



# The Atkins Family

Jason, Emily, Savannah,  
Nathaniel, and Miriam

Serving in Guinea-Bissau,  
West Africa

July 2023

The kids are having a great summer break snuggling our dog's 7 puppies!

## Dirt Under My Fingernails *by Emily*

Ever since we purchased the project land three years ago I have been excited about the opportunity to grow things. In our 16 years in Guinea-Bissau we have always rented apartments or houses with no yard that we could put a garden in, and I was ready to get some photosynthesizing roots down. In fact, before the purchase was even finalized we started doing two things at the project land—digging the well and planting fruit trees.

Last year I spent a lot of time building compost piles and collecting seeds. This year I have been building and filling raised beds, moving tiny seedlings in and out of the sun and rain, composting everything I can get my hands on, and planting things. More of my plants have died than lived (don't even ask how many zucchini plants have grown huge and then collapsed without giving me a single zucchini, lol), but I have learned a lot

from my experiences and from many conversations with friends and neighbors along the way.

The best thing about gardening hasn't been the cucumbers in the hot months which are usually only available in the rainy season, or the red peppers, malabar spinach, beets, and arugula that we cannot get in Canchungo and have loved eating, or even the basil that I have propagated so successfully that we are eating it every day and even decorating the table with centerpieces of basil flower bouquets! Those things have been wonderful, but the best part has been the connections I have made with so many of our neighbors as I walk the mile from our house to our property and back every day, stopping to share garden progress, ask questions, and get advice.

I have done many things in Guinea-Bissau over the years to build relationships, learn about the culture, and fit in as one of the group. Things like learning the language, cooking Guinean dishes, sitting with grieving friends in times of loss, being in the room with other women when babies are born (once even

basically onto my lap), and dancing on stage with my church's women's choir, to name a few. Unexpectedly, it seems that tending a garden has a place in that list. Nearly everyone I know here has a small garden by their house where they raise vegetables or a few fruit trees or even just keep a small collection of pigs and chickens, and I didn't realize how excited people would get to hear that I am carrying buckets of water and weeding and nurturing little seedlings. It has led to so many hilarious comments from friends and strangers about me truly being an African woman. (cont'd)



*One of my dozen beautiful basil plants basking in the tropical sun.*



*Because Nathaniel never met a vegetable he doesn't like, he is simultaneously the garden's best customer and biggest pest.*





## Dirt Under My Fingernails (cont'd) by Emily

This rainy season, because of problems with the cashew harvest, there are more people using even tiny plots of land to grow things than ever. Cashews are Guinea-Bissau's primary export, and a large percentage of families around the country depend on the income from the harvest to see them through the rest of the year. With food prices sky high and cashew harvest money nearly non-existent, this could be a hungry year for Guinea-Bissau. As I have found plants that work well in this climate and our specific clay soil, I have been putting in extras with the hope that I will have lots to share with friends and neighbors in need over the next year.

## Neither wind nor rain! by Jason

Going into this rainy season, we weren't sure exactly what things would look like at the site. We have several buildings in different states of progress. The first guest bungalow was about ready to be roofed in anticipation of guests later this year and early next. Our house's foundation was (at long last) done, and we were backfilling. The shop, whose footings were poured a year and a half ago, was ready to have its foundation walls poured.

I was hoping that we would be able to finish both the house and the shop foundation pours before the rainy season started so that we could use the huge amount of water that gets dumped on us to help compact the backfill that would be under the floors of both buildings. However, as the house's last pour was in early June, already into the beginning of the rainy season, was it foolhardy to still hope that we could also finish the shop's foundation in time for the rains to beat down the fill?

Perhaps it would've been foolhardy if we were talking about last year, but this year we have an ace in the hole! It would've been very difficult getting all of that heavy concrete moved around in sloshy mud if we'd had to do it by hand with wheelbarrows and buckets, but the tracks on the skid steer mean that it can move around in conditions that are even hard to walk in! We decided to go forward and see how far we could get. Don't get me wrong, the rains have caused delays, and we've still managed to get the tractor *really* stuck twice, but we've been making steady progress. The shop foundation is now 2/3 of the way done, including the most important parts, the parts where heavy machines will sit on floors that are poured over a lot of fill dirt, the parts that are most important for the rain to work on.

The shop is the first building where we've had access for the tractor to reach all around it, and we've taken full advantage of that fact by pouring most of the foundation directly with the tractor's bucket, no wheelbarrows needed! In addition to lifting the concrete up easily to pour into forms that are 5' above the ground, it's also sped things up quite a bit - now the cement mixer team has trouble keeping up with the pouring process, whereas before it was the pouring that was the bottleneck. As with all things new, the first day of pouring with the tractor my guys weren't so sure, but a few hours into it, they all said we should never go back to wheelbarrows! It still remains to be seen if we'll be able to completely finish before the rainy season has come and gone, but even if we don't get any further than we are now, it will have been worth the effort.



*The shop foundation walls are rising from the ground!*



*The tractor has not only enabled us to work further into the rainy season, it's also accelerated how quickly we can get concrete poured.*



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