Finding Roots: Asian American Farmers in Contemporary America

Lan Dinh
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Interview conducted by Katelyn Reuther

Lan Dinh is one of the co-founders of Vietlead in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

This was a remote interview conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lan Dinh joined the interview from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Katie Reuther joined from Boston, Massachusetts.

Interview Log

00:00:00 Introductions

00:00:39 When Lan was growing up, everything was centered around food. Those are the memories that stick out the most from her youth. Her family always came home for dinner and ate together, no matter where they were. They ate simple meals of rice, broth, sautéed vegetables, and a protein/meat dish. Her parents had a lot of joy in providing them with food. The vegetables they ate would often come from the garden, and Lan recalls having gourds and melons everywhere in the house.

00:02:24 Lan liked spending time in the garden when she was younger, even if it was just to play. Her parents would show them things in the garden, like how to harvest. When she got older, Lan realized what important lessons those were, including the lesson of taking care of the land and tending to the plants.

00:03:20 Lan enjoyed going outside, and she was curious about the plants. When she was young, the garden seemed like a big, lush jungle. Returning as an adult, she realizes that it was only a small, concrete area.

00:04:07 Lan’s parents grew a lot of molokhia (jute), which they still grow today. They got the seeds from Vietnam, and this plant is one of their most prized possessions. She says you cannot find molokhia at any grocery store. They would also grow winter melons and squashes that could feed a lot of people and be trellised to save space. Lan describes frequently eating sweet potato leaves and many wild weeds that others pull out and discard. She only realized what these plants were when she started working on farms.

00:06:46 When Lan was young, she liked the plants. However, later on in middle school and beyond, she saw it as something uncool that her parents liked to do. She also
equated having to grow their own food with being poor, which she says was the reality. They grew food to survive. Instead, she wanted to “buy food like normal people.”

In college, Lan did work study at a school garden. When she saw people there passionate about growing, she thought about it as something her parents did. Through learning about food justice, she realized that growing food is one of the most radical things you can do to be self-sufficient and in control of your own health, and she recognized that her parents had been doing that. It was a shift for her, and when she got older, she went through a process of reclaiming being proud of her parents and their skills and knowledge around farming.

00:09:32 Lan grew up with food being a strong component of her life and identity, so she didn’t even have to think about it. When she did the college work study job and was exposed to the food justice world, it gave her tools and vocabulary to name the experiences she had already been living. She understood why it was so important for her parents to be growing their cultural crops, and why it is so important to continue to learn how to grow and cook their foods. Seeing it from another lens validated her own experiences.

00:11:05 Lan describes her work study job. When she was going to school at the University of Pennsylvania, she did a work study job at a high school through the Urban Nutrition Initiative. There, she was exposed to the concepts around food justice and food access, to different parts of the food system, and to where food comes from at every step. Coming from a family of farmers, she did understand that it takes a lot to grow food, but she was not aware of how unjust the food production process truly is. She could guess because of what she witnessed and heard from her parents, but this job gave her facts to solidify that understanding.

She gained a lot from this first experience in the food justice movement, but there were also gaps in her experience that informed how she chose to continue this work. For example, while the staff working with the predominantly Black student population were staff of color, the administration staff, who wrote grants, directed the vision of the program, and created program content, were all white. Lan cites that as a difference between food justice and food sovereignty. There must be folks of color directing and deciding for themselves what access to food and a food system means for them. People of color must also be in leadership roles as those who have been most impacted by the creation of the food system in the United States and globally.

When she was there, she asked herself what her role was as a Vietnamese woman, and she realized it was not to be a leader for the Black community doing food work, but instead, to organize her own community. She thought of her parents and
other elders growing food, and she asked herself what it would look like to do that programming and community work with her own community. That work experience started her on the journey to where she is now.

