

Market Farmer Spotlight

Mak's Garden



Photo courtesy of Mak's Garden

Mak's Garden at the Olympia Farmers Market is part of Mak (pronounced MAKE) Lee's journey following her parents' footsteps back to her farming roots and cultural heritage. In 1980, Mak Lee's parents took factory jobs near Everett after immigrating to the United States from a war torn Laos. The grueling demands of factory work, coupled with poor treatment due to language barriers, had the couple reevaluating how to make a living for their growing family. Mak's father shifted to a better paying job as a certified mechanic. Mak's mother took care of the children during the day and continued with factory work at night. The impact on her mother's mental health took a toll and it was time to get back to what she knew best, farming. Her mother grew up farming in Laos. She carried the knowledge of growing vegetables within her.

Mak's parents leased 20 acres in the Everett area. Their garden started as a way to feed the family. It grew into a thriving wholesale business for Seattle's International District. Over the years, they sacrificed quality family time together to ensure the farm's success. Saving every cent they could, they eventually purchased a 60 acre family farm, OJ's Produce, located in Ethel. While growing a robust wholesale produce business, Mak's parents put their seven children through college.

2020 was a hard year for many, and for Mak Lee, it was profoundly difficult. She had left a job in Seattle, faced a health crisis, and a family emergency. Mak

was forced to reevaluate her life, a similar situation as her mother many years ago while struggling in the factory. Mak sold what she owned and moved to her parents' farm to help them as she figured out her next steps. Through her parents' guidance, Mak began to work a two acre piece of their land. She learned how to plant, thin, and harvest vegetables for the market. Knowing the wait for a booth at the Olympia Farmers Market can sometimes be a year long, Mak decided to start the application process. Surprisingly within a month, she obtained her business license, completed her site visit, and was able to offer Asian produce as Mak's Garden at the market in 2021.

"There is no equipment to harvest the Asian produce we grow," Mak explained. These vegetables are so tender and fragile, and they grow directly on the ground. She continued, "All of this is done on your hands and knees. You're cutting every single vegetable by hand and you're packaging every vegetable by hand."

Land is one of the biggest hurdles for up-and-coming farmers. "I am so fortunate that I'm able to lease two acres from my parents. If I didn't have that, I wouldn't know where to begin." Mak's inherent and invaluable farming knowledge can be traced through her mother's family lineage dating back several generations from mother to child. "For the first time, I feel like I have a grasp on my life."

"I have been very fortunate in how well people are accepting new and different products to the market. There's a whole spectrum of Asian produce that people are not familiar with. It's a lot about me educating the customers as I'm meeting them."



Gai Choy

Gai choy is her favorite of the fall/winter season with a sweet mustard flavor and is grown from their family's heirloom seed harvested bi-annually. *Short choy sum* is another winter veggie that she showcases at the market. "In the spring and summer, I will be introducing the market to a whole new ball game of produce they haven't seen yet," Mak Lee exclaims. Keep an eye out for *gai lan*, also called *Chinese broccoli*. Mak's decision to transform her life, much like her mother did years ago, has brought her back to herself, her farming roots, and her cultural heritage.

(See farm listing #17)



Choy Sum



Gai Lan with Oyster Sauce