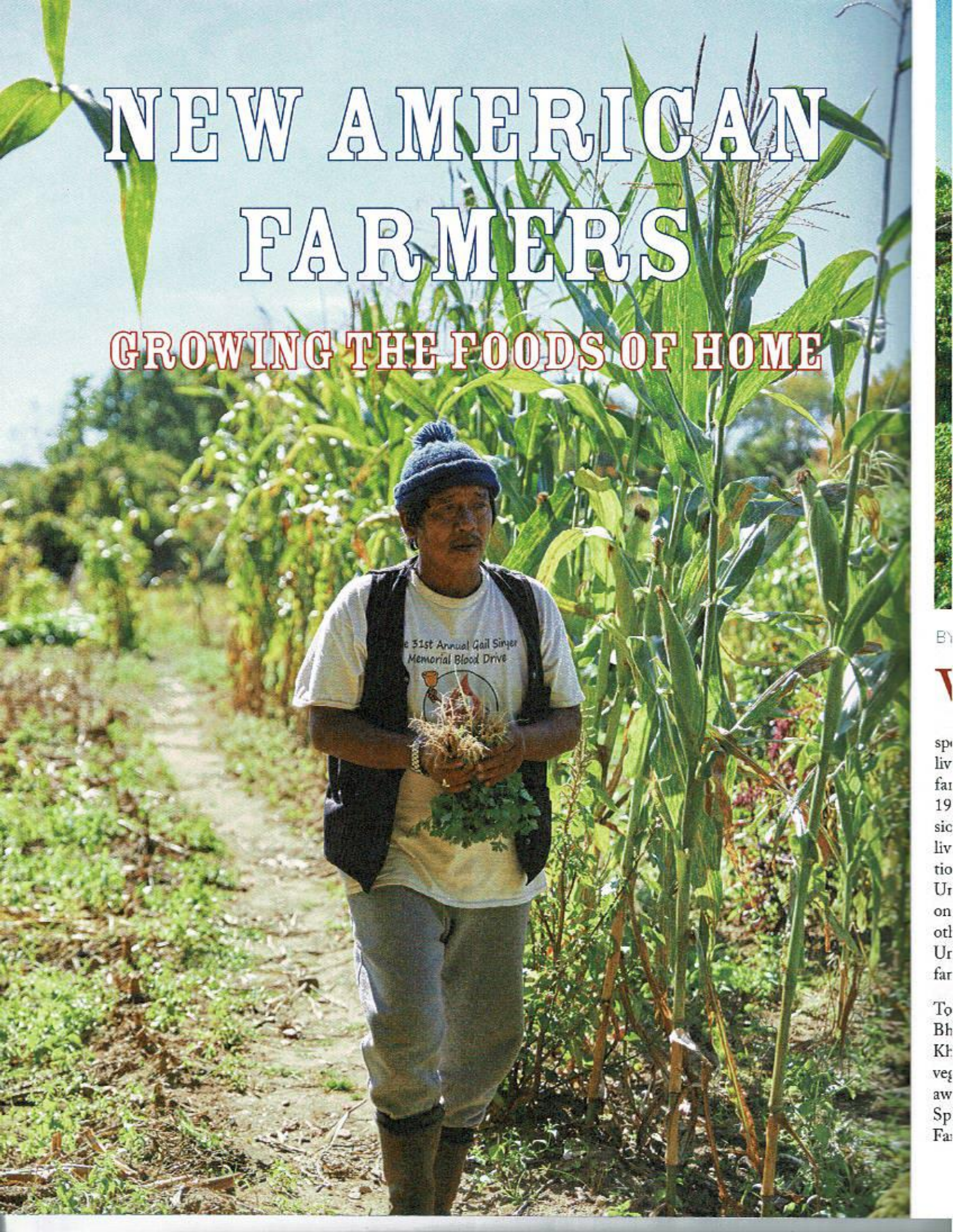


NEW AMERICAN FARMERS

GROWING THE FOODS OF HOME



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BY LAURA SAYRE, PHOTOS BY DOMINIC PERRI

When Krishna Kharel came to the United States in 2009, he was 27 years old and had spent most of the previous two decades living in a refugee camp in Nepal. His family fled neighboring Bhutan in 1990, after a civil war led to the expulsion of Hindu peoples who had been living in Bhutan for several generations. Eventually, with the help of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, Kharel and thousands of other Bhutanese were resettled in the United States, including a few hundred families in West Springfield.

