

TIPS FOR MAINTAINING A SUCCESSFUL AND THRIVING HOME GARDEN

- Start with making healthy soil. Check whether you have Earth Worms in your garden. They are the best buddies you must have to get healthy soil. If they are missing, get them back! You can even ask some friends to give them to you. Or you can start by making your own wormy farm.
- Always loosen your soil before planting seeds or plants. Always use mulch (surface cover) with dry leaves, dry grass, banana stems or even plain paper or cardboards. You must protect the soil from harsh sunlight. Let grass grow in walking paths and non-growing areas. Plant different varieties of plants. Maintain crop rotation and companionship planting. Use natural manure such as cow dung, goat dung, compost, fruit tonic, fish tonic, egg shells or leaf manure. Always watch and monitor for early detection of diseases. Take actions by using pest repellents or fungus treatments if there are any.

Cultivating calm



Founder and President Eco Friendly Volunteers
Kanchana Weerakoon

ISHARA JAYAWARDANE
“Have you made any New Year’s resolutions?” Is a common question we are normally asked. For many people it is a commitment to eat more healthily and improve and safe guard one’s physical health. For others it is about mental health – peace of mind and a sense of fulfillment and for others it is time spent with the family.

As we enter 2022, with the coronavirus not weakening or losing intensity (now taking the form of Omicron) we must make a resolution not to give up hope. Green Thumbs speaks to Founder President of Eco Friendly Volunteers (ECO-V), Kanchana Weerakoon, on how home gardening can help you realize these new resolutions.

With the rapid spread of Omicron there is no doubt that many around the world are experiencing high levels of stress. The question is, how can we create our home garden in such a way where it becomes more of a sanctuary? Or a refuge? What steps do we need to take, to create a soothing oasis in the cement jungle of the city?

MENTALLY READY

2022 has come, and in Sri Lanka schools have opened up. The children are returning to school after an interval staying home. However, we know that fate is no respecter of persons and there is a possibility of the virus raising its head in such a way that might warrant another lockdown. It is not only children. Now, even those in the workforce (public and private sector) have to face a five day work week. The future is uncertain. But perhaps being close to nature can alleviate this distress.

“The first step in Gardening is getting mentally ready to have one. You must grow the love and passion within yourselves to have such a garden. This is because you are going to help many living beings by sharing whatever garden space you have. People who do not have enough ground area, can have



Bird in Sri Lanka bathing

container gardens such as pots or growing wooden or cemented beds on balcony or terrace gardens, or even vertical gardens on walls. If you have the willingness to create a home garden, then it’s a very easy task and always a very satisfying and relaxing activity where you can have so many health benefits. To have one garden would be a very wise decision and a pledge for 2022,” said Weerakoon.

A home garden is always full of happenings. There is so much to see and experience. It is such an enriching experience. It is a place to learn and a place for enjoyment.

NEW ACTIVITIES

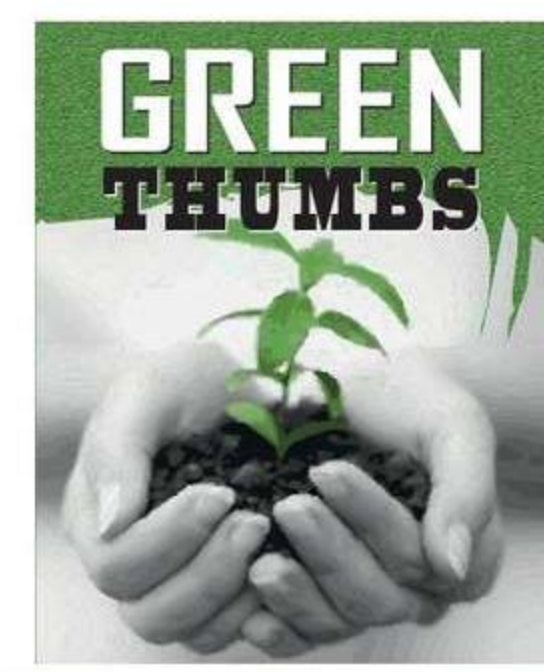
“Children can always plan for new activities to do in the garden or new plants to grow again and again. It’s a continuous process. Also, they can spare some



Spending time in home gardens

time to walk in the garden no matter how big it is. You can engage in so many activities such as just spending time among the plants, thinking what to do next, maybe create a small pond using an old tire, creating a bird bath or sowing some seeds. There is always something to do. Children can even make a record of birds that visit their garden.”

As 2022 is a brand new year, Green Thumbs asked Weerakoon what kind of guidelines she would



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give to home gardeners who will be facing another uncertain year? What kind of guidelines could she give them, in order to maintain their homes gardens in the face of uncertainty?

“Whether its certainty or uncertainty, the garden is a place with so many living beings. So, you have to take care of them. Also, it will be a place with so many happenings. My advice is, forget about the uncertainties and try and make the best home garden ever! You can plan fresh. Maybe you can change the design of the garden. If its only using pots maybe you can change the arrangements. Read more information and learn new ways of gardening, start growing something that you have not grown before. Or you can start making your own organic manure and share it with your garden

friends. Start a plant nursery. Start selling them or share with friends. Write about your garden experience and share it with others. Encourage two more people to start gardens. Always make records of the garden activities. Seasons, weather, success stories, what made you fail in gardening, seed germination time, vegetable harvesting time, diseases you encounter and solutions you found. These will make you more aware of gardening and you will become an experienced gardener when the year 2022 is over. That way you will be so happy at the end of the year to think that you did not waste the year by thinking of the uncertainties,” explained Weerakoon.

FAVORITE VARIETIES

Having learnt from 2020 and 2021, what vegetables and fruits should we start growing in our home gardens in case of another lockdown? How should we prepare immediately?

“You start with your favorite varieties and ones that are also easy to grow. These are your daily needs such as greens, herbs, chillies and common vegetables. Then when you have more space and time to go for a wider range of varieties, then you may be able to sell them, share or exchange them with others,” said Weerakoon.

When we walk in to our home garden in the morning or after work, we need to feel that peace of mind. The best way to ensure peace of mind is by starting right now, this January. What plants should we start growing in order to attract our “fauna friends”? How do we design our home garden in order to attract our “fauna friends”?

“We definitely need to encourage pollinators in our garden enabling us to have fruits or vegetables. Pollinators such as Bees, Butterflies, birds, bats, ants, beetles or moths will bring us happiness. Having said that, sometimes some of these will harm your garden too. So that’s why you need to have a close watch and take precautions if there is any attack to your crops. We can always get ready with natural pest repellants. Anyway, in order to have

many animals in your garden, you need to have different varieties of plants and trees. Big trees, medium and small sized ones, fruits trees, small plants and even grass. Also, some flowering plants such as Atapethiya, Daspethiya, Rajapohottu, Nil Katarolu, Sun flower, and shoe flowers will bring more beauty to the garden. The more diversity in plants will automatically control the pests and diseases. Once your garden becomes a sustainable ecosystem it will function naturally,” pointed out Weerakoon.

