

[Back to search result list](#) **The Louisville Times, Volume 83, Number 12, August 3, 1996** — Lafayette garden's growing days may be over [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

## Lafayette garden's growing days may be over

By JENNIFER BEAUPREZ

It's been a sanctuary for people like Mao Xiong for the past 11 years.

For \$30, anyone can rent a 30-foot by 30-foot plot at the Wilson Community Gardens in Lafayette starting in the spring of each year. It's becoming a popular garden for many apartment dwellers, retired farmers and Hmongs, who are immigrants from Laos and often grew up in the farming tradition.

"I spend most of my time there," said Mao Xiong, a Hmong who works a full-time job, raises two daughters and then tends to her vegetable garden from 4-9 p.m. each evening at the Community Gardens at the southeast corner of West Emma and Miller streets. She rents 18 lots where she grows numerous vegetables, including peas, cucumbers and lettuce.

She has rented the plots for the past eight years since her backyard of her Centaur Circle home is too small to plant the way she did growing up as a farmer's daughter in Laos.

Despite its haven for Xiong and other garden lovers, the outlook for the Community Gardens remains uncertain, as both old age and health problems burden the family that has owned and operated the land for 70 years.

"I don't know what the future is going to be for the gardens," said landowner Lora Starkey, who dedicated the gardens in memory of her father, Jim Wilson, a long-time Lafayette vegetable farmer and former coal miner who died in 1978.

Since the garden's start in 1985, Starkey's brother, Raymond Wilson, had tended to the gardens, collecting rents, plowing in the springs, measuring and dividing lots and handling any problems users may have had.

When he passed away in February and his wife, Joyce, suffered serious health complications, it sent a wave of doubt through the mind of Starkey, whose own impending age prohibits her from operating the gardens.

Despite the area's high property values, Starkey does not want to sell the four residential lots. It has been in the family since 1927. "It has been in the family and it will stay in the family," she said. If the land was sold, she said she knows it would be developed.

"I don't want to see houses go up there.... If I can't continue and Joyce isn't able, then we'll just go from there."

☛ **The City's Open Space Advisory Committee listed the** property for negotiations for a potential open space purchase. But because there was no threat to the land, it was not considered a priority at t said Susan Koster of the city's administrative office.

Soon after Starkey's father passed away, she inherited two plots of the land. Earlier she had bought the other two adjacent lots. Her brother and sister inherited the house adjacent to the land.

Starkey initially attempted to designate the four lots as a memorial park in recognition of her father. But neighbors complained the park would bring too much noise, and so the land was left vacant for several years.

Nearly a decade later, in 1985, local attorney Bill Zurinkas was searching for a project for his club, the Sunrise Lions, as well as a place for himself to garden. He lived in a condominium at the time and had rented land at a community garden in San Diego before while attending law school.

Zurinkas approached Starkey with the idea and she

agreed. Soon after, an irrigation system and water pump were installed, the land was plowed and the Wilson Community Garden was born. One season later, every lot in the garden was rented. Longtime local farmers volunteered to help the project by plowing the garden.

Today, the thought of loosing a community treasure surprises Zurinskas.

"It has to go on. It just does. It's a good idea and a key place to have a garden," Zurinskas said.

Joyce Wilson said since her husband, Raymond, passed away, her job of managing the gardens is relatively simple. Her children helped her prepare the land for gardeners this spring. Gardeners come find her if they have any problems.

From the family-owned home adjacent to the gardens, Wilson can see the daily routine of every gardener—the

man who comes by a 6 a.m. to water his plot or the older woman who spends hours pulling weeds after dinner.

Most of the people who rent space are Hmongs. They farm everything from sunflowers and broccoli to cilantro and beans. Many of them sell their goods at area farmer's markets and to friends. Some are what Wilson calls "regulars," who expect to have the same few plots reserved for them every spring.

"I enjoy it. It gives somebody, who enjoys gardening and doesn't have a spot at home a place," Wilson said. Although she knows the ultimate fate of the land is up to Starkey, Wilson said she would be disappointed if the land was developed.

"I don't want to see houses go up there. It just wouldn't be the same," she said.

Starkey remembers helping her father on the farm, where he grew a variety of vegetables including sweet corn, strawberries and carrots.

"I don't want to sell it because it was more a sentimental feeling for my dad," she said. "I don't know, I just don't know what we'll do."



—PHOTO BY JENNIFER BEAUPREZ

**LORA STARKEY, owner of the Wilson Community Gardens at Emma and Miller streets in Lafayette, is pondering the future of her the gardens, since old age and health problems may keep her family from continuing the tradition.**