00:15:38 While studying public health in college, Lan took a number of food courses. The work study job seemed aligned with that interest. In her first few years at the University of Pennsylvania, she was very socially isolated from her Philadelphia community. In a huge way, it was deeply healing for Lan to be back in Philadelphia schools for the work study job. She chose it, but had no idea it would take her to where she is now.

00:16:53 After the work study job, Lan was interested in many different things. She wanted to continue working with high school students to do education and hands-on learning. She also wanted to farm, but knew she needed more farming experience. Once she graduated, she did a popular education teaching program before spending two years at the University of California Santa Cruz’s Center for Agroecology. Throughout her time in California, she stayed connected with Vietnamese comrades in Philadelphia who shared her values and vision for community organizing. Upon her return to Philadelphia, they co-founded Vietlead.

00:18:46 Lan describes why she chose the program at the University of California (UC) Santa Cruz. First, the apprentices live on the farm, and she liked the idea of being immersed with the land. It was also a mix of hands-on and practical knowledge, and as a hands-on person, she wanted that experience. Because she had lived in Philadelphia her whole life, she was excited to go to California and find out more about the Asian American community there.

00:20:19 Lan recounts her time at UC Santa Cruz. Being with the land taught her a lot; it was her greatest teacher. There were many great instructors, but there was also a big gap. For Lan and many other apprentices, that gap was a lack of racial analysis in the teaching curriculum. For example, being on land but not talking about how that land was stolen, or failing to acknowledge the existing wisdom around how to caretake that land. At the program, they credited organic agriculture to a white European man, which shocked Lan. She and other apprentices would meet and organize about what they wanted as apprentices of color, and how to hold the program accountable. She says the staff did not know how to reach the program’s vision of promoting equity.

During her second year, Lan worked with other second-year apprentices to make institutional changes around the curriculum. She learned a lot more management skills and did more hands-on learning. It also gave her time to create curriculum, which she still uses today at Vietlead. While she was there, she reflected a lot on...
how she went to California to feel validated. When she was in Philadelphia, she was not getting jobs, because she didn’t have credentials to be a farmer. However, once she was getting those credentials, it validated the knowledge she already had from her mom. UC Santa Cruz gave her more skills and practice, but it also validated how much wisdom her parents had already instilled in her around growing.

Lan lists some of the curriculum changes she and others recommended at UC Santa Cruz: hire a permanent staff of color; institutionalize anti-oppression training so everyone has a foundational understanding; offer and require courses that include the history of agriculture to give people a shared understanding of the roles of communities of color in building the food system.

At the end of the day, if the institution is still white-led and isn’t one hundred percent invested in transformative change, organizing can only do so much. Ultimately, Lan feels that the program’s actions have not changed in the end. She decided that instead of working to change white institutions, she wanted to build her own. That was a big push for her and her Vietnamese comrades to co-found a different institution and community organization.

All along, Lan knew she wanted to return to Philadelphia and be there long-term. She always saw her time at UC Santa Cruz as an important learning opportunity that would end with her coming back and sharing her knowledge.

Lan was twenty-three to twenty-four years old when at UC Santa Cruz.

Lan and her Vietnamese comrades continued to talk while she was living in California, and when she returned, they began planning.

She co-founded Vietlead with Nancy Nguyen and Duong Ly. They wanted to create an organization that pushed folks on their politics and created community leaders. They set out to be unapologetically progressive and clear about their social justice values.

When Lan worked at her old job in the school garden, Nancy and Duong came to visit. Lan learned that there were other Vietnamese folks doing organizing and social justice work.

Lan describes their values at Vietlead. She says their articulation around those values has changed over the years. The organization’s mantra is heal, resist, grow. Because of the trauma of resettlement and people’s varied experiences with the motherland, their community exists on a wide spectrum politically, economically, and emotionally. At Vietlead, they seek to provide a space for internal and
interpersonal healing; create spaces for political education to learn more about themselves and their families; resist and fight for collective change on a larger scale. While healing the past and present and resisting to make institutional change, they also strive to grow the world they want. The farm comes in at all of those places: healing; contesting on stolen and hyper-gentrified land; growing new practices and new relationships.

