



Does Anyone Wants Broccoli

New Crops for Andean Peasants*



Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Margarete & David Riley Story

The horticulturist Hernán remembers when the land in Ambato didn't produce anything; planted seeds didn't germinate. Farmers planted seeds in deep holes, filled them up with water and prayed for the best. What they didn't realize was that after years of using chicken fertilizer, the soil had become eroded and had lost all its nutrients. That was before the agreement among the Agriculture Chamber, Americas Fellows and Peace Corps who collectively stirred up agricultural practices and which drastically improved the production in the central area of the highlands.

Hernán was assigned the Volunteer Margarete, or "Margarita" as her agronomist counterpart called her in 1979. During the first year, the Peace Corps agronomist worked along with Hernán on his farm in Izamba. She analyzed the soil, changed the fertilizer system and designed new chemical formulas for returning nutrients to the soil.

Several classic agricultural practices had not been effective. "When we applied the changes, results were dramatic" said Hernán. With the new techniques, there was a 98% success rate, for example with cabbage the production was increased from 30 tons to 120 tons. The time they had to wait to harvest was reduced from 2 months to 3 weeks.



Hernan, horticulturist from Ambato, in his plant nursery.

Hernan was growing cabbage, lettuce and beans using the seeds provided by the "Fellow of the Americas Program" and with Margarita's help he was able to expand the variety of vegetables, adding zucchini, cauliflower, radish, spinach, and some other tomato and onion hybrid species. Included among these seeds was "broccoli" an unknown vegetable in Ecuador at that time.

The rest of farmers in the area believed that the high rate of productivity was because of certain seeds and not because of the new agricultural techniques used by Hernán. "It was neither the seed nor the fertilizer, but rather the combination of all the elements that were modified in order to get a better production" Hernan said. This change was a challenging process, but because of the hard work of Hernan and Margarita, farmers were leaning to change their classic techniques.

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PCV David Riley continued Margarita's work and extended the knowledge to other farmers. He also promoted the use of low residual pesticides authorized under the U.S. restrictions, because potent and unrestricted pesticides had been in use with no control. In order to transfer more knowledge Hernán transformed his farm into an "experimental farm," but with more than 7000 visitors a year, he was forced to close it because he didn't have enough time for his business.

The new agricultural techniques spread by Peace Corps Volunteers across the region benefited people in several areas, not just the productivity of grass for cattle and fruit trees but also in the reduction of prices for fresh vegetables. Hernan was convinced that Peace Corps Volunteers played an important role in the innovation of the agricultural practices and crop rotation, drastically improving production of crops in the central highlands.



Broccoli was introduced in Ecuador during this decade.

** Taken and adapted from the Magazine "40 years of Peace Corps Ecuador" of John Zorovich.*