

garden

Seeds of hope

Food from around the world is finding its way onto a network of North East allotments thanks to a revolutionary project helping refugees in our region as Pauline Holt discovers.

It's a languid sunny summer's day and Brigitte is watering her thriving vegetable plot on an allotment in Newcastle's West End.

She knows all too well the importance of keeping her seedlings hydrated, for Brigitte hails from Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) just four degrees south of the equator.

Barometer needles in this central African country regularly hover around 90 degrees. And in the dry season between June and September growers have to keep a weather eye on irrigation.

Here in the rainy North East, missing a few days' watering is less of a problem and Brigitte can cultivate a much wider variety of vegetables than she could ever have hoped to coax out of equatorial soil.

Tyneside has been home to Brigitte for the past five years since she and her husband, a political prisoner, fled the DRC to escape persecution.

Each week now she comes to these city allotments run by the Comfrey Project, a safe place for refugees and asylum seekers to grow the seeds of friendship alongside their potatoes and parsley and sometimes more exotic vegetables which remind them of distant shores.

At this time of year the comfrey herb is in full bloom, proudly showing off its pretty bell-like pink flowers. The project's

founder, Mandy Jetter, chose it for her emblem because of the herb's healing properties.

"Comfrey is a healing plant," she says.

"Traditionally it's known as knitbone and bruisewort. It's also a plant that feeds other plants."

Mandy first had the germ of an idea 14 years ago after hearing a radio programme about a London allotment scheme administered by the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture.

She was at home with a small baby at the time but had previously been an 'enabler' on horticultural projects for people with learning disabilities and knew she could grow something similar in the North East.

This was before the Government's policy of

'dispersing' asylum seekers around the country and there were very few in the North East.

Almost a decade later since its launch and the Comfrey Project is now a hardy perennial with one allotment in the West End of Newcastle, one in the East End and another in Gateshead. They each operate one day a week and users can come and go as they please.

They may stay all day, or for just an hour or two.

On the day we visit, there's an interesting international mix of people. As well as Brigitte from the Congo and her friend Lucicca, there's a married Iranian couple in their sixties, the elder statesmen of the allotment, Behrooz and Farough and a Palestinian woman, Najat. Bosnian project worker, Sanja Ratkusic, who



Seeds of hope: left to right, Brigitte, who fled Congo, Iranian Behrooz and fellow allotmenteer, Lucicca who holds a bunch of the prized leafy vegetable amaranth, one of the Comfrey project's best crops.

emigrated to the UK herself from war-torn former Yugoslavia, finds it easy to empathise with the people who come to the allotments.

"I've always been a gardener. I lived in Mostar with my mum and dad and we had a nice big garden and there was always this thing about who was going to grow what. Mum wanted vegetables and dad was mad about flowers. "She would move his flowers, then he would move them back. I came from a region where you could grow kiwi fruit and grapes, apricots and figs.

"I've had a go at most of the stuff but I have to grow things like figs indoors."

Sanja's fellow allotmenters are also keen to grow reminders of 'home'. There's a kerfuffle on our visit for example as Lucicca clocks that Brigitte has an armful of amaranth and she's desperate to grow some herself.

Related to our own 'love lies bleeding' bedding plant, in many parts of the world, including the Congo, it is used as a leaf vegetable and has been hailed as 'the crop of the future' because it contains 30 per cent higher protein values than other cereals such as rice and wheat flour. Brigitte cooks it like spinach. The Congolese women have also grown calabash, the bottle gourd, which in Africa are often hollowed out and used for carrying water but can be eaten like a pumpkin.

For Brigitte, coming to the Comfrey Project has given her the gardening bug. "When I come here I remember my house in Congo and its garden. When I was there I wasn't interested in growing things but now I am amazed what I can grow. It brings back nice memories."

In winter the project downs tools but each week different nationalities take turns to cook a dinner typical of their country and the project users continue to meet and share food.

Says Sanja: "We've had some very memorable and delicious meals. Brigitte is a very good cook. She made Liboke Mbike, which is parcels of chicken while Najat makes wonderful falafel and kebabs and we had Iranian dolma which is a real art.

"They hollow out vegetables like peppers, tomatoes, onions and courgettes and stuff them with mince, rice, and chicken. It's visually stunning. What interests me is how similar food



Fulfilling groundwork: **William Mortada takes time out with Najat and Bosnian project worker Sanja Ratkusic. They find peace and friendship among the seeds and soil as well as sharing delicious meals.**

is from all over the world yet there are little twists and different flavours. For instance a Kurdish man made us a wonderful Biryani which you associate with India, yet it was very similar." It is clear that the Comfrey project is a healing experience for many people who could otherwise feel dispossessed. One of the Comfrey Project's early users, a woman who had had to leave her family behind when she came to England, referred to the seedlings in the greenhouse as her children. People are referred by GPs, English language teachers, existing users and others. The project costs around £80,000 a year to run but the Northern Rock Foundation has just given £90,000 for the next three years and the Henry Smith charity and the Tudor Trust are

also among a number of generous donors. Despite the beauty of the allotments project manager Jayne Butler wishes there wasn't a need for them. She says: "These sort of spaces are only needed because the users are so unwelcome in other places. They get on the bus and people scowl, they open a newspaper and it's full of nasty headlines, the bus drives past them. It's great the project exists but it's sad it has to."

Sanja adds: "The idea is it's a relaxed place for people who are going through or have been through a traumatic time. Here they can come, have their own plot, have a cup of tea, meet people of all nationalities and improve their English,"

"Quite a lot will have mental health issues >>

Najat's lamb shefta recipe

Ingredients (Serves 4)

450g/1lb minced lamb
1 tablespoon oil
1 onion
55g/2oz fresh parsley leaves (washed and chopped) juice of half lemon; 4 cloves garlic (crushed) 1 handful of chopped mint
1 ½ tsp coriander powder
1 tsp cumin powder
½ tsp black peppercorns (crushed)
½ tsp turmeric powder
½ tsp garam masala
2 tsp grated ginger
1 small uncooked potato
1 tomato

Method

Put two tsp of lemon juice in the mince and leave aside to tenderise the meat. Put all the ingredients into a food processor and blend. With wet hands skewer the meat into long sausage shapes. Rotate the meat around the skewer, pressing gently all round. Brush with a little oil and grill under a medium heat or barbecue until cooked well right through. Serve with hot pitta bread.

and gardening can improve people's outlook by making social networks, becoming integrated and the therapy that comes from watching something grow."

"We don't press people for information about their backgrounds."

"We have had a few people who have told us things that are quite difficult but it's as you like and when you like. Some people trust us to reveal things. Just the whole process of leaving their country is difficult but some people have had terrible things happen to them."

William Mortada, who works with VONNE (Voluntary Organisations Network North East) gains an enormous amount from volunteering with the project.

"I've met some really lovely people and I've made good friends. It's the highlight of my



Friends over food: The allotment is a focal point for the refugees who can meet and enjoy gardening together, make friends and join together for meals using their produce in recipes from their homelands.

week," he smiles. Palestinian gardener, Najat, who is expecting her first baby in September is busily sowing carrot and beetroot seeds. She loves cooking and her lamb recipes is one you can try for yourself (on previous page).

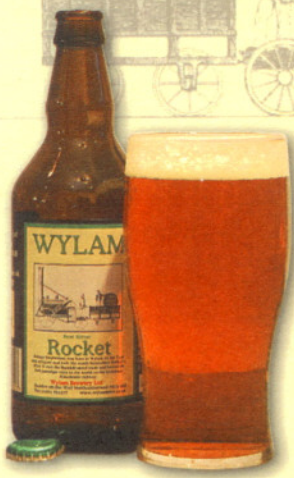
She says: "If you sit at home it's boring. Here you come and you enjoy your time. I make many friends here. I am happy."

fa For more information about the Comfrey Project log on to www.thecomfreyproject.org

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