

# The Yangs achieve the American Dream

The son of a prosperous merchant, Huj Koob "Howard" Yang suffered culture shock when he immigrated to Garden Grove in 1980 and took menial jobs to support his family.

"In Laos, you work at your own pace and your hard work shows by how much food you have on your table," says 22-year-old Hong Yang, the third eldest of Yang's eight children. The younger Yang speaks for his father, who is not comfortable with English. "In America, you work by the hour, people are telling you what to do and you are not being paid a lot."

The Yangs are Hmong, an ethnic group that collaborated with the U.S. military against communism during the Vietnam War. When the United States withdrew, thousands of Hmong were placed in Thailand refugee camps and later settled in America.

Howard Yang read in a magazine of the San Joaquin Valley's agricultural riches. A farmer in his native Laos, he packed up the family and moved north.

"I remember that my parents were hardly home," says Hong Yang, who by then was struggling in English-as-a-second-language classes that were geared toward Spanish speakers. "They were always busy at the farm. We lived in a poor neighborhood. That was all we could afford."

Yang started farming the crops he knew best — Asian vegetables, cherry tomatoes and eggplant — barely turning a profit. Hong says his father enjoyed the freedom of being self-employed, but didn't like working long hours in the intense Valley heat.

In spite of initial hardships, Yang knew he could make a better life. "He's not afraid of hard work. My father is a very intelligent man," says Hong.

Turning to strawberry production was one stroke of genius. Although the job was still burdensome, the strawberry farm was profitable. Yang sold fruit on contract with a processor and ran a lucrative roadside stand. Eventually, the family moved to a suburban home in Clovis, a middle-class community known locally for its acclaimed schools. Three children are in college, including Hong, who is studying biology at California State University, Sacramento.

"My father is a good farmer. He takes pride in his farm," Hong says. "Even though he's not

educated, he knows a lot about plants, especially strawberries."

UC Small Farm Program farm advisor Richard Molinar agrees. He met Howard at a UC Cooperative Extension strawberry production meeting 4 years ago, where Howard immediately expressed interest in cooperating on research projects.

One of those trials, soil solarization in place of preplant fumigation, showed excellent promise on the Yang farm. The technique, in which clear plastic film covers the field for 4 weeks in the summer, raises soil temperatures to as much as 140 degrees Fahrenheit. The high temperature kills weed seeds, soil pathogens and nematodes. It is significantly cheaper than fumigation, environmentally benign and will be one of few alternatives left to farmers when methyl bromide is banned in 2005.

"We're anxious to see more strawberry growers adopting solarization," Molinar says. "Farmers are used to having a break in June and July. We're going to start pushing growers in June."

Developing improved farming practices is only half the battle for Molinar and his assistant, Laos native Michael Yang (no relation to Howard and Hong Yang). Convincing farmers to try something new takes effort. Molinar and Michael Yang produce newsletters, hold meetings and farm tours and broadcast a Hmong-language radio program twice a month. But it is the on-farm consultations, they say, that are most effective.

"It takes a fair amount of one-on-one to build a relationship and earn the farmer's trust, and then make sure new farming practices are done correctly," Molinar says. "Take solarization. The farmers have to do this themselves, unlike methyl

**College student Hong Yang is inspired by his immigrant father's hard work, which has built a successful strawberry farm in Fresno County.**



Jack Kelly Clark

bromide where they call in service. Solarization saves money, but mistakes can be very costly. To be successful, the plastic must be free of holes and carefully sealed along the edges. The soil must be moist and the plastic must be in place for a full 4 weeks."

Hong Yang says his father knows methyl bromide can harm the environment.

"With solarization, it reduces pollution," Hong says. "My father feels better knowing that he's helping."

In 1999, Yang's lease expired on his high-traffic Clovis farm, forcing a move to a more remote parcel east of Fresno. The frustrating loss of time meant a return to the \$1,400-per-acre treatment with methyl bromide, a procedure that takes only 3 days. But Molinar and Michael Yang are encouraged by Howard's willingness to experiment with the new procedure and hold hope the Yang farm has now seen its last methyl bromide fumigation. — J. Warnert

## Growing blueberries frustrates farmers, but opens doors



Jack Kelly Clark

Jennifer and Chuck Lenet are trying their hand at growing blueberries.

Chuck and Jennifer Lenet never expected blueberry farming to be so tough.

"It's been hard and frustrating for us," Jennifer Lenet says. "Blueberries are finicky plants. I'm not sure it's worth it."

But the very challenges of growing blueberries, says UC Small Farm Program farm advisor Mark Gaskell, may be the secret to the Lenets' eventual success.

"Somebody is already growing all the easy crops," Gaskell says. "Chili peppers, snow peas and summer squash are chronically in oversupply. But the blueberry market in September will suddenly switch to offshore fruit from New Zealand and the price at supermarkets will be \$3 to \$4 per half-pint. That's the market we're after."

In the late 1980s, the Lenets were running a successful Morro Bay landscaping business when they began a search for their dream farm.

"We wanted a change," Lenet says. "We wanted to live and work on the same property out in the country."

It took 5 years, but they found what they were looking for in an 80-acre parcel near Cayucos: excellent soil, a good water supply, southern exposure and a location close to the coast but outside the coastal fog zone.

They contemplated growing avocados, a common crop on California's Central Coast, but after consulting with Gaskell, decided to focus on blueberries.

Blueberries are native to the northeastern United States and have traditionally been grown in the acid soils of the eastern seaboard, and in Michigan, Washington and Oregon. Gaskell knew of the Southern highbush types, including Sharpblue, Georgia Gem, Cape Fear and Marimba, which have low chill needs.

"I suspected we could acidify the soil enough to grow them so it could be an excellent alternative crop for coastal California," Gaskell says.

Acidifying the soil is one thing that has vexed the Lenets. Blueberries prefer soil pH below 5. Since most California soils range from pH 6.5 to 7.5, Gaskell says frequent testing and applications of peat and sulfur are required to bring the soil pH down and keep it there. In addition, blueberries have superficial root systems and will not tolerate water stress or poorly drained soils. New plantings of blueberries must be kept from producing flowers or fruit for the first 3 years to allow the plants to develop an adequate plant structure. All these factors resulted in several years of high costs and hard work with no return for the Lenets.



Jack Kelly Clark