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*Stranger in a Strange Land:*  
Immigrant Gardeners  
in a Nation of Immigrants

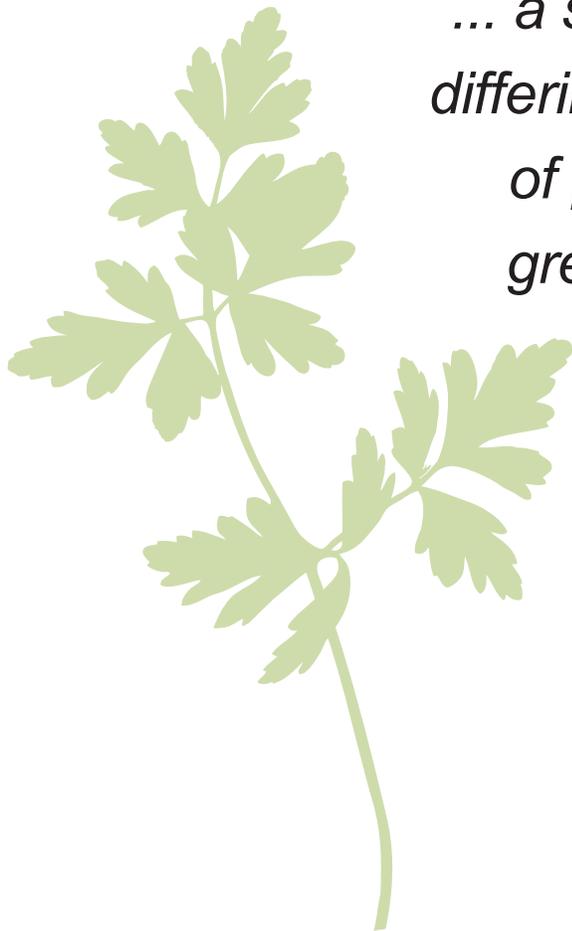


# International Garden of Many Colors

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Spring comes quickly to the rich agricultural valley of Sacramento, so it is not surprising that on a cool and sunny February morning, people are already at work in the International Garden of Many Colors. Started in the early 1990s by mostly Russian, Ukrainian, and Mexican immigrants, this informal community garden lies just north of the American River, which runs through the heart of Sacramento, adjacent to an affordable housing apartment complex.

The gardeners reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity for which the city is known, and the garden supplies fresh produce for all kinds of treasured food traditions, from borscht to salsa. However, this garden is a place of struggle as much as success, an incredible asset to some, a worrisome liability to others, and an ongoing question mark in the context of Sacramento's urban agriculture revolution.

On my first visit, as a curious student intern and avid gardener, an elderly woman greets me and crushes fragrant bay leaves in her fingers for me to smell. Planted in the underutilized space beneath giant electrical towers, winter crops such as cabbage, potatoes, fava beans, and wheat grow well, and bright orange calendula flowers spill into the paths. By early May, gladiolas, roses, and irises start to bloom, alongside growing tomato forests, dense raspberry bushes, and meandering squashes.

The International Garden of Many Colors is a great example of how community gardening contributes to a fulfilling environment for immigrants both to build new lives in new places and to maintain traditions, even in the context of migration. The food is grown primarily for home consumption, with surplus shared with friends or exchanged for a few dollars with those in the neighborhood. Many gardeners grow fruits and vegetables from their home countries, which are not easily found in typical American grocery stores, like black currants, sorrel, and fresh garbanzo beans.

Having brought seeds from her home country, one gardener explained to me, “Ukrainian dill is much better than American dill.” Gardeners not only grow much of their own food, but also medicinal herbs like artemesia, yarrow, chicory, greater celandine, plantain, and comfrey. Many older gardeners are on a fixed income and often help out with grandchildren or other family members. For those who have the skills and energy to grow food, the garden contributes to the health and happiness of entire families, particularly in times of limited resources and structural barriers to accessing those resources.

Gardeners are proud of the fruits of their labor, even if the hard work has been made more complicated with recent state-wide mandatory water restrictions, because of drought. Some gardeners have decided not to plant this year because of water challenges, but others wouldn't dream of letting their plot go after having worked on it for 10, even 15 years. The gardeners themselves have designed the patchwork garden layout over the last 20 years, using mainly reused and recycled materials. Pallet fences, teddy bear scarecrows, homemade trellises, and plastic milk jug cloches speak to resourcefulness and freedom of expression. However, one person's trash-into-treasure is still another person's trash, and not everyone loves the DIY garden aesthetic—or the fact that gardeners are technically squatting on public land.

Like other community gardens around the U.S. and elsewhere, the International Garden of Many Colors is a site where differing visions of public city green space clash. The land is owned by the city, and the garden also sits partially within a utility corridor. Safety, code compliance, and liability are all concerns for the city, and the local electrical company wants to build an access road and clearance areas underneath the towers.

Though gardeners know they don't actually own the land they work, they nevertheless feel a sense of ownership through the effort they have put in and continue to devote to the beauty and productivity of the land. Previous city attempts at removal have been met by energetic resistance from the gardeners, supported in part by the affordable housing organization's community organizing program.

However, there is no formal leadership structure for this garden. This seems to be something of a double-edged sword. In moments of crisis, people come together to fight eviction, but proactive organizing and leadership wanes over time. Gardeners have the freedom to design and manage their plot as they see fit, but maintaining ground rules and sticking to procedures that resolve conflict and sort out who gets a plot to work is not as easy, especially when not everyone shares the same language. Opportunity to access garden plots, responsible water usage, and fairness and respect are all issues that occasionally become problems in the garden. Despite the challenges, this

immigrant-driven garden remains strong, with its unique companion planting of structure and anarchy.

This past year, the International Garden of Many Colors has a new horizon. With the support of a local council member, Sacramento's Department of Parks and Recreation has agreed to build a new, official community garden immediately next to the existing garden, prioritizing new spots for gardeners who may be displaced by the utility access road. Some gardeners are excited about this proposal, given the resources that come with a formal garden, like guaranteed water, free seeds, and shared tools. Others are wary, wondering whether the new garden will meet their needs in terms of space, design, and autonomy. Some worry that the new garden may become an excuse to get rid of the old garden entirely.

So what is the future of democratic, community-based, immigrant gardening in Sacramento? Community gardens must find a balance between formal and informal structures to meet the needs of a broad spectrum of users, especially in culturally diverse places. The success and struggle at the International Garden of Many Colors invites community garden advocates and city residents alike to consider how social and cultural diversity goes hand in hand with biodiversity.

