

**Her family fled Laos carrying seeds and plants. A new Hmong garden at the arboretum features these healing herbs.**

Rachel Hutton

6–7 minutes

---

Planted by a Minnesota nurse, the medicinal plants used in traditional remedies are being conserved, studied and shared.

The Minnesota Star Tribune

September 23, 2024 at 8:15AM



Zongxee Lee holds red malabar spinach, a culturally significant plant, at the new Hmong garden she designed for the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum in Chanhassen, Minn. (Richard Tsong-Taatariii)

Lee, who comes from a family of herbalists and shamans, was just a baby when her parents fled Laos after the Vietnam War. They carried only what was most precious: Lee and her toddler sister, along with a bundle of cuttings from healing plants, and seeds sewed into their clothing.

That history is on display at the new garden she designed at the [Minnesota Landscape Arboretum](#), as part of a two-year exhibit. Giving a tour, Lee pointed to a sign depicting her family

crossing the Mekong River on a bamboo raft and noted how it didn't capture the journey's most harrowing aspects.

Lee was one of many Hmong children, she said, whose parents drugged them with opium to stay quiet during the furtive crossing.

"If a soldier heard us, they would kill the entire group," she explained. "I almost died." When recounting the trip, Lee's parents told her how border patrol staff had beaten them and damaged their bundle of medicinal herbs. How Lee had vomited parasites. And how, when the family finally made it to Thailand, Lee was so hungry she ate sand.

"Just trying to envision all that, it's pretty traumatizing," Lee said.

After settling in Minnesota, Lee's family maintained their traditional healing practices by learning to grow Hmong plants in our colder climate. Lee's mother, May, and sister Mhonpaj started [Mhonpaj Garden](#), the state's first Hmong-owned certified organic farm, which sells vegetables and medicinal herbs.

Lee took a different route, as a registered nurse focused on preserving Hmong holistic remedies. She hopes the new botanical garden — which was funded and planted by the arboretum for research, conservation and education — can help identify and preserve plants like those her parents brought from Laos.

The garden is especially significant because of the Hmong community's strong cultural ties to plants, and skill with growing and using them, said Annie Klodd, the arboretum's manager of interpretation and visitor learning.

"The type of expertise that this community holds has things that are unique from the type of plant knowledge that botanists in the United States have," she said, citing the medicinal uses of plants as an example. "They're able to think about and communicate about these plants in a different way, and that really adds something to our understanding of them."

Read online: <https://www.startribune.com/her-family-fled-laos-carrying-seeds-and-plants-a-new-hmong-garden-at-the-arboretum-features-the-same-kind-of-healing-herbs/601150092>



Lee demonstrates how to fold a canna lily leaf for use in Hmong cooking. (Richard Tsong-Taatariii)

### **Healing garden**

Lee designed the Hmong garden in the form of a circle, to represent the shape of a seed. She decorated a central arched trellis with pompom ornaments used in traditional Hmong clothing and a Hmong decorative symbol that evokes flowers, mountain ranges and snail shells. She chose climbing red Malabar spinach to wind around the wooden structure. The plant's crimson veins, Lee said, reflect the heart of the Hmong community pulsing through its new American home.

### **Related Coverage**

The garden features plants Hmong people use for cooking and medicine, along with a few ornamentals. Some are supermarket staples, including cilantro, eggplant and Thai chilies. Other plants are rarely grown in Minnesota, such as the small papaya tree, which will be dug up and brought indoors for the winter.

Bees buzzed around the bright-red blossoms of tall canna lilies, as Lee explained how Hmong people use the plant's broad leaves to wrap steamed meat and fish. She shared how red corn is hung over doorways for protection: "To shun away bad spirits, bad people, bad vibes."

Among the amaranth, mustard greens and bitter melon, Lee pointed out herbs used as blood thinners, to heal ulcers or treat upset stomach, fevers and coughs. Some plants, she noted, are chopped into paste and applied as a patch for bruises and muscle strains.

Among the best-known Hmong medicinal plants are the herbs used to make a Hmong chicken soup eaten by postpartum women, to help their bodies recover from birth. “The mom will eat it for 30 days straight, for every meal,” Lee said.



Lee stands in the center of the garden, next to a carving of a Hmong motif and pom-poms used to adorn traditional clothing. (Richard Tsong-Taatariii)

### **Holistic health**

Lee’s interest in documenting Hmong plants came from farmers-market customers who asked her mother and sister about what, exactly, their medicinal herbs were, and reassurance they were safe to eat. Some culturally significant plants have Hmong names or English names, Lee explained, but haven’t been linked to established scientific classifications. Lee tried to learn more with plant-identifying apps, but found they weren’t always accurate.

So, she began working with University of Minnesota researchers to sequence the DNA of several Hmong herbs to determine their scientific classification, or taxonomy. “They all have been discovered and cataloged in the past, but never identified as Hmong plants,” Lee explained. “I’m connecting the dots.” She’s also writing a book to share her findings that’s slated to publish next year.

Lee cultivates a few acres in Hudson, Wis., [growing Hmong holistic plants and hosting photoshoots in her flower fields](#) at her Zooxis Conservatory & Botanical Garden. She dreams of creating a large, permanent Hmong conservatory and botanical garden to preserve important plants and educate

others about them. And, more broadly, to remind a society that has become so divorced from nature how much of our nutrition and medicine is owed to plants.

“I would love people to remember the roots,” she said. “If we don’t plant it, who will?”



Lee holds two plants grown in the Hmong garden: bitter melon and fat red medicine. (Richard Tsong-Taatariii)