

## Report on GCFP April 2015 Trip to El Remate, Guatemala

Spring is the hottest and driest time of year in the Peten. During my two-week stay in El Remate, we saw not a drop of rain. With temperatures hovering around 100° F and no such thing as air conditioning, even my computer kept shutting down during the middle of the day. But my sisters in El Remate know how to adjust to the weather. We meet early in the day to work in the gardens and to discuss our plans for the future or late in the afternoon, when the sun is not quite as hot. One of the things this Gringo is learning is that not everything has to be done at a New York City kind of pace. After ten years and seventeen trips to El Remate, I'm learning how to walk sloooooowly when the sun is at its height.



Views of the Community Garden of El Grupo Feminino de Ix Canaan

There are now four women's groups in the village with a total of over 100 women, a big increase over the fifteen ladies we started out with in January of 2005. The original group, El Grupo Feminino de Ixcanaan is now a highly functional “negocio” utilizing their cooking skills to cater large and small groups of tourists and volunteers. While most of the women still keep a home garden, they share the responsibilities of a well-maintained community garden and orchard. Some of the crops in the community garden are dedicated to seed-saving and distribution among the members. Seeds from their home gardens are also generously shared.



First Meeting of the New Women's Group



Blanca Rosa Shares Cilantro Seeds



Maintaining the gardens during this intensely hot/dry weather is challenging. In teams of two, the women take turns watering the community garden every day. But in such hot weather, the soil dries out very quickly. A good layer of mulch helps to keep it moist and one of the women, Blanca Rosa, was having good success using sawdust. A local lumber yard generously agreed to let us take as much sawdust as we wanted; so we filled about thirty huge bags with the “aserrin” which we mixed with composted soil and spread on the gardens (Sawdust by itself can leach nitrogen from the soil). Within a couple of days the tomato plants were looking more lively.



The Sawdust Gathering Team



Tomato Plants Liked the Sawdust

Another ongoing challenge to the gardening effort is that of critters eating the crops (pigs, chickens, rabbits). Chicken wire fencing is the standard solution but the chicken wire deteriorates quickly, so replacing the fencing for the gardens has become one of the main areas of assistance from Global Coalition for Peace. It can mean the difference between an abundant crop and nothing at all for their efforts. With more than 100 home gardens and now, four community gardens, that's a lot of chicken wire. On our last visit in December we built a keyhole garden as a potential, partial solution to the animal problem. The keyhole garden is doing very well and has become a conversation piece in the community. The hope is that it will be duplicated in the home gardens so that less resources will have to go to chicken wire.

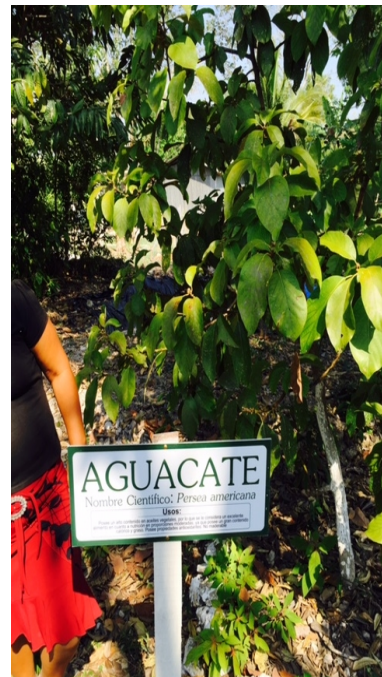


Gloria Shows Off the Keyhole Garden Which Has Already Yielded One Harvest



Even though we are reaching more and more women as time goes on, there are still many families in and around El Remate with whom we have not connected. On our previous trip to the village in December of last year, the desperate poverty of some of these families and the effect it has on the health of their children became evident during a well baby clinic that I assisted with, along with two visiting students from the University of North Carolina. The purpose of these clinics is to weigh and measure the babies and young children, chart their growth and development and screen them for evidence of any serious health problems. Reports of chronic diarrhea were common, along with obvious signs of under-nourishment.

It may be hard to understand why nutrition would be a problem in a region where healthy food grows naturally and abundantly (coconuts, bananas, papaya, avocado, and more) But not every family has access to those crops nor the money to buy fresh produce. Lack of education, along with the invasion of the area by cheap junk-food have also contributed to the nutrition problem. Thus we decided to initiate a nutrition education program, promoting the distribution and consumption of the natural wealth of the area. A local, native farmer with a beautiful “forest garden” that he has been developing over the past ten years has agreed to provide coconut tree seedlings to every family in need. So our first nutrition workshop consisted of information about the many benefits of the coconut water to keep the children (and the mothers) healthy and hydrated. (Sadly we have observed babies being given coca cola and watered-down coffee in their bottles to supplement their mother's milk). Because sugary coffee is one of the most common drinks in this hot climate, many of the women are also dehydrated and, of course, this affects their ability to produce milk for their babies.



Nature's Perfect Foods Grow in the Orchard Established by GCFP and Trees for Life in 2006

We had an excellent turnout for the first nutrition workshop and forty women signed up to receive coconut saplings in August, which will be a prime time for planting. This will not provide an instantaneous solution to their problem as the coconut trees take several years to mature but the workshop should, at the very least, make them aware of the need to change their dietary habits. We talked about the many benefits of this nectar from nature and concluded our meeting with a cup of coconut water for every woman and child present with the coconuts provided from the orchard.



We will be continuing the nutrition education program in August when we will focus on another wonderfully nutritious local plant called chaya. Chaya, or tree spinach, as it is often called, is a large, fast-growing leafy perennial shrub. Chaya is a good source of protein, vitamins, calcium and iron and is also a rich source of antioxidants. Chaya is generally cooked like spinach. It can also be made into a soup or a refreshing drink or sauteed and mixed with eggs or other foods. The leaves can be soaked in vinegar and water and eaten raw or dried and ground into a powder which can be added to other foods. There are so many ways this local treasure can be consumed. Chaya is a stimulant for circulation and lactation, and it is believed to improve vision, help lower cholesterol, prevent coughs, improve memory and combat diabetes, We will be offering chaya cuttings to all of the families and this nutritional resource will reap benefits very quickly.



Women and Children of All Ages Attended the Nutrition Workshop

On my last night in El Remate, with the ladies of El Grupo Feminino de Ix Canaan, we celebrated our ten year anniversary together. So our hard-working ladies would not have to do the cooking on this special occasion, we hired two women from outside the group. Adelaida brought an old CD player along with some recordings of native music and Nicolasa dressed up in a typical local dance costume. Before long there was music and dancing and, as always, lots of laughter. That's one of the things you've got to love about these wonderful women: whether they are working in the gardens under a blazing sun, filling bags with manure or sawdust, chopping at huge boulders to make a talapia pond, catering a meal for forty people or having a meal together – *there is always lots of laughter.*



Nicolasa Dances



Laughing it up with El Presidente, Gloria



Our Ten Year Anniversary Celebration