So dismal were those sun-blasted sidewalks that workers were willing to frequent restaurants in the tunnel system that began spreading beneath downtown. To escape their fluorescent-lit offices, they retreated to fluorescent-lit basements.

**Marvelous**

These days, pedestrians are back in style. It's hard to fit cars into the high-density development that's begun to make good economic sense even in sprawling Houston. And at the same time, that density can support

a large number of restaurants and shops — destinations worth a walk. Unfortunately, we still haven't done enough to make those walks pleasant.

At City Hall, there's talk of Complete Streets, outfitted with bike lanes, broad sidewalks and street trees. We need streets like that.

And shade would make city streets even more complete. Yes, there are insurance and permitting issues to be worked out. And, yes, architects would need to figure out how to update the look; wrought-iron columns and carved stone, lovely as they are, don't make sense anymore.

But shade still makes marvelous sense. We need more of it.

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# Farm program reminds many of the refugees of home

Farm from page G1

suggested in a column that a person could earn a living just selling produce from a small urban farm. O'Donnell called him.

"He thought that about an acre of land could generate a living wage," she remembers. "So I went back to Catholic Charities and said, 'Hey, are these guys farmers?'"

Indeed they were. Many of the refugees O'Donnell most wanted to help, in fact, had a lifetime of farming experience. Suddenly, she had an idea that might work.

O'Donnell assembled a team of people who knew something about organic farming. Braswood Assembly of God Church let them use a piece of its land, and those 3 acres soon became the Plant It Forward training farm.

Through the church, O'Donnell and her team connected with African refugees who had settled in Houston. Plant It Forward selected 14 for the training program last summer. First planting was in September; first harvest was a month later. And since then, they've been selling out at farmers markets almost every week.

**Power to earn more**

To Alimasi and his family fled the Democratic Republic of the Congo for a Ugandan refugee camp. After three years there, they ended up in Houston in 2011. At home, he taught French to middle-school kids and managed a small family farm with cows and goats. Alimasi now works the night shift for a cleaning service, then works the farm most days before heading off to English classes in the evenings.

Eventually, Alimasi would like to make farming his full-time job. He and his wife have 10 children of their own, plus five more who came with them to the United States. Money will probably always be tight. But managing his own farm on a small piece of land, Alimasi believes, will give him the power to earn more.

The native French speaker's English is improving, but for long conversations he enlists Elody Kayumba, a fellow Congolese refugee who works as a translator and

hopes to join the Plant It Forward program. Kayumba says the farm reminds them of home. It's a smaller version of the family farms they grew up with, and it's overflowing with the same beans, corn and tomatoes they remember. In fact, this farm is growing 17 varieties of amaranth, which is both a leafy green and a grain — and a popular vegetable in the refugees' home countries.

"We don't really find it in the market here, but back home we have it, and we're used to those foods," Kayumba says. "The only place we find it, really, is here."  
The farmers take home all the amaranth they want, plus any vegetables that aren't the perfect shape or color to sell. They may miss their home at times, say Alimasi and Kayumba, but having safety — plus enough food to eat — is most important.

"At least we have peace, no war," Kayumba says. "We sleep well, we eat, we have some jobs and can make a little money."

**Produce stays local**

Nine men and one woman graduated from the training program in May, but Plant It Forward still is seeking farms for nine of them. Trainees and volunteers will set up each new plot, plowing land or building beds, then let a single farmer take over. The farmers are expected to be economically self-sufficient within a year — and after that, they'll each put a little of their earnings back into the program to help support a new class of trainees.

The first satellite farm is on the edge of the University of St. Thomas campus. In five or 10 years, the university hopes that land will hold a new performing arts center. But right now it's covered with tomato plants, carrots, beans and radishes and eventually will be assigned to one of Plant It Forward's farmer graduates.

Students in the environmental science and studies department helped build the raised beds and plant the crops, says Sister Damien Marie Savino, department chairwoman. They'll continue to help the project as part of their sustainability studies.  
Plant It Forward is



Eric Kayne photos

Plant It Forward manager Teresa O'Donnell looks over onions in the nonprofit's training farm tended by Albert Malomngga, right, and other refugees from Africa.

leasing the half-acre space from the university for \$1 — almost free — because the program fits the university's mission so well, she says.

"Even though we know there's going to eventually be a new building there, we can help one or two Congolese families get their feet on the ground here," Savino says. "On top of that, we're supporting healthy eating and ways of growing food without genetic modification and pesticides or fertilizers."

O'Donnell hopes more landowners will allow her organization to put farms on empty lots throughout the city — bits of land, a half-acre or larger, that aren't being used.

"We have a lot of people who come to us and say, 'How do I get a (Plant It Forward) farm in my neighborhood?'" says Ray Sher, the organization's farm manager and a long-time urban gardener. "We say, 'Find us some land in your neighborhood.'"

So far, Plant It Forward's farmland is generating about \$1,000 per acre in sales each week. The group sets up at two Urban Harvest farmers markets, the Eastside market behind 3000 Richmond on Saturdays and the City Hall market on Wednesdays. Produce often sells out within the first hour or so.

Some of the best customers have been local chefs: Plant It Forward sells to several restaurants in town, including Local Foods, Underbelly, Sparrow and Oxheart. Benny Mason, chef at the Heights restaurant Down House,



Christine Kengue, a refugee from Congo-Brazzaville, waters tomatoes at the 3-acre farm.

prepared a fundraising farm dinner in April using produce from Plant It Forward's training farm.

Plant It Forward also has 40 subscribers to its Community Supported Agriculture program who pay \$320 to get a box of fresh produce every week for four months. "We have people on the waiting list," O'Donnell says. She hopes to have enough produce for 250 members by this time next year.

"Houston's hungry for local produce," says Colleen O'Donnell, Teresa's niece, who studied organic

farming in college and works with Plant It Forward. She fields calls and emails from people who have seen the farm in their neighborhood and want to know if they can be a part of it.

Teresa O'Donnell, too, has seen how faces light up when she talks about local micro-farms.

"There's an incredible amount of interest in local food right now," she says. "I feel like we're just at the cusp of something. You say you're growing local food and it's 'Where can I buy it?'"

**It's not heavy work**

Banoungouzouma, 42, graduated from the training program last month. In the late '90s, he and his family escaped civil war in the Republic of Congo — sometimes called Congo-Brazzaville — and spent 11 years in Ivory Coast. When Banoungouzouma arrived in Houston in 2010, he got a job with a clothing factory, then with an electronics manufacturer. He was working the night shift when Plant It Forward came along. Now he's been hired to tend part of the training farm full-time. He's waiting for his own farm, but already he works days doing something he loves.

"I like this job," he says. "When you like this, it is not heavy. But if you don't like (your work), everything is heavy."

Banoungouzouma, who began farming when he was 11, wants this farm to thrive so he can visit Congo-Brazzaville and share what he has. If he can save a few thousand dollars, he says, "I can do something for over there — for one village, for two villages, for water, for medicine, to dress people."

First, though, he wants to make more money for his wife and four children — including his 3-month-old daughter. He even hopes to add some chickens to his farm someday.

"I always think of you who work on land," O'Donnell tells him. "I think, 'Would chickens go here?'"

For Banoungouzouma, though, the kale and green beans, corn and onions are enough for now.

"Listen here," he tells O'Donnell, using his fingers to count off his points.

"Family, happy. Wife, happy. Me? I'm happy. You know how many people you make happy in one home?"

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