

Bio-Benin Newsletter, March 2021

The cock wakes us with his loud and boastful cry before dawn; a chorus of parakeets, doves, wagtails and warblers join in harmony to greet the first rays of sunlight soon after.

So begins another day in Natitingou, Benin, seemingly beyond the reach of a deadly pandemic that has imprisoned most of the rest of the world. Thanks to living outdoors most of the year, largely beyond the reach of 21st century "super sanitation", the population here seems particularly resilient. We are even somewhat "grateful" for climate change which has made the excessively warm weather at this time of year cooler, probably due to melting polar ice caps and their effect on wind and ocean currents worldwide. But it may also result in less rain; a mixed blessing, indeed.

Our house is finally painted inside and out; hot water is available for showers (hurrah!), using a system of glass tubes heated by the sun. Both house and restaurant are independently powered by some 80 solar panels, 10 batteries and two powerful converters. The total cost, some \$6,000. Thank you, China!

For Bio-Benin we have spread massive amounts of cow manure on the fields, collected from the local nomadic Peulh, who tend their long-horned African cattle, drink their milk and make delicious cheese, often served in a peanut sauce with *igname pilé* (yam pounded with a mortar and pestle). We're also busy making compost and turning dry leaves, ashes, green leaves and vegetable peelings into highly nutritious soil. The sun helps it "cook"; we get "black gold" about six weeks later.

Lettuces, planted by two agricultural students, are ready to be sold in the marketplace. Tomatoes, garlic, onions and cabbage await a later harvest. We've hired our first professional gardener, whom we met while bicycling past his fields of cabbage one morning. Daniel is both intelligent and industrious and as committed to "bio" as we are. We are becoming a virtual employment center for young students looking for work clearing the fields, women wanting to sell their manioc to make beer and those scrambling to make a living by selling wood for our pizza oven.

We plan soon on hiring a Burkinabé as head gardener. Burkina Faso was among the first to upgrade its farming practices in the 60's and its people excel at raising strawberries and other highly marketable crops in the middle of the Sahel, where no rain falls nine months of the year. Our plan is to focus on raising potatoes, onions and the largest possible garlic, since what's available here are shrivelled, tiny bulbs, tedious to peel and chop for cooking. We're also growing bananas, oranges, lemons, grapefruit, mandarins, mangoes, cashew nuts and papaya. For nutritional value we have morenga trees, plus avocados, and breadfruit. In time, we hope to become entirely self-sufficient by selling our crops.

The building where women will make beer is almost finished and we have just created an enormous lake, hiring a bulldozer to dig out three meters of heavy clay soil. Now all we need is lots of rain and a barrier system to control the outflow of water. During dry weather we will

probably need to pump water in from the local stream, using solar-powered pumps, to protect the tilapia we plan on raising, another potential source of steady income.

Overlooking the lake behind our house is a charming, semi-circular patio covered with the local stone and lit at night with small solar lamps pushed into the ground. We imagine serving breakfast there to visitors when they come. You are all invited!

It's both exciting and exhausting but better than sitting around worrying about Covid. We are doing well and hope to be finished with the major expenses soon but would welcome any support you care to give. The faster we can put everything in place the faster we can welcome more students to learn how to grow crops organically and raise fish and chickens. We're also planning on beehives and a harvest of honey next year. With all these developments our little farm, of about 10 acres, is rapidly becoming a thing of beauty and a source of local pride in the community.

Please know how much we appreciate any and all donations. The easiest way to donate is to go to our website www.bio-benin.org and click on the Donate button to pay via PayPal. If you prefer to send a check, the address is Bio-Benin, 7483 Pinebrook Rd., Park City, UT 84098. For tax purposes our non-profit 501c3 ID is 84-2747245.

Thank you for your generosity.

Julie and Guillaume.



Figure 1 Daniel our first professional gardener



Figure 2 Emmanuel and Claude, our guardian's children



Figure 3 Local women dancing to celebrate the New Year in front of our house