



GOING ORGANIC

ISHARA JAYAWARDANE

Those who do organic gardening these days in Sri Lanka are the envy of those who did not take the time to grow fresh, safe and healthy food in their home gardens.

More than a week ago there was a sense of real worry as customers thronged to shops when the government announced that there would be a covid19 lockdown. There were long queues of customers who were obviously very agitated trying to buy vegetables and fruits.

Today *Green Thumbs* speaks to Co-Founder Green Care Organic, Brand development and Export Consultant, Udara Rathnayake, who not only speaks on how to buy food that is organic, but also on certain aspects of home gardening – crop rotation and pests and diseases.

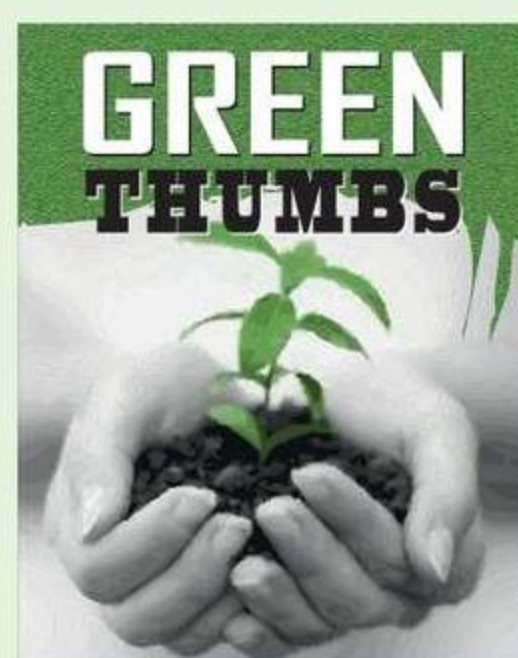
We live in unpredictable times and of course one needs to be well prepared. Of course it is never too late to start your own organic home garden. Before speaking of Organic Home Gardening, Rathnayake decided to speak first about the topic of buying organic food.

“One of the main differences between organic and non-organic produce is that the organic ones cannot be kept for longer than two to three days of being harvested. Some of the non-organic vegetables are kept fresh for as long as five to six days. This is because of all the various added preservatives & chemicals. Another difference is in the size of the product as well and sometimes even the color. We know that artificial fertilizers can boost vegetables. They grow huge and puffy due to the chemicals inside but they have no nutrition,” said Rathnayake.

She adds that it is true, organic food maybe a little pricier than non-organic produce, but the price is worth paying. Organic is when fresh produce is grown on a soil that has not been contaminated with any chemical substances for at least two to three years before anything is cultivated in it. Soil tests are done by relevant authorities before the farm or company is certified as 100 percent organic. Also the seeds that are planted on this soil should be organic and not with the conventional seeds. She also stated that farmers who grow in organ-



Co- Founder Green Care Organic, Brand development and Export Consultant, **Udara Rathnayake**



from that location. The fly cannot do any damage to the chilies.

Another advantage in Crop rotation is the crops themselves. “Crop rotation enhances the soil properties. If you take root crops (they are called root crops because the roots produce food under the ground) they create a lot of air space in the soil. So next season if we plant cabbage in the same location it can get more air from that location,” stated Rathnayake.

Rathnayake goes onto explain that another way to control the pests is through the vital food chain in the garden. If you practice 100 percent ‘Organic’ in your home garden, then you will see spiders who eat other insects that damage your vegetables. One is prey and the other is predator. Rathnayake also pointed out that another threat is diseases. We know that insects act as carriers of diseases. They contribute to spreading microbes. When there are no spiders in the garden, flying insects will increase. When there are no cobwebs these insects fly freely without getting caught. They may be carrying microbes. Also, if we can keep some rice out for the birds, then they will control the caterpillars.

You need to work hard in your home garden and spend some time in your garden because the best way of controlling pests in the garden is mechanical removal. This is simple, it’s just hand picking (when we see signs of pest attack, we must remove and destroy that part of the plant). You can hand pick snails and slugs and throw them away. If left unchecked caterpillars are known to severely damage a crop as



they feed on a variety of plants. Neem seed extract can be used for pest attack when it comes to vegetable and fruit cultivation. Neem extract can control mites, pod borers, thrips, sap sucking insects, leaf miners and white flies. White flies are some of the most dangerous pests.

This is why we must never use harmful chemicals because they destroy the biodiversity of the organic home garden.

“When growing organically there’s a lot to look into such as controlling the growth of weeds as well. In a home garden, weedicides, pesticides and insecticides are not used. Using them defeats the whole purpose of the home garden. When it comes to weeds, without using weedicides we can use our hands to remove the weeds. We prevent them from falling to the ground because if they fall to the ground they grow again. That is how we control weeds. Another way of controlling weeds is applying a mulch (material such as decaying leaves, bark or compost spread around or over a plant to enrich or insulate the soil) to cover the ground,” pointed out Rathnayake.