00:34:19 Lan talks about the evolution of the organization since it began. In size, it has grown a lot. It started with around five part-time staff and no funding. When the youth program began, Lan and Duong led a cooking club that required students to bring their own supplies, such as knives and cutting boards. They also had a gardening club, but they were still trying to find land. Students would walk around the neighborhood and write down the location of vacant lots where they could grow a garden. Five years later, they have two garden sites: one is a half acre, and one is a school garden.

Within their current after-school program, students can join three different activities: cooking, gardening, and civic engagement. When the organization started, they had around six students. Some of those students now run their youth program, and the program has grown to around thirty students.

As Vietlead grew, they developed a leadership trellis with the intention of adding more comrades to share the work. They started by training students. Now, students Lan had five years ago are her comrades.

At the beginning, they were just trying to survive, but now five years later, they are involved in three different organizing campaigns: a national campaign with the Southeast Asian Freedom Network around ending deportations; a healthy schools campaign in Philadelphia to address lead contamination in schools; an anti-gentrification campaign to protect an important Philadelphia plaza with ethnic supermarkets.

As they built their community base, they listened to what people wanted and set out to organize and build campaigns that their communities are invested in and that are connected to Vietlead’s programs. For example, the healthy schools and anti-gentrification campaigns came out of the gardening program.

00:41:34 Lan is currently on sabbatical, and says the other two co-founders will also take sabbaticals in the coming years. She reflects on the capacity and emotional labor it took to build up the organization and organize the community. For them, this is a time of realizing the importance of rest in order to stay fresh and prevent burn out. They want to make sure they are also healing and growing. Lan says that the biggest shift is that as they are growing, they are also slowing down.
In addition to being one of three co-founders, Lan is the Farm and Food Sovereignty Director at Vietlead. They have five different programs within the organization: youth organizing, health and healing, civic engagement, community defense, and food sovereignty. Lan directs and guides the Vietlead team, in addition to overseeing the food sovereignty program. She thinks through how to connect the food sovereignty program to the other programs at Vietlead. She also manages and takes care of the land and farms.

The food sovereignty program is closely connected with the youth program. There is a summer intensive that includes six-week-long paid internships where students are trained in food, political education, and community organizing skills. During the school year, they also offer farm and cooking internships for students. Over the summer, they have a weekly CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) with their neighbors. Their farm is half production and half community plots.

The majority of the growers at their Camden, New Jersey, farm are Southeast Asian refugees. The program is intergenerational, with the elders teaching young people how to grow. The passing of an elder last year spurred them to do more to document the knowledge, skills, and practices of their elders.

They grow lots of Southeast Asian crops. The land team and students typically choose what is grown. Because the farm and school garden are within multiracial neighborhoods, many of the crops overlap with Latinx and Black crops. In addition to surveying the students and their neighbors about their crop preferences, they also consider what they grow well and what people are curious about learning how to grow. They then create a crop plan that balances all of those considerations.

The vision and hope is that most crops will be grown from saved seeds. Lan says their elders save seeds, and her mom instilled in her the importance of seed saving. For a lot of the Vietnamese crops, they have made an effort to save seed, including for gourds, bitter melon, and malabar spinach. The food sovereignty program partners with True Love Seeds to sell some of the seeds they have been keeping. Lan says they also source from Kitazawa Seed Company.

The *rau day* seeds that her mom passed on to her feel special, as does growing bitter melon. Sweet potato leaves are also important to Lan. When she was growing at the first school garden, it was beautiful for her to see the overlap between Black and Asian crops. That overlap produced many moments of beautiful exchange, including sharing about the importance of sweet potatoes in the Black community and sweet potato leaves in the Vietnamese community.
Lan grew up with *rau muông* (water spinach), and she says many Vietnamese people love it. Because it is seen as an invasive crop, it is illegal to grow in some places and has gotten expensive. Vietnamese and Khmer folks brought sprigs of it over when they came, and it feels ancestral for Lan to grow it. There are also stories about it being carried, planted, and eaten by soldiers during the war. Lan says eating it feels like resistance.

