

Local agency helping Ethiopian farmers

ECHO ships food plants meant to ease hunger

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You can put your money where your mouth is, but for some, that isn't enough.

Tim Watkins, Sara Hendershot, and Dee Donalson are also putting their hearts, their souls, their minds and even their roots on the line to help poor, predominantly Muslim farmers in Ethiopia, on the northern rim of Africa.

On the morning before they flew out of Fort Myers this week, the bold do-gooders and a band of volunteers were working a score of buckets and plastic tubs, with hoses, to clean the root-balls of 300 highly productive food plants raised at ECHO in North Fort Myers — Educational Concerns for Hunger Organization, a Christian, non-profit "demonstration farm."

As long as your forearm and placed 50 to a tub, those trees and vines — figs, grapes, grapefruits, avocados, various berries, mangos, macadamia nuts, persimmons and others high in nutritional value, and hardy — had been inspected just the day before by USDA officials. The officials insured that the plants were properly prepared and sprayed, before letting them out of the country.

The ECHO-raised plants were about to be flown to the other side of the world with a team led by Watkins, then planted 8,000

of Yetebon (80 miles south of Addis Ababa) — that is, if Ethiopian customs officials let them into the country.

"Every bit of dirt, everything you see — absolutely everything — has to come off the roots," Watkins ordered, as small trees were lifted from plastic tubs and passed down the line of volunteer cleaners. "If they see anything at all on those roots, they might not let them in — all the pine bark chips, all the peat moss, it all has to go," he said, unnecessarily.

Everybody knew the score.

"You just sort of massage them," added Hendershot, the second-in-command. She will spend the next six months in Ethiopia nurturing the ECHO varieties after they're planted in yards and on tiny farms. "Just work your fingers in and be gentle, otherwise you'll damage the roots."

The little plants went from the first team of hands into a bucket, where a second team worked them and sloshed them, and then to four more hands that gave them the same treatment again. After that, the root balls were dipped in a viscous, moisture-absorbing jell also used in baby diapers, then wrapped in plastic, and settled into the traveling tubs.

"When I went to Yetebon three years ago it was all grass huts, which wear out in about six years," said Donalson, who grew up on a peanut farm in Alabama, and has spent much of her professional life as a kindergarten administrator. "Since then the landscape has become dotted with three-room houses with tin roofs that last a lot longer — that's because people are starting to do better."

The Sanibel Community Church, represented by Donalson, has sponsored the project, along with Project Mercy, an Ethiopian-based charity headquartered in Yetebon that provides medical help

and education, and has been largely responsible for starting to turn around the fortunes of residents, Donalson said.

"It's mostly Muslim and Orthodox (Christians) there, and I think our reception has been very good," said Scott Martell, who was volunteering to help with the plants, and about to return to Ethiopia. A long-time Lee County resident, Martell now lives in Yetebon and works for Project Mercy as an English teacher.

"They're very poor, there," he added. "We've thought there might be some radical (Muslims) trying to work their way into the community, but I've never felt threatened. Instead, I'm truly happy. I feel I need a lot less when I'm there."

The idea for this gift has been kicking around for a few thousand years. "Give a man a fish and you'll feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you'll feed him for a lifetime," said the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, something anyone at ECHO can quote on a dime.

It's an idea the folks at ECHO (where Watkins and Hendershot, both with degrees in biology or related fields, were former interns) have been practicing for a long time. ECHO raises food under a variety of conditions that simulate those in desperately poor regions of the world — regions representing many climates — so it can help residents become comfortably self-sufficient.

And the idea has been part of the plan of the Sanibel Community Church, Donalson's church, and Project Mercy, since 2004.

The trees and vines were planted months ago, or longer, to prepare for the journey, and the level of excitement was high on the evening before the flight.

A lot is riding on Hendershot's young shoulders, and she knows it — it will be her job to make sure the plants are properly cared for, and survive, so the Ethiopians can benefit from them for years or generations to come.

"Something like this was tried once before in the highlands (of Ethiopia), and they had a 90-percent success rate," she said. "That's my goal." ■



PHOTO ROGER WILLIAMS

Dee Donalson traveled to Ethiopia with this fig tree and about 300 other plants early this week.



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The hands of young and old prepare a gift of fruit trees to Ethiopian villagers on the northern rim of Africa.



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ECHO staffers Tim Watkins and Sara Hendershot wash one of the 300 fruit plants they took to Yetebon, Ethiopia from ECHO this week.

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