

Yazidi refugees, volunteers plant massive produce garden for community

Hey there, time traveller!

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ST. FRANÇOIS XAVIER — She's hunched over and getting dirty in the blazing sun, but the 52-year-old woman says there's no place she'd rather be.

"It's one of the happiest moments of the last year and eight months I've been here," said Adol Alyas, a Yazidi refugee who came to Canada in late 2017, and was part of a massive planting operation Tuesday on seven acres outside Winnipeg.

"It's great," said the farmer from northern Iraq.

In that region, the Yazidi ethnic minority faced a genocide by members of the so-called Islamic State terror group, who captured some of Alyas's family members. The widow with 10 grown children arrived in Canada as a government-assisted refugee with just five of her children, after spending nearly three years living in a tent in a refugee camp in Kurdistan.



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Adol Alyas carries seedlings to be planted at a Yazidi Community Garden near St. François Xavier.

"We barely survived," she said Tuesday through an interpreter, taking a break from planting green peppers and watermelon — her favourite farm produce. "We froze in the winter and it was super hot in the summer."

Dozens of Yazidi men, women and children and volunteers planted nearly 8,000 seedlings on land owned by Bo Wohlers, owner of Shelmerdine Ltd. which lent them 200 square feet of greenhouse space to get the project started in March.

The Charleswood United Church member said he immigrated to Canada from Germany and knows how difficult it can be to resettle. When he heard about the plight of the Yazidi refugees, and read about Operation Ezra volunteers helping them grow potatoes at a farm west of Portage la Prairie — a lengthy drive from Winnipeg — Wohlers offered his land for a much bigger garden.

"Canada's treated me extremely well," said Wohlers. "It was time for me to do something for immigrants."

Last year, his church became involved with Operation Ezra, a multi-faith coalition led by Winnipeg's Jewish community. It lobbied for Canada to open its doors to persecuted Yazidis. It sponsored them as refugees and helped those who arrived as government-assisted refugees (like Alyas), organizing food and clothing drives and English-language classes.



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In October 2016, Canada committed to resettling 1,200 survivors of Daesh, including vulnerable Yazidi women and children, by the end of 2017. Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada said Wednesday it has met its commitment and more: welcoming more than 1,400 Yazidis (1,344 government-assisted, 94 privately-sponsored).

Yazidis plant a cornucopia

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What's growing: Tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, eggplant, okra, rapini, parsley, radish, beets, melons, watermelon, onions, potatoes, pumpkins, peas (snap, regular), beans, peppers, banana peppers, carrots, garlic, mint, corn, squash, broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, cilantro, cabbage, turnips, green onions, Swiss chard and spinach

Manitoba received 288 government-assisted Yazidi refugees and 65 who were privately sponsored.

Last fall, Charleswood United Church took part in a food drive organized by Operation Ezra, said Rev. Michael Wilson. That planted a seed that would grow into a seven-acre garden plot bringing communities together and much more.

"I think as a result of this partnership, our refugee committee is also going to be sponsoring some Yazidi refugees on Operation Ezra's behalf," the minister said Tuesday before joining the volunteers working in the fields. "The partnership continues to grow and expand."



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Rahlim Rafo (left) and Adol Alyas drop seedlings into rows.

The massive garden is a "sequel" to Operation Ezra's successful potato project last year, said co-ordinator Michel Aziza.

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Last Thanksgiving Sunday, dozens of Yazidi men and Operation Ezra volunteers harvested 300 kilograms of potatoes from land loaned to them by the Tufford family west of Portage. This growing season, they have much more land, an irrigation system and close proximity to Winnipeg where the Yazidis live.

The harvest will be distributed among needy Yazidi families, with the excess sold at farmer's markets around the city, Aziza said.

Khalid Adi, a farmer who grew tomatoes, cucumbers and eggplant until he was chased from his land, plans to drive to the St. François Xavier land each week to weed and water the vegetables, herbs and melons, and check on their progress.

"It gets me out of the house and gives me a sense of back home," the married father of three said through an interpreter. He beamed as he helped run a wire fence around the garden to keep out deer.

"The food we're planting today will produce food for my family," he said.

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Reporter

Carol Sanders' reporting on newcomers to Canada has made international headlines, earned national recognition but most importantly it's shared the local stories of the growing diversity of people calling Manitoba home.

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