

# Garden project in Assam reaps bounty of benefits

## Opportunity for staff members to work regardless of their caste or gender

It's not just the vegetables and flowers that are growing well at Adarsh Souj Prakaalpa. It's the people who work there, too!

The two acre demonstration garden was initiated by Fertile Ground, a Comox Valley organization that has provided educational and technical support to farmers and small-scale tea growers in northeast India since 2003.

Since it began, Adarsh Souj Prakaalpa has welcomed hundreds of people from across the state, and the centre's guest book displays names and good wishes of visitors from as far away as the U.S., Germany, Nigeria and Australia.

Farmers, agricultural extension workers, students, and self-help group members have participated in training on compost-making, natural pest control and seed saving, and plenty of healthy, organic fruits and vegetables are being harvested from what had formerly been a vacant with heavy clay soil, littered with garbage and building debris.

The founder of Fertile Ground, Peggy Carswell, works in Assam for several months each year.

From her home in Merville, she's in regular contact with the project coordinator, Pompy Ghosh, by phone and e-mail - reviewing work-plans and financial reports, creating training materials and co-editing the centre's monthly newsletters.



**Adarsh Souj Prakaalpa coordinator** Pompy Ghosh, 3rd from left, with staff members Iqbal, Babu, Kall, Kamala and Soumen.

Carswell describes Pompy as an enthusiastic young woman from the local area who initially volunteered at the project, and has worked there as an employee for the past two years.

"She's a college graduate who speaks five languages, but she'd only been able to find part-time work tutor-

ing the children of upper-class families in the nearby town. The reason? - her

caste and gender, her family's inability to come up with a cash "gift" that is commonly offered to potential employers, and the area's growing unemployment, due in part to the migration of desperate workers crossing into Assam

from nearby Bangladesh."

Carswell says that in her e-mails, Pompy speaks for all the staff at Adarsh Souj Prakaalpa when she writes that they've been given something they never imagined would be possible - an opportunity to work in an environment where everyone is welcomed

and respected regardless of their caste or class, where they are trusted, where they receive a fair wage and appreciation for their efforts, and where they feel safe.

Working in partnership with members of the Digboi Rotary Club in Assam, Fertile Ground's volunteers have raised the funds required to construct, furnish and maintain a small resource centre and classroom, paid the salaries of full-time and part time workers, installed new fencing to keep out marauding goats and cows, turned compost piles and planted seeds, and helped design and build a small retail shop for organic vegetables, vermicompost and local seeds.

Support for the project has come from a number of individual and corporate donors here in the Comox Valley, as well as from contributions made by the Strathcona Sunrise and Cumberland Centennial Rotary Clubs World Community Development Education Society and Edible Island Whole Foods.

"Pompy told me several months after we first met that she knew I had come to Assam to teach people about growing vegetables organically, but that she thought I was also there for a very different reason.

"This year, listening to the neighbourhood kids playing happily outside our office, watching our gardeners confidently explain to a group of teachers how they make compost, and seeing the excitement in the eyes of a group village elders as they opened the gate to the garden - I knew she was right."

Anyone interested in learning more about Fertile Ground's work in Assam, or helping out as a volunteer or board member, is encouraged to visit [www.fertile-ground.org](http://www.fertile-ground.org) or call Carswell at 250 337-8348.