00:55:43 Lan discusses what attracts the elders and youth to Vietlead’s programming. She says Vietlead is a space for healing. A lot of the elders have limited English and had to adapt to a new culture after coming to the United States at an older age. They feel socially isolated, and the land and farm are a space they feel safe going to. It feels like theirs.

At Vietlead, they believe in creating employment opportunities for their young people. At first, students might come for the money, but some continue to stay because they feel reconnected to land and drawn to another narrative of what life could be. Some of Vietlead’s first students have shifted their focus to environmental studies and ecology because of their experiences with the land.

00:59:03 Lan recalls a significant memory from the program. Early on at Vietlead, they had a very shy student who barely spoke during the trainings. Each year, there are opportunities for students to return to the program, but they are required to take on more responsibilities. This student came back every year, which shocked Lan. Lan witnessed her growth, and now she is one of their coordinators. Lan never imagined when they first met that she would continue on for five years. This student is leading her own youth now and speaks and presents publicly about the farm. Lan watched her defy perceptions of being shy and step into leadership positions.

1:01:18 Lan never wanted to do this work alone. She wanted to do it in community and have a team around her. She knew she had to train people and build her team. The education piece is a step toward higher production growing. Right now, they are in the process of doing more for-profit growing, and they hope to transition to majority for-profit in order to be self-sustainable. They want the community to be funding and investing in the farm instead of relying on grants and similar types of funding sources.

1:03:25 Lan’s mom is an important influential elder in her life. Lan’s thinking around how they do their programming at Vietlead is shaped by watching her mom. Her mom has so many skills, but there are times when she feels helpless as a foreigner in this country. Lan sees her feeling her power when she is growing and cooking food. Lan’s mom has inspired her thinking around how food can be a superhero power if we are able to tap into it. Lan’s relationship with her mom has grown as
they have explored issues of land and food together. Through Lan’s questions about these topics, her mom realizes that Lan is actually interested, and that her own knowledge is of value.

Lan has also seen this with other elders. They are excited to share their knowledge with youth. Questions around land and food create an opening for students to talk to their parents about their lives, journeys, and how they got to the United States. Many other amazing elders have influenced Lan at the farm. They have been passionate and stepped into their wisdom and knowledge around farming.

Lan says they center the leadership building of those who are Vietnamese and Southeast Asian. However, since they are in close proximity to other communities of color, their programs are open to Latinx and Black community members as well. They work in solidarity to build those partnerships and skills amongst their members.

Many of the issues they take on at Vietlead are not just Southeast Asian issues, but more importantly, all of the issues within communities of color are intertwined. Thus, a lot of their work is solidarity work. At Vietlead, they work closely with Soil Generation, a coalition of Black and brown growers in Philadelphia. They have been fighting together to protect gardens in the city against gentrification. Vietlead has also done regional coalition work with Black and brown growers, such as participating in a mid-Atlantic agroecology convening. Lan says they are always trying to move with their Black and brown comrades, because it is still such a white-dominated food movement and world.

At Soil Generation, they advocated for Black and brown leaders on the institutional level and won a seat at the decision making table for a new urban agriculture plan. Lan was one of the first members of Soil Generation. When they started five years ago, most organizations in Philadelphia were led by white people. But now, things have really changed. Those at organizations like Vietlead and Soil Generation have been a wrecking force holding institutions accountable for their hiring practices.

In white spaces, being brave and speaking truth to power when needed is important, as is having communities of color continue to build their own institutions and have their work speak for itself.

