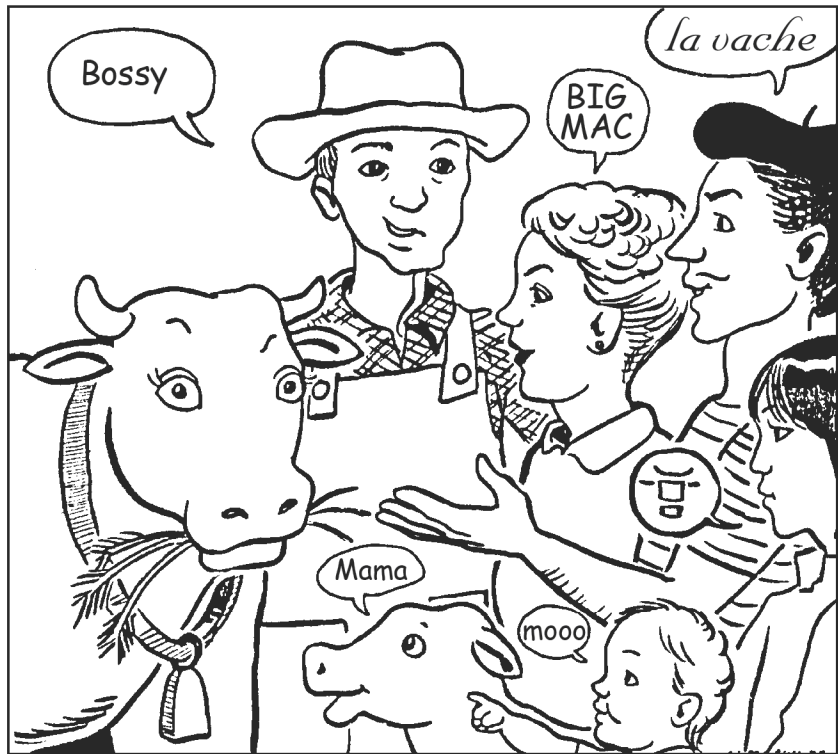


WHILE DIRECTING the Community Garden Coalition in Columbia, Missouri, I had the pleasure of working with refugees from Southeast Asia. The Cambodians spoke Kmer, the Vietnamese spoke Vietnamese and/or Chinese. All of these were originally as foreign to my ear as the black pepper-related *ghee* was to my mouth ("*ghee*" is Cambodian for "herb", specifically *Houttanya cordata*). I still have not learned these languages, but we can now communicate and I have grown to like *ghee* (although not as a popular Cambodian condiment to cooked hog lips – yet).



BREAKING THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

- **FIND THE KIDS.** Children have a remarkable capacity for learning language and they can serve as translators for their parents (although this does put them in a power-broker role which one needs to consider). Because the children's attention span may be shorter and their interest less than what you may want to communicate, work on becoming their friends. Gifts, such as fruit, toys, and popular American culture items can be big hits. Gifts to their parents, like garden produce, extra clothing, or whatever seems appropriate, creates good will for all involved.
- **ATTEMPT TO LEARN** at least a few of native words., beginning with greetings, polite phrases (please, thanks) and question words. I also suggest learning some of their plant names. It's fun, and will help gardeners realize that you are interested in plants and gardening.
- **PICTURES AND POINTING** at the object while speaking can also be helpful. Carry around packets of seeds or seed catalogues that have good pictures for this purpose. Also, gestures and gesticulations can humorously illustrate what you want, need, or have to offer.
- **KEEP SMILING.** I can't tell you how many times things have been said to me so quickly, or in words that I could hardly hear, let alone understand. My solution to these situations of total non-comprehension is to smile and be patient. Let someone else help by straightening out the communication process. As long as you try in a friendly context, someone will almost always try to help. The communication process does work both ways – keep trying, and keep smiling. 🌱

KELLY KINDSCHER • JCG Spring 1987

Bite your tongue

ALLISON BROWN • JCG Spring 1987

ANYONE WHO'S TRIED TO EXPLAIN to an Ohioan that mangoes are tropical fruits, not hot peppers, or tried to arrange a mid-day meal with an American Southerner, understands that language barriers exist even within the United States. Working across international language barriers can be positively frightening.

A weird friend of mine, who reads grammar books for fun, says, "forget childhood – the only time humans are truly innocent is when learning a new language. Even gardening, a topic very conducive to teaching by doing, can be amazingly difficult in a cross-language, cross-cultural situation. Some painfully recent examples:

Thai, as a tonal language like Chinese, has an array of pronunciation pitfalls to trap the extension agent.

