

## Bio-Benin Newsletter, September 2021

Every so often the sun bursts through the clouds and after a few weeks of torrential rain, worry and difficulty something happens to lighten my spirits. This morning it was Manu (short for Emmanuel) the four-year-old son of our guardian who spontaneously came to clean up the clippings around the hedges I had been trimming in front of the house. Without being asked, he carefully gathered them all into a bucket, which he placed on his head to carry to the compost, where his father makes "black gold" from the weeds and clippings each month.

Such thoughtfulness! Perhaps inspired by the fact that he wanted more *gari*, the dried and ground manioc (cassava) that children here eat as a snack, that I had given him the day before because he was crying and perhaps needed comfort. When mixed with cold water, *gari* makes a pleasant and soothing porridge that children here love. It is filling and, while not terribly nutritious, keeps hunger at bay.

I am also heartened that in a world rapidly running out of fresh water, we are doing our best to conserve ours. For the crops, we pump water from the nearby stream which seems abundant thanks to the heavy rainfalls from May through September- seemingly not yet affected by global warming. For our personal use we turn on our well pump for 15 minutes every other day and carefully limit our use. We count the rainy days with elation and have built water tanks to collect rainfall from gutters on our rooftops so that we never run completely dry. Of course, we will never have enough for machines to wash clothes or dishes, but perhaps that's just as well-- I detest emptying the dishwasher!

So far, with ample solar power for the pump, we have not run dry, although our well is not copious. If we build further, we must drill another well in the hills behind our house. The geologist came to mark the most promising spot and I tagged it with a British Union Jack, singing "God Save the Queen" as I hammered a metal spoke into the ground, much to Guillaume's amusement!

These last few weeks have not been easy as we run short of funds and try to limit activities and salaries (\$482/mo) to the most essential. I keep holding my breath and hoping fervently that something will break our way and help us finish what we have started. There is so much promise around us in the 17 acres of extremely fertile land, but we need a little luck (and perhaps several generous donors!) to make it all happen. We did have one stroke of luck when a direct hit by lightning did not damage the barn or solar batteries within, thanks to a lightning conductor installed with the solar panels last year. We were jolted from sleep by the simultaneous bolt of lightning and thunder striking right above our heads. Thanks be!

We now have three professional gardeners working on vegetables, poultry, rabbits and eventually fish, after we raise the funds to repair the breach in the wall holding water in the lake (about \$5,000). All the fish stock we initially bought escaped, so we must rebuild and restock once the rains return (another \$1,000).

Two of our gardeners have started clearing the fields of manioc for planting vegetables for the restaurant, plus potatoes and onions for sale. We sponsored our third gardener to attend a training course in Porto Novo, the capital, so that he can learn the latest organic techniques. It is the one school in Benin with a good reputation for training agricultural workers and we want to know what works here and what doesn't so that we are at least as good, perhaps, one day, even better.



*Theo and René, gardeners at Bio-Benin*



*Women making beer starter*

With Covid's re-emergence, we expected the restaurant to go into decline, but we are (just barely) breaking even. Guillaume has now brewed four new batches of beer and plans to launch them in October, with some fanfare and lots of tastings for local officials. Any suggestions for connecting with craft beer lovers worldwide would be welcome.

It's possible to imagine that with our new gardeners, a fishpond stocked with carp selling at a good price, chickens (we now have 60) providing the restaurant with its needs, plus income from Guillaume's beer, we might even make a small profit, at least enough to pay salaries and ongoing expenses, plus expanding our training program for apprentices to apply for practical experience.

On a personal level, we are buying a dog to keep me company during Guillaume's long absences and I'm planning for two donkeys to do chores around the farm - fetching manure, carrying crops. It's a simple life and one that, on most days, I find deeply satisfying as I plant gorgeous Canna lilies around the pond, tend to my roses, watch my dahlias bloom (new to this part of Africa), experiment with growing leeks, spinach, celery and other vegetables I can't find in the marketplace and watch over my baby fig tree. Gardening has always been my passion -- one I share with Guillaume. With help from our guardian, we are gradually turning our farm into a place of beauty, and I look forward to welcoming local families to the grounds for picnics and simply to enjoy Nature, without fertilizers or chemicals of any kind to disrupt the insects, birds and other wildlife that make their home here.



*Canna lily by the lake*



*Red Canna lily*

We'd really appreciate your help to achieve our dreams, train locals in organic gardening and give lots of locals work in the process. Please consider contributing to Bio-Benin. Go to [www.bio-benin.org](http://www.bio-benin.org), click on the "Donate" page and contribute through Paypal or send a check to 7483 Pinebrook Road, Park City, UT 84098. Thank you for your generosity.

Each time I make a request, some of you step forward and keep our spirits strong as we build a thriving, gardening community here in Natitingou that will help keep local people well fed and educate many others to respect the environment in the best possible ways. We can't do it alone. Your help is essential in so many ways. Thank you.

Julie and Guillaume



*First dahlia in Natitingou*



*Queen Elizabeth rose at Bio-Benin*