

Bright floral displays beckon and wooden sculptures await visitors to the day stalls

Text and photos by MARIE ARY

Eye-catching and often photographed floral bouquet displays of Sai and Chew Chang and one-of-a-kind functional sculptures by Kris Sacksteder are featured along the Main and North Arcades day stalls.

Day stalls, the centerpiece of the Market's 98-year-old tradition of "meet the producer," are home to 311 farmers. Husband-and-wife Hmong farmers Sai and Chew Chang, of The Indochinese Farm in Woodinville, and craftsman box-builder Kris Sacksteder, of Weird Woods, are among the regular Market vendors.

'I have my own job, I am my own boss'

For 19 years, Chew Chang, of The Indochinese Farm, has brought to Market crops grown from seed. These are now predominately fresh cut flowers, ornamental foliage and grasses her family grows on leased land in two locations.

The first Hmong immigrants at the Market, the Changs grow crops on 18 leased acres in Woodinville shared with other Hmong farmers and "on two acres we lease for ourselves in Fall City," Chew Chang said. "My husband Sai farms both every day."

Daily, customers can watch her arrange fresh bouquets by hand spring through fall using seasonal flowers such as iris, gypsophila and chrysanthemums. During

winter she makes dried arrangements.

"Spring through fall, the flowers we sell are fresh," she said. "We dry our flowers so we can sell them during the wintertime and we dye some of them to make pleasing colors in the bouquets."

When the Changs first began farming locally, they focused on food crops.

"At first, we grew vegetables and fruits," Chang said. "But, there's no irrigation in Woodinville, so in the summer the vegetables and fruits don't grow large enough to sell and we can't make a living. That's why I grow all kinds of cut flowers from seed."

Chang, who has no formal training in floral design, explained that design and color creativity is encouraged within her culture – which is very different from the U.S. culture.

"Hmong people know design from our needlework, where we express our own brand of thinking and make our own color choices," she said. "I learned to make arrangements by myself. It's how our people do things, we think about something and then we just do it."

In 1980, the Changs arrived in Seattle from war-torn Laos after a six-month stay in Denver.

"As our plane flew over the mountains near Denver, I saw they were all white and I was surprised," she said. "I didn't understand because I had never seen snow. We moved here because my husband had a brother living in Seattle who wanted the family together."

Chang found it difficult to leave Laos.

"I had my home and rice fields, my chickens, everything I needed," she said. "It



Chew Chang sells flowers from the farm that she and her husband Sai Chang grow on The Indochinese Farm near Woodinville.

was difficult for me to decide to leave everything to join my husband and son across the Mekong River where they had gone to a refugee camp for safety."

A soldier, Sai Chang was sought as an enemy by the new Communist government of Laos. "It was very bad," she said.

Sai was away for months at a time from his family's home, where she moved after their arranged marriage, with no way to communicate with her.

"My mother-in-law was very good to me and taught me many things, and I was very good to her, too," Chang said. "During the war, we moved many times and many times nephews and other men left and never returned from battles. It was very hard."

For nearly five years, she, Sai and their son Yin lived in a Thai refugee camp while they waited for her family to join them.

"I was homesick in the refugee camp because I could see my home just across the river, so close, like Seattle is to Lake Washington. Then, it was difficult to leave the refugee camp because I waited for my family to join us, but they didn't," Chang said.

Once in Seattle, since she could not read or write, "It was hard for me to get a job," Chang said. "But I had two jobs before I began to farm here."

For two years, Chang cut fish before an economic slump caused lay offs. "Then, for two months, I trained on a sewing machine and for almost two years worked at a sewing factory near the old Kingdome and, again, not enough work and I'm laid off.

"So, I decided to go into farming," she said. "Here at the Market, I have my own job, I am my own boss and I like it."

She and husband Sai raised two sons at the Market: Yin, a businessman, who with his wife Xee are raising their three children and Scott, a college student.

"I am proud of my family and I am proud to be Hmong."

Visit Chang daily in the Main Arcade to buy her modestly priced bouquets or daily view the Market Heritage Center documentary video, 1533 Western Avenue, that features Chang and other Hmong and Vietnamese merchants and artists.

Rare and unusual woods

Craftsman Kris Sacksteder, of Weird Woods, works with more than 125 different, untreated, natural woods to fashion one-of-a-kind functional sculptures that respect their source: Mother Nature.

"Dancing with Mother Nature is what my brother Karl calls this work," Sacksteder said. "I make a sculptured box that fits the wood, and out of respect for the wood, I'll sometimes study a piece 12 times before I make a cut."

That study involves observation of the shape and size of each piece of wood, its grain pattern and hardness and whether it contains burls.

"I work each box individually based on the specifics of each piece of wood, so no two boxes are ever alike," he said. "I use no stains nor any enhancements.

"Each box requires several steps during cutting, then I follow a three-step wax process, line each with leather and then sign, date and identify the wood."

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