Mr. and Mrs. Art Douglas and their grandson. Douglas puts food on his table through subsistence hunting and fishing, supplemented by vegetables from his garden.

Subsistence includes farm in Selawik

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times Staff

In a land where many thought that nothing could be grown to eat, broccoli, lettuce and other fresh vegetables are being raised in quantities that one day may be great enough to help feed the people across the Arctic.

Bert Greist grew up hunting and fishing and living off the land and the subsistence lifestyle is still important to him. He now manages an experimental farm in Selawik and sees agriculture as a good way to supplement the local diet at a reduced price.

The farm also is a good way to put people to work and even to combat some social problems such as alcoholism.

"Last year, we employed about 85 people," Greist noted. "This year, we're employing 50 so far."

Besides giving people work, the farm also seems to have helped a few gain self respect. "About half of our crew had alcoholism problems," Greist explained. "Working has kept them away from the bottle."

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Farming hard work but rewarding physically

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One worker in particular has reportedly gone from being one of the most unhealthy looking, seeminly hopeless drunks around to a bright employee who takes pride in his job. A robust complexion has replaced the sickly pallor which had hung on his face.

Greist expresses gratitude that the program has been able to help the community in such a manner. But that is not what it was established for.

The state Legislature granted the village of Selawik $1.3 million to test the practicality and possibility of farming in the Northwest Alaska region. State Sen. Frank Ferguson sponsored the grant legislation.

"We have 80 varieties of 20 different vegetables," Greist says of the Selawik farm. "We are developing information on which plants are most appropriate for use in the Arctic." The farm actually is a short distance from town, in an area which can get as much as 20 degrees warmer than in the village which is closer to the sea.

The farm is built on a slight slope which allows gravity to help in irrigation. The soil is mounded around the plants and the mounds are covered with clear plastic sheeting to draw more of the sun's warmth to the plant roots.

A small Japanese tractor is used for much of the work, but most is still done by hand. Greist says that horses are being considered for use for much of the work which normally would be done by machines on farms elsewhere.

Horses could save a great deal of duel, Greist explains, and the grain needed to feed them possibly could be grown locally.

Additional equipment has been brought in from the Delta region, and workers have built a 40 x 20 foot, double-log equipment shed which Greist describes as "super insulated." Using local resources, the cost of the shed came to only $2,000.

A Minnesota firm, Rural Ventures, Inc., has been hired to help with the management of the farm. "We tried to look for a firm in Alaska to help us with the management," Greist explains, "but we couldn't find anybody."

Help also has come from the NANA corporation, and from the University of Alaska. Greist notes that studies done by UA on gardening and farming elsewhere in Alaska have helped to determine what to experiment with at Selawik, but it will take a lot of experimentation to see what crops actually grow best there.

In addition to vegetables, Greist says other experiments will be tried with fur farming and livestock such as reindeer and even pigs and chickens.

"Eventually, after people see how successful the project is, we hope they'll become enthused and make a long term commitment to that type of work."

It does mean changes in some people's lifestyle, Greist admits. Up everyday at 5 a.m. and out to work on the farm by 6 a.m., but he stresses that subsistence livers have long met such strenuous demands. He also believes that the demands of farming can be blended with the subsistence lifestyle. "If you stagger the hours, give people time off after planting for two or three weeks so that they can go out hunting, fishing, berry picking, so they can get their ducks and their moose, then it blends with subsistence needs.

Greist foresees a time when there could be about 20 small farms throughout the region, supplying fresh vegetables at a lower rate than they can be brought in from Outside.

Then along with those ducks, moose, caribou, seal, berries, whale and fish, there might be a few more potatoes, brocolli, head lettuce, cabbage, and even tomatoes and other vegetables in the villages. The money spent on these goods would go back into the Inupiat community.

Farming may be new in Selawik, but it has been around the NANA region for a while. Last year, Katherine Devereaux, the agricultural co-ordinator for Mauniilaq, the non-profit arm of NANA, spent the summer in Ambler, helping with the farm there and assisting villagers who were interested in getting their own gardens going. Some had experience of several years already, and needed little if any help.

The 35-acre farm, overseen by Nelson Greist, who also runs his own farm and has made a small profit from it, and Jim Barger, an agricultural worker employed by Mauniilaq, appears to be doing well this year. Devereaux notes that 30 acres have been planted in grain, including oats, barley, buckwheat and millet.

There are two acres of potatoes, which have proved successful in the past and hopefully will again. Head lettuce, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, celery, and brussel sprouts are also growing and are expected to produce a crop.

Devereaux notes that the grain is being grown to test its feasibility in the region. Much of it is not expected to be harvested, partly because the growing season began later than usual this year, and partly because some of the types being tried may not work in the Arctic.

The grain also is being grown as a cover crop, to help stop soil erosion and then later to be worked back into the earth to improve the topsoil.

Ambler is lucky, says Devereaux. "The soil is well drained, and is warmer than in many villages. Most of it is free of permafrost. Arctic farming and gardening often require special techniques, such as building mounds above the earth in order to protect the seeds from cold, and to use sheets of plastic to magnify the sun's heat and warm the earth further.

For some crops, these techniques must be done in Ambler also, but not to the extent of elsewhere. For these reasons, a number of Ambler residents have been gardening for years. Thanks to the agricultural program, even more are gardening now. Perhaps most encouraging, residents are growing their gardens on their own, with only marginal assistance from the Mauniilaq program. They have made use of the availability of seeds, and have taken advantage of having access to a roto-tiller. Several sport new greenhouses which they have built with the program's help, but they are doing the work on their own, leaving Barger free to put his efforts into the farm.

Elsewhere in the region, different communities are trying their own garden projects, adjusting them to the different climatic and soil variations. Workshops have been held on planting and weeding, and will be held on canning and food preservation.

Some communities expect to hold fairs late this summer, where villagers will be able to show off the vegetables of their labor. And some people will not be making as many trips to the store to buy some very expensive vegetables.