Although Lan had reservations going into the creation of Vietlead, she has always believed in the organization’s vision. She is grateful for the team’s commitment and how much they have put in to building it.
Lan talks about the alienation, discrimination, and microaggressions she has experienced as an Asian American farmer. She says it was a slap in the face when she wasn’t hired to run the Southeast Asian farming project in Philadelphia. She proposed programming centered on culturally relevant growing, training, and political education. Looking back, she knows they wouldn’t have allowed her to do the work in the way she wanted to do it.

In Santa Cruz, having to undergo a very Eurocentric curriculum felt oppressive, and facing ongoing gentrification and state-sanctioned displacement is an everyday struggle. Lan also mentions microaggressions that occur regularly, such as people assuming she is a man before they meet her. She notes that there are microaggressions that happen in community as well, such as the elders doubting her ability as a farmer because of her age and gender.

Depending on who the community is, different discriminatory things occur. Before she worked in community, the white supremacy and microaggressions Lan experienced felt exhausting. She thought that working in community, those things wouldn’t happen. However, she says that in community, it’s a whole different set of triggers. It’s much more personal because it’s internalized. At the end of the day, she still wants to hold more space for the triggers within her own community, rather than the white supremacy microaggressions that she experiences outside of the community.

Lan describes the impacts of the events of 2020 on her work. During COVID, they couldn’t depend on outside labor. There were only two or three of them working on the farm. Farming also felt more important than ever. As they thought about essential work, it felt good to grow food for people. With more public awareness of anti-Blackness and anti-Asian sentiment, it felt good to be holding space for the community to process those things. Through their political education, it also felt important for them to provide young people and community members with tools to unpack these topics.

Lan has felt grateful to have a community to process with. It has been beautiful to have a space for Black, brown, and Southeast Asian young people to have a space to process and talk about what it means to be in solidarity with each other. At a time when being Asian is attacked, they are staying strong and doing things at the farm that are unapologetically Viet and unapologetically Asian. Being visible on land in public feels important at this time, as does being a space for young people to be proud of their history, themselves, their ancestors, the land, and the relationship of their ancestors to land.

In the future, Lan would like to have an Asian farming apprenticeship program that trains around Asian-specific techniques; transition to a for-profit farming
model; transition a lot of their work to a cooperative model so that their community is economically invested in the organization (cooperative kitchen, cafe); fight against gentrification (create a land trust where their community is and where the plaza is to remove the fear of being displaced).

1:24:50 Lan would also like to see reparations for Black folks; reparations for Black farmers; funding to Black and brown farmers; more sustainable and successful Black and brown farms; transformation of the subsidy program so that the government subsidizes more than just cash crops (healthy crops, cultural crops important to Black and brown communities); more educational scholarships and opportunities to encourage Black and brown students to pursue agriculture; land reparations to Indigenous folks. How do we transform our capitalist society so that we have a food system centered in taking care of the land, paying people fairly for their labor, and immigration reform? There are many interconnected issues.

1:27:42 Lan gives advice to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) trying to get into farming in the future: trust the wisdom and experience that lives in your blood. Your ancestors are with you every time you touch the soil. As you’re growing food and healing yourself and your community, you’re also healing your ancestors. When you’re in a room and injustice is happening and you speak up, you’re speaking for all of us. Your words are important, and when you say it, it’s what many of us are thinking. Thank you for believing in yourself and trying. The system is meant so that we don’t try to reconnect with our land and seek to be farmers and tend land. This is one of the most radical things BIPOC people can do.

1:29:31 After tending their half-acre farm in Camden, New Jersey, for five years, it was threatened to be demolished and sold. No one told them about it. Instead, they found out about these plans in the newspaper. The staff at Vietlead rallied the elderly and students to testify at a student council meeting, and they were granted a ninety-nine year lease from the school district. Everyone was shocked when they won. It reminded them that they need to have a voice in these things. For Lan, people’s ability to fight for the farm in that way was a testament to how deeply they cared about it.

1:32:13 End of interview