From what has been said it is evident that Rathnayake has touched upon some key aspects of organic home gardening which itself is a vast topic. Indeed, by practicing crop rotation one can lay the foundation for a thriving home garden and by not using chemicals you can create a garden where things take place naturally.

ic farms spend more time on the farm taking care of the produce day and night to make sure that whatever is produced comes out well to go to the end consumer. Organic seeds are also taken from plants that have been grown without any use of pesticides and non-organic fertilizers.

It is important to be careful about manure because it could be contaminated. The dung could be from farm animals fed with antibiotics or other sorts of artificially made food. Compost made out of municipal council waste could definitely be contaminated. When earthworms and millipedes die, the soil becomes dead.

“So, the next time you hear someone say ‘everything is organic’, you will know what other questions to ask and also make sure that they have a genuine certification to prove it as well,” added Rathnayake.

Next Rathnayake spoke to *Green Thumbs* on what you need to do when maintaining an organic home garden, so you can start your home garden without delay. She first discusses crop rotation and pest control. Crop rotation is actually a very good practice to avoid

pest attacks. But exactly what is Crop Rotation?

“During one season you can grow one crop in a certain location and during another season you grow a different crop in that same location. That is how we rotate the crops in our garden. If we grow the same crops in the same location in all seasons throughout the year what will happen is the pests will come to those locations and colonize and take up permanent residence in those same locations. This is because certain pests love certain crops,” explained Rathnayake.

Readers will now understand that crop rotation is key to maintaining a thriving organic home garden. One good example is the Cucurbit Fly. If we take the Cucurbits family – Pumpkin, Melon, Cucumber, Snake Gourd and Bitter Gourd, the major pest is the Cucurbit Fly. But this Cucurbit Fly does not harm the chilies. It just focuses on the Cucurbit. If we put the Cucurbit in the same location throughout the year, the fly will take up permanent residence in the same location. But if we can practice Crop Rotation, the fly will not be able to find any food source

THE TONIC OF GARDENING

The COVID-19 pandemic has focused attention on our food system and how much we rely on others for our food. This pandemic and its associated impacts, is motivating many of us to produce a bit of our own food, and whether we are conscious of it or not, we will reap many intangible rewards from growing food.

When I talk about growing food, I am referring to anything from growing a few containers of microgreens or pots of spinach in a sunny window in the house; to containers of vegetables on a balcony, deck or

driveway; to a garden (raised bed or in-ground) somewhere in the yard, or a community garden plot. Here is a list of some of the intangible benefits that I have personally experienced or have seen in my gardening past. These benefits are especially important now during the pandemic, when many of us are feeling stressed, isolated, alone, or apprehensive.

Sense of achievement. I have an email message and photo of a tomato plant with ripe red tomatoes, sent to me by one of my students. The caption reads: “Look at what I did, I grew my own tomatoes! They are beautiful. I am a gardener Grant.” I

could feel the excitement in the text. This was the first time this student had ever grown a vegetable. Yes, it is about the tomatoes but it is more about feeling proud for having grown something beautiful and delicious.

A sense of purpose. Now that many in our community cannot volunteer at their regular places, or have been temporarily laid off, we may lack purpose if there is nothing to do to fill our time. Use that time to grow some microgreens or baby greens in your own home, and in as quick as two weeks, you are eating the rewards of your time and effort. You can still start some of your own



bedding plants right now, and then plant them outside after the risk of frost is past.

Relaxation. Gardening is soothing. It makes you feel grounded and reduces stress. If you are new to gardening, start small — a container or two of microgreens on the windowsill; six containers on the balcony, deck, patio or driveway. Having your hands in the soil, planting seeds, picking a few weeds, or harvesting a few leaves for your salad or sandwich, and watching your plants grow can be very soothing. If gardening is causing you stress, reduce the size and enjoy the activity.

Learning new skills. In a world of lifelong learning, you should strive to learn something new every day. It

can be exciting to learn new information, and fun having new experiences. Learning how to use row covers to protect my spinach, beets and chard from being attacked by leaf miners, so I could harvest better quality vegetables was very rewarding.

Sense of belonging. Spending time working with plants and the soil, helps reconnect us to the natural and even spiritual environment around us. It helps us open our eyes to see the interconnectedness of the environment. Take the time to stare at a handful of productive gardening soil, see and marvel knowing that there are thousands of organisms in that handful of soil.

Even in a time of social distancing,

gardening connects people of all abilities, cultures, faiths, beliefs, countries, ages and gender identity. Gardeners nurture plants, and we nurture the people who grow these plants. If we see a person struggling with gardening, we help them because watching them grow and develop is just as important as watching our plants grow.

If you are struggling right now with the restrictions placed on us by this pandemic, consider growing some food. If you’re not sure how to do this, then ask your friends, family and neighbours for help. If they are gardeners, they will love the opportunity to help a fellow gardener.

Leader Post