

Mey Saefong works on a winter crop.



Co-op Farm Thrives in Sunol

By Jennifer Wadsworth

On 18 acres of once-dormant land abutting tiny Sunol, a handful of farmers grow their winter crops and nitrogen-replenishing groundcover.

In the thick of the Tri-Valley's foggy winter, most of the soil rests for spring planting. Thirty-year-old Cynthia King — one of the agriculture experts behind the farming co-op — lays her plans for another season of teaching and feeding nearby communities.

Three seasons have come and gone since an East Bay nonprofit asked to plant food crops on the public land. The small-time farmers who now grow there are finally starting to gain recognition. Their crops were recently certified organic. To obtain this certification, the group has learned how to deal with planting chemical-free and using relatively primitive equipment, except for a tractor one farmer brought to make life a little easier.

King oversees the politics of the operation. Six growers from various East Bay and Tri-Valley cities actually farm the patch of land secured by a nine-year lease through the Berkeley nonprofit Sustainable Agriculture and Education (SAGE). They are Iu-Mien Village Farms,

People's Grocery, Baia Nicchia, Terra Bella Family Farms, Swarm Catchers, beekeepers, Peter Rudnick, organic farmer, Fico, specialty fig grower.

The neophyte farmers rent the smaller plots for \$1,500 per acre, per year. The nonprofit supplies the water.

The threefold plan spearheaded three years ago by the SAGE's director Sibella Kraus, is to establish sustainable city-side farms, care for the natural resources in a given spot, and teach the public to reconnect with the earth that feeds them.

"What we want is for people to realize where their food comes from," said Terra Bella Farms founder Shawn Seufert, 29, echoing Kraus' doctrine. Seufert, his family and another farming buddy grow mostly melons, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and summer and winter squash on the borrowed land. Seufert also raises crops at his own home in Pleasanton.

What he and his land-tilling peers have accomplished so far is to supply organic food to local restaurants, farmers markets and soup kitchens in the Bay Area and in Hunter's Point in San Francisco and to friends in the valley region.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission owns the actual title to

the fledgling farmland across Highway 84 from Sunol, a town that entered the quirky hall of fame for electing a dog as mayor in the 1980s.

The site, now home to rows of seedlings, chickens and beehives, is part of 40,000 acres the city utilities department has called its own since it bought the place 79 years ago. Under the loamy, nutrient-rich soil where cold-tolerant broccoli, strawberries and kale now sprout, massive pipes carry clean Sierra snowmelt from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite to thirsty San Franciscans.

The alluvial earth near the Alameda and Alamo creeks makes for a super-fertile medium in which to grow organically.

Immigrant Laotian women raise wintergreens and Asian vegetables on their few-acre share of the land. Near the farm entrance, Iu-Mien Village Farms dumped a pile of squash ravaged by a root-eating centipede — a learning experience for the entire farm, and a problem all the growers will have to tackle together.

Yards away from one corner of the farm is the namesake of the Sunol Water Temple Agricultural Park — a classically styled monument built in 1910 by a pri-