



Fitini nafa thiam

These “small gardens with big benefits” delight and nourish families in Mali

Vegetables are incredibly versatile plants. They can be grown without soil, thrive indoors or out, under natural light or artificial. They even can be grown in a bag.

In Djalé, a village in Koutiala District, Sikasso Region, Mali, 30 mothers with children aged 4-8 months from 30 different households each agreed to set up 10 sack gardens with the help of neighbors and staff from the USAID-funded project “Deploying Improved Vegetable Technologies to Overcome Malnutrition and Poverty in Mali.” They grew carrots, beets, amaranth, tomatoes, Africa eggplant, pepper and okra in the sacks. The household members were in charge of watering the vegetables and protecting them from foraging animals.

Sack gardens allow families to grow vegetables in the family compound and offer quick access to nutrient-rich vegetables for children’s meals. They’re especially handy when mothers caring for newborns or very young children may be unable to visit distant garden plots. Sack production also offers a partial solution to the problem of land tenure. In areas where women are less

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entitled to own land, a sack garden provides them with the means to produce fresh food on their own.

At first, the 30 mothers were skeptical about growing vegetables in a bag. How could the plants thrive in such a small space? Would there be enough room for the roots? And could the sacks produce enough food to make a difference in their diets?

Community leaders, including the village chief and area mayors, encouraged the mothers to work with the project team. The local health center in Koutiala was a big supporter of the sack garden project, with good reason: Koutiala has one of Mali’s highest rates of child malnutrition, and vegetables the householders grew would provide much-needed nutrients for children’s diets. Everyone pitched in to help the families fill their bags with soil. Project members offered information and guidance on

growing vegetables, and they provided recipes and nutrition information to help the families get the greatest nutritional benefit from the food they grew. The sack gardens were introduced in May 2018 and over the following months proved to be so popular that even people not targeted by the project activities began growing vegetables in the big bags. Everyone calls the sacks *fitini nafa thiam*, which means “small garden with a lot of benefits.”

Quick-growing amaranth--ready to pick and eat just six weeks after planting--was the first crop the mothers were able to harvest from their sack gardens. Eggplant, tomatoes, beets and carrots soon followed. From May to December 2018, 30 beneficiaries from Djalé were able to harvest 116 kg of tomatoes, 50 kg of amaranth leaves, 268 kg of potato leaves and 60 kg of beets. They also produced sweet potato cuttings and 1,250 kg of orange fleshed sweet potatoes.