

Site visit to An Giang: Seeing a Medicinal Plant Garden and its Accompanying Plant-Drying System



"Doing philanthropic work doesn't have a salary; all we need is to be invited for a meal at someone's house when they hold special celebrations."

We all had a good laugh when the volunteers at the My Thanh traditional medicine clinic candidly told us about what motivated them to spend their time there. On January 25, 2017, the LIN Center for Community Development organized a site visit to two projects: "An Giang Medicinal Plant Garden" and "A System to Dry Medicinal Plants" in My Thanh, Long Xuyen, An Giang. The LIN staff team was joined by 9 other members of the community on this site visit.

Plant-based medicine is the oldest type of medicine in the world. These "everyday pharmaceutical products" are incredibly simple, yet extremely effective and safe, proven by their widespread use throughout Vietnam and Asia's history. The simplicity of these medicinal plants has resulted growing support from a community of individuals who want to find alternative methods that allow them to take charge of their own health.

Because of this, the projects aim to access the value that is hidden in the medicinal plants and give the community the opportunity to benefit from the plants as well. This is a community-friendly project because it expands people's knowledge of plant-based medicine, while simultaneously promoting long-term health. The project also helps individuals reconnect

with nature because over time, people's relationship with nature has been eroded in the face of newer technology and commercial pharmaceuticals.

The medicinal garden is a place that provides alternative solutions and a way to be self-reliant through mother nature. The diverse activities of the garden and its focus on sustainability aims to help bridge the gap between urban and rural areas, leading to more collaboration and unity in the future.

With a grant of 27,972,000 VND (90% of the total budget) for the "Medicinal Plant Garden" project and 50,000,000 VND (67% of the total budget) for the project "System for Drying Medicinal Plants" from the Narrow the Gap Fund in 2016, the team in charge of the "Medicinal Plant Garden" has collaborated with the My Thanh traditional medicine clinic and people in Long Xuyen, An Giang to implement these two projects.



Picture 1: Group that went to visit the plant-medicine garden

Currently, the project "An Giang Plant-Medicine Garden" has finished planting the model gardens, and building the planting areas as well as the irrigation system to support the planting, tending, and harvesting of most common medicinal plants.

The process of growing clean medicinal plants is an issue that all of the site visit attendees were interested in learning more about. According to the project team, intercropping plants is a way to minimize the potential for diseases spreading between them, so the planting process does not require the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides. To ensure that the plant medicine is clean, organic fertilizers containing a small amount of nitrogen and NPK are added only once in the plants' early growth stage to help the plants stabilize and develop normally. The technical issues the group faced while building the garden are related to agronomy, and the project's volunteer group consulted with experts in agronomy from Can Tho University.



Picture 2: A model garden

On a plot of land about 3000 square meters, donated by the local people, a total of 100 medicinal plants have been and will be planted (75 have been planted). The most ubiquitous plants include the Green Chiretta Kariyat, Pervenche de Madagascar, Little Ironweed, Rough Cocklebur, Bastard Poon Tree, Licorice Root. Currently, the garden has already provided 2000 kilograms of medicinal plants to the My Thanh traditional medicine clinic.

The "medicinal drying system" has now completed the installation of a railway system, 10 frames drying medicines and a shelf of medicine preservation that meet the standards of Vietnam's Ministry of Health. According to the project team, before the drying system was developed, the plants were dried directly on the concrete surface, which raised safety and

hygiene concerns. With the advent of the new drying system, those concerns have been alleviated.



Picture 3: The Medicinal Plant Drying System

The drying system significantly improves the quality and quantity of herbal pills produced in the pharmacy, and better serves local people and people in other areas. Currently, the project team works to continuously monitor feedback on the medicine's quality after the project.



Picture 4 – Medicine manufacturing workshop using homemade machines



Picture 5: Mr. Đạt, the person who invented the machines to produce the medicine

When visiting the medicine production facility, the site visit participants had the opportunity to learn more about how medicinal tablets are produced. More than 20 local people are involved in medicine production at the My Thanh Clinic. These individuals volunteer their time, skills and labor for all year round.

After the site visit, Ms Nguyen Thi Cam Tien, Sustainability team - Product Department of EXO Travel Ho Chi Minh City, said: "Both projects did a great job of fulfilling the needs of the

local community. The implementation of the project demonstrates the serious commitment of people in the community. Not only did these individuals donate supplies and their time, but they also directly monitored the project. In terms of the medicinal plants, the planting process needs to have a more specific plan about planting times, the specific plant variety, and how to apportion and distribute the plants. For the medicinal plant drying system, further research can be done to prevent dust from getting onto the plants during the drying process. Despite these concerns, the positive immediate impacts of the project are clear, and it is evident that this project has great potential to be replicated in other locations.”

In terms of agronomics techniques, La Pham Lan, who has many years of experience in plant protection, said: "At present, the medicinal garden is limited in terms of the distribution of the plants. To ensure sufficient living space, there should be greater distance between medicinal plants. Additionally, the classification of medicinal plants needs to be more scientific." For the medication production process, Hong To Hue Lan, chairman of the CEPORER Hoc Mon (an orphan and street children parenting center), proposed investing to build a sterile medicine production room that would ensure the safety, hygiene, and quality of the herbal medicines which will be distributed to the locals.



Hình 6 : : Free herbal medicines for local people



Picture 7 – The site visit participants with the project implementation group and the staff at the My Thanh Traditional Medicine Clinic

We'd like to sum up this article in the words of Phillippe Landry, a long-time journalist who joined us on the site visit:

"The medicinal garden restores the importance of the natural and agricultural space. It also helps us see the thread of nature that connects the past and the present, and the alternative practices used to protect our water sources, land, health, education, and collective action. The project promotes exchanges and cooperation among individuals sharing common values and goals. I had the opportunity to explore different plant species in their local habitat and witness the plant-based medicinal methods firsthand. I also had the opportunity to have lunch with local people...During this lunch, we shared about important principles of growing plants and the benefits that they have on human health. We understand that these silent organisms are essential to our existence and survival. The trip was an opportunity to explore the diversity of the wild plants, and see the weeds that line our fences differently than we used to."