The Thai words for "egg", "camp" and "fever" all sound identical, except for their different tone. One Peace Corps volunteer whose pronunciation is terrible always said, "I am an egg" when he got sick. I was careful to say that my body was hot, (fortunately we weren't speaking French.)

Favorite Peace Corps Thailand tongue twisters:

My my my my chai my? ("New silk doesn't burn, does it?")

Suir suir suir la suir. ("Buy a tiger, shirt, and mat.")

Now you try it.

Then there are the non-cognates – words that sound like words we know, but aren't. The first ones you learn are sexual, always good for a laugh outside of polite company.

In Thai, a *fuk* is a squash, a *prik* is a chili, and the pestle used to pound curry paste is called *my dee prik* (and looks like one, too).

Alas, this phenomenon works in either direction, so suddenly you have another way to embarrass yourself. The first lesson English teachers learn is not to say "Qui-et!" to an unruly

class. It means to have carnal relations with a water buffalo and does nothing for class discipline. (For those who collect these things, "mama" is equally rude in Thai. So is "chicken" in Nepali – *always* say "hen.")

Other communication problems arise when simple words are used in complex ways that no one tells about you until after you are totally confused.

In Thai, the word "food" really means "rice" and everything (except noodles and snacks) are referred to as "that-which-is-eaten-with-rice."



“Meat” is “beef” unless noted otherwise. The general word for “vegetable”, strictly speaking, only refers to leafy vegetables. Cucurbits, roots, and legumes each have a different collective noun. While it usually works to say “vegetable”, it helps to say “many kinds” every once in a while, just to be sure. Better yet, list them all, every time, in every sentence. The farmers get bored but they know which edible plants you mean.

WHEN BROWN RICE IS RED

Even adjectives can be a problem. Brown rice is “red”; sweet peppers are chili varieties that aren’t fiery hot. Carrots taste “hot”, not sweet, and are also “red”. Any legume that has been introduced in the recent past is a “visitor bean”, Spinach, a hard to raise cool season crop, may actually be vegetable amaranth, easy to grow all year. “Orange” means “sour” and “orange juice” is also vinegar. Unless otherwise specified, any dark color is black, and blues are green. “Unripe” can also mean “uncooked” which makes exchanging recipes interesting. Acid soil is salty, but so is salty soil and, for all I know, alkali soil is too.

All the above result from inadequate language skills that, in theory at least, will improve with practice.

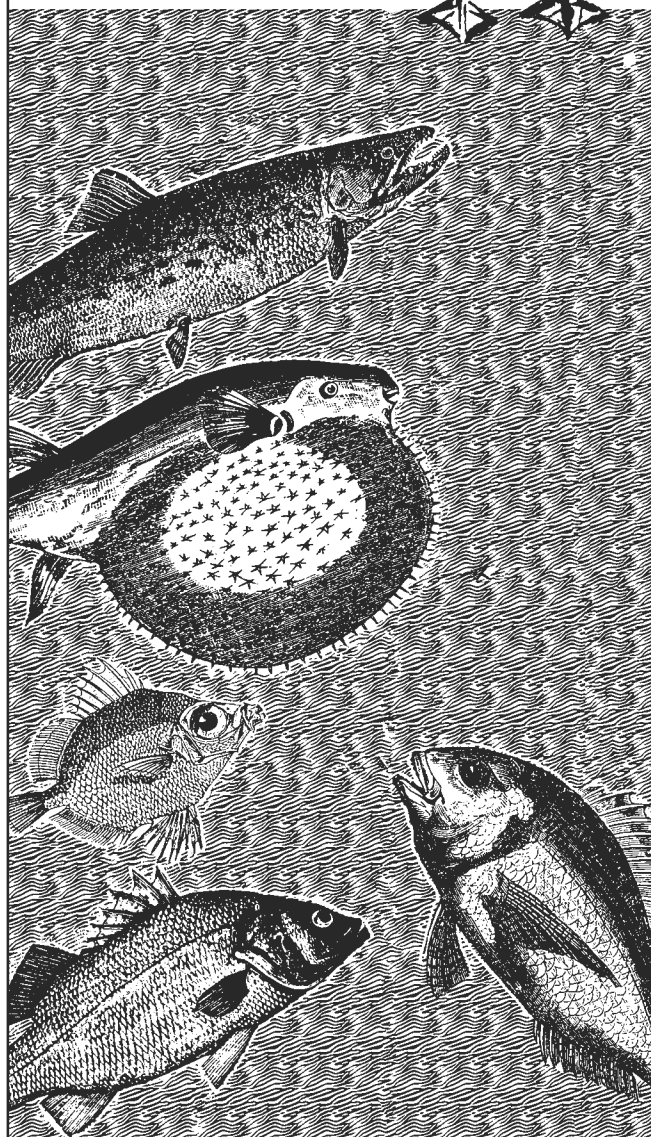
Peace Corps trainers (if not volunteers) place lots of faith in “checking for understanding”, which is the skill of asking the same question fifteen different ways until everyone is totally confused. (There are several other basic skills such as “cultural sensitivity”, “observation”, and “convulsing host country nationals with laughter”, all part of Peace Corps training.)

Don’t think though that once your gardeners learn English your troubles are over. Language skills are only a small part of the problem. The most difficult confusions arise from differing perceptions of the same thing. (Is a carrot really red, or orange, or what? Are “white folks” really white?)

A friend in Taiwan reports my favorite example of an irreconcilable worldview, cross-cultural agricultural extension story. A very successful truck farmer complained that his tomato crop wasn’t doing well. His explanation? “Tomatoes are afraid of fog.” 🍅

HOW TO SWIM WORKSHOP

1. Paddling
2. Feather care
3. Quacking



Southeast Asian gardeners: Teaching fish to swim

ALLISON BROWN • JCG Spring 1987

TEACHING HOME GARDENING to villagers in northeast Thailand is remarkably similar to teaching gardening in any North American community garden, beginning with the folk wisdom that holds that all Asians are wonderfully skilled vegetable gardeners. Gardening components of international development programs in Thailand are seen in the same light as teaching a fish to swim.

Thailand's Northeast is a fertile plain to the west of the Mekong River. Twenty years ago it was heavily forested; tigers and elephants roamed the area. Today the area has been "developed" by clearing the land for farming. Consumer goods, including seeds, move quickly on an extensive network of roads, many paid for by US aid money. Although village economy has moved away from subsistence, many of life's rhythms remain the same as they have for centuries.

Gardening in the tropics sounds easy. It may get hot for a few months, and the rainy season is hard on vegetables – *but there are 365 frost-free days!* Western development workers are, therefore, often shocked to find that most Thai villagers plant gardens only during the cool season, November to February. Plus, Thai traditional gardening techniques aren't especially intensive.

Given culture and climate in Thailand, this makes perfect sense. Rice is the primary crop and food in Thailand, whenever possible eaten with meat. Before modern nutrition education, vegetables were thought to add flavor and color more than anything else.

All year may be frost-free, but Thailand has three distinct seasons – the cool, the rainy and the hot. Only the cool season has, in the past, been the time to plant vegetables of Chinese (temperate) origin. In the rainy season, wild foods are abundant, and farmers often live in the fields where they work on the rice crop. Because it rains so much, garden vegetables rot quickly and are eaten by insects. During the hot season, it is too hot for

many traditional varieties, and in many areas, the water level may drop ten meters, forcing families to carry water a kilometer or more, making gardening impractical.

As for technique, Thais tend to ignore most of western gardening's cosmic truths. They overhead water every day because "it's natural, like rain." Damping off is caused by "bad seed." Mulch is "ugly", as are interplanted or closely planted crops – rural families seldom need to conserve space when they do garden. The proper way to harvest leafy vegetables is to cut them off at ground level. Of course, if a little pesticide works, more works better.

Beyond teaching improved techniques is the larger issue of motivating people to garden at all. Thai villagers resist efforts to promote home gardening for many of the same valid reasons people in North America resist starting gardens. Thai villagers are striving to be wealthy enough to buy their own food. Farming is a low status occupation, and people don't want to be reminded of their humble origins. Village women, who do the bulk of the gardening, enjoy socializing in the market and would prefer to go shopping more often rather than less. "We grow vegetables well enough already" is the usual attitude.

In spite of such constraints, promoting home gardening has undeniable benefits. Gardens, coupled with nutrition education programs, improve family diets. Growing food at home allows scarce cash resources to go farther. Successful market gardens are good money-makers. Intensive gardening techniques save labor, water and soil fertility.

A successful extension program is based in part on technology transfer – technical solutions for technical questions. More important, a successful extension program depends on understanding the attitudes, motivations and sources of resistance in the audience, and developing communication techniques which get the message across. This process is the same regardless of whether you work in Thailand or Togo, or in Cleveland, Toronto or Philadelphia. 🍷