



## A way of life: farm family of the year

By Rick Moore



Photo by Patrick O'Leary May Lee's daughter Mhonpaj shows off some of the fresh veggies from her family's farm operation at the Minnesota Food Association.

At the small parcel of land that they rent near Marine on the St. Croix, May Lee and her family provide food for themselves and the greater community. For the Lee family, it's a way of life. May Lee began farming at the age of 8 in Laos, and continued when her family moved to St. Paul from a Thai refugee camp in 1981.

The Lee family may not be the first that comes to mind when you picture a typical Minnesota farm family, especially in generations past, and that's symbolic of how the face of agriculture has changed over the years.

But one thing hasn't changed. In this state, agriculture is still a family affair. "In the state of Minnesota, our agricultural land and our agricultural production system are owned and operated by farm families," says Bev Durgan, dean of University of Minnesota Extension. "I think that's something to get the word out on and also something to be very proud of."



Durgan and the University are doing just that. Since 1980, the U has annually been naming "Farm Families of the Year" from counties in all corners of the state, and May Lee and her family have been chosen as the 2009 Farm Family of the Year for Ramsey County.

Durgan says the program looks for farm families rooted in production agriculture and also active in their community. Beyond those common denominators, the family histories are as diverse as Minnesota's landscape. The Bruce and Lynette Wellendorf family, Farm Family of the Year for Big Stone County, tends 2,800 acres of corn and soybeans on a farm that was established in 1912. The Schaper family, the winner from Hennepin County, operates Minnetonka Orchards, a 13-acre spread that has some 3,800 trees including about 825 Sweetango(r) trees—a new apple variety developed by the University of Minnesota.

And going back three years, Kay and Annette Fernholz were named the Farm Family of the Year for Lac Qui Parle County. Annette and Kay are biological sisters as well as members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and theirs is a growing ministry.

#### **Promoting health and carrying on traditions**

Because access to farmland has been a challenge, May Lee has rented land whenever the opportunity has presented itself. At the Minnesota Food Association, where she has farmed since 2007, she grows a variety of vegetables including tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, peas, and onions. The Lees are the first Hmong farmers to be certified organic in Minnesota.

May works with her daughter, Mhonpaj, and other children in their family of 10. In addition to their land at the Minnesota Food Association, May also grows traditional herbs at a greenhouse in Mahtomedi. She sells her products at area farmers' markets, through her Mhonpaj's CSA (community-supported agriculture), and through the Minnesota Food Association.

According to Mhonpaj, winning the Farm Family of the Year award for Ramsey County is nice, but the family's satisfaction comes from successfully running a farm operation each day and from serving their community.

"It's a way of life. This is how we grew up, and we didn't think our lifestyle should get recognition," she says. "Our recognition that we're still waiting for is to buy land. To buy land that has a house so that we can sustain our lifestyle."

It's a lifestyle that Mhonpaj, 25, became accustomed to while growing up and even throughout her college years at Gustavus Adolphus in St. Peter. She was a triple major in health education, health fitness, and political science, and also worked a number of jobs to get through school.

Even now, she finds time to work outside the farm. Mhonpaj is a medical

interpreter at Hennepin County Medical Center, acting as a cultural liaison between doctors and Hmong patients. She's also been approved as a Ramsey County master gardener. And she's well aware of the resources available to farmers and others through University of Minnesota Extension. "I stay very well connected to the University of Minnesota," she says.

Mhonpaj isn't the only one in her family who functions as a cultural liaison. May helps plan cooking shows each year that demonstrate how to prepare the traditional Hmong post-partum diet. And as part of the Mill City Museum's Hmong cultural celebration, May and family show others how to cook Hmong greens.

As Durgan points out, it's family farms like the Lees that help define the state. "We're very broad and very diverse," she says, "and I think that's what has helped to make Minnesota agriculture strong."

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