Today, together with about 20 other Bhutanese families and individuals, Kharel is growing traditional Nepalese vegetables on a 20-acre field tucked away in a residential area of West Springfield. Known as New Lands Farm, the project was begun in 2012

under the auspices of Lutheran Social Services (now known as Ascentria), a nonprofit agency that provides support to refugees and other vulnerable populations throughout New England. Although Ascentria discontinued its farm incubator programs in 2016, the project has continued as a farmer-led initiative called the Bhutanese Vegetable Farmers of West Springfield, with technical support provided by a new nonprofit called All Farmers.

In its current form, the Bhutanese Vegetable Farmers of West Springfield is part community garden, part commercial farming operation via an on-site farmstand. The field is divided into plots of about 1/6 of an acre, with each plot assigned to an individual or a family. The landowner disks with a tractor once or twice a year, but otherwise all the work is done by hand

by the farmers. Although most of the farmers have other jobs, the gardens are immaculately cared for. The plots are densely planted and diverse; many feature elaborate trellises built out of branches trimmed from the surrounding woods, providing support for the beans and cucurbits and partial shade for greens underneath.

The farm has also become a gathering place where people can meet and talk and enjoy being outdoors. "It's healthy," says Kharel, who works as a volunteer in the Bhutanese community in addition to gardening at the site and working as an emergency technician at Bay State Medical Center, "especially for the elderly people, or those who are sick or who are depressed. When they come to the garden, they are able to talk."

On the day I visited in late September, a couple of dozen people were at the farm—young and old, men and women, farmers and customers. “When I meet someone, I tell them about our farm and how we grow vegetables,” says Lakpa Tamang, one of the commercial growers, speaking through a translator. “[Then] they tell someone they know, and that’s how we find our customers.”

Demand is strong, he says, because their vegetables are fresh, high quality, and many are not readily available in standard supermarkets. They grow corn, potatoes, onions, mustard greens (rayo ko saag), several kinds of beans (including yard-long bean, lamu bodi), several kinds of cucurbits (bitter melon or karela; tukugre; luffa gourd; lauka or bottle gourd), many different kinds of hot peppers (khursani), aromatic herbs, and other vegetables. Customers come from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont—even as far as Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Typical Nepalese/Bhutanese cooking centers around vegetables with a little meat sautéed with a spicy sauce and served over rice or corn (prepared like grits or polenta). Many of the crops here are dried or frozen and stored for the winter, so farmers’ families and customers can eat from the gardens all year long.

Another farmer, Ram Gurung, who used to work for the Nepali Department of Agriculture, emphasizes how different the New England climate is from the climate in Nepal, where they could farm year-round. The soils require more compost here, he says, and some of the pests are different. They have had to adjust.

There are other challenges, too. Like farmers everywhere, the Bhutanese farmers have a wish list of improvements they would like to make: a more reliable irrigation setup; a greenhouse to extend their growing season; a secure storage area; fencing to keep out the

deer and other animals. Mostly, though, they would like to know that they can keep farming here indefinitely, and/or find additional sites to make garden plots available to more individuals. “There are more people who would like to grow vegetables,” says Kharel.

Although the current landowner is happy to have them and has been making the land available, the farmers are worried that something could happen to make them lose access to the site. Hannah Spare, executive director of All Farmers, has been focused on working with the community to figure out a more permanent land tenure arrangement.

The Bhutanese immigrants resettled in West Springfield didn’t necessarily know each other before they arrived, but they have formed a tight community here, and the farm is clearly a part of that.

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