

GARDENS OF THE MEKONG

As an avid vegetable seed collector, spending five weeks in Indo China in January was, for me, a dream come true. And it was a stretch of the Mekong River as it meandered through Laos that was to reveal the horticultural surprise of my life.



The longest river in Asia, the Mekong starts its 4,200 kilometre journey to the South China Sea in the highlands of Tibet. I joined it after the river had already journeyed some 2,500 kilometres to a point just south of the Golden Triangle, the place where Burma, Thailand and Laos meet. Here the river runs unhurriedly yet purposefully and in January is already some 5 metres lower than its height at the peak of the rainy season in November. The entry point into Laos is at Houay Xai – no more than a village across the river from the small town of Chiang Kong. A 200 metre trip in a long-tail boat across the muddy, swirling waters brought me to a concrete slipway and Laos customs. That afternoon was as pleasantly warm as a summer's day in England; the evening chill begged a sweater to be worn, no more. I watched my first Laotian sunset from a monastery perched on a hill above the river, the balmy air mellifluous with the sound of chanting monks, blissfully unaware of the surprises awaiting me along the river bank.



Our journey south was to take us along two great stretches of the Mekong, the first a two-day boat ride 150 kilometres south to the world heritage town Luang Prabang; the second south of Pakse amongst 4,000 islands to the border with Cambodia. En-route we were to visit a number of villages and settlements.

The climate in this part of the world is perfect for growing just about anything. Laotians have taken the art of cultivating raised beds to literally, great heights. Everyone it seems, keeps chickens, ducks and black pot-bellied pigs. None of these animals are corralled, but happily peck, scratch and snuffle through the villages and around the houses, all of which are built on

stilts to keep from being flooded in the rainy season. Having that lot loose in your vegetable patch is any gardener's worst nightmare because, as we know hens will gladly scratch up a seed bed, ducks will shovel their way through a row of greens hunting for slugs and pigs... well, need I say more. So, in order to protect cash crops, especially spring onions, lettuce and dill, all of which grow at a furious pace in the perfect climate, every household has at least one raised bed. Two or three feet wide and up to six feet long, made from slats of wood, about six inches deep, these magnificent structures are supported on posts six feet off the ground. A ladder is needed to get at the crop and defies even the most determined fowl from robbing the grower.



Every year as the snows of the Himalayas melt and pour off the Tibetan plateau through the precipitous gorges in the north, the Mekong does something truly miraculous. As the waters of the swollen river rush to the sea scraping and gouging at its banks the river sweeps away the deposits of alluvial soil that were left behind during the previous year in its bends and shallows. Then, as the rainy season comes to an end and the waters gently recede the Mekong leaves behind its remarkable gift - brand new beds of fertile sandy loam.



As soon as these new gardens are revealed by the subsiding waters everyone is out planting. Along the length of the river for thousands of kilometres, wherever there is exposed ground, pocket-sized plantations of sweet potatoes and ground nuts rapidly take hold. Stands of maize, ordered rows of onions, tomatoes, capsicums, squash, beans and peas, brassicas, lettuce, spinach and Chinese greens of all types plus herbs like coriander, dill and morning glory grow in joyous profusion from beds cut out of the drying mud. I was surprised at the half-hearted and seemingly ineffectual enclosures that surrounded some crops. But usually no effort was made to protect the plots from predators and I can only presume that stray animals didn't need to go to the trouble of digging up veggies to feed themselves.



This was organic gardening at its purest and most perfect. Everything I saw growing along the Mekong was from home-saved seed, many varieties of which I was able to add to my own collection. The only nutrients the plants got were from what the Mekong provided. Unaffordable insecticides and herbicides were unnecessary as the fresh deposits of rich alluvial soil were, for the most part weed-free and I saw no obvious evidence of predation by pests.

At every opportunity I would scramble out of the boat to look at what was growing. Imaginative intercropping of lettuce and carrots, plots divided by avenues of beans growing determinedly through vines of ipomea, spring onions in clumps like green Mohican haircuts, rows of cauliflower plants emerging amongst tufts of flowering dill, all a feast for this gardener's eyes; all flourishing and all available in the markets, places too for buying seed.

Laotians eat a great many herbs, usually by the handful; loose lettuce is a staple as are Chinese greens, pulses, squash and chillies. They grow many different cucurbits including two varieties of cucumber. One is grown in the north during the dry season - a small gourd-shaped type. It has a strong but sweet flavour without any bitterness. The other is in the south during the rainy season, a squat, smooth-skinned type. I was able to acquire seed of both on my travels. In Luang Prabang I found locally grown chillies and was able to confirm from the seller that they came from her own seed.



In a dimly illuminated corner of the market sandwiched between a woman selling loose tobacco and sachets of cheap shampoo on one side and a fruit seller on the other, squatting amongst mounds of mandarins from Vietnam and bunches of grape-sized Longon from orchards on the edge of town, a toothless old dear had little packets of all sorts hanging from her awning. There were soya beans just harvested, as well as seed that yield long green beans like cow peas from blue-flowered vines. The old lady also sold fennel, dill and black mange-tout seed, something I had never seen before. And the price for a bag full of palm-sized packets? Just thirty pence.

A week later whilst ferreting around in the capital Vientiane's main market I found my second real surprise, red coriander seed. No one could tell me if the leaves would be red too? Only by sowing some will I find out.



Part of my journey through Laos was to the Bolaven plateau, an area in the south about the size of Surrey situated between the Mekong River and the mountains along the border with Vietnam. This area of highlands at an altitude of between 1000m and 1300m is a veritable Eden for temperate crops. The French introduced coffee production 100 years ago and as well as some rather – in my opinion – over-rated Arabica and genuinely filthy Robusta, there are also large tea plantations producing delicious green tea. So, travelling through the region was another horticultural delight, especially as January is peak harvest time for coffee when the roads were lined with great sheets covered in red beans drying in the sun. I saw large groves of bananas, fields full of cabbages, orchards of cashew, orderly rows of pineapples and wonderful vegetable gardens including the ubiquitous raised bed verdant with cash crops. But there was one truly organic product I didn't see any evidence of on the plateau – elephant dung. Earlier I had spent a few days on a reserve near the river which offered elephant rides to the tourists. The locals would collect the dung from the trails in large fish-food sacks. These bags would then be taken to a collection point in the centre of the village where a truck came regularly to carry the load up onto the plateau for use as an organic fertilizer... allegedly!

Now, back home with paper envelopes full of peppers and chilies waiting to be de-seeded, I must catalogue the additions to my collection and get a few into the propagator this spring. Oh yes, and maybe it's time to build a Laotian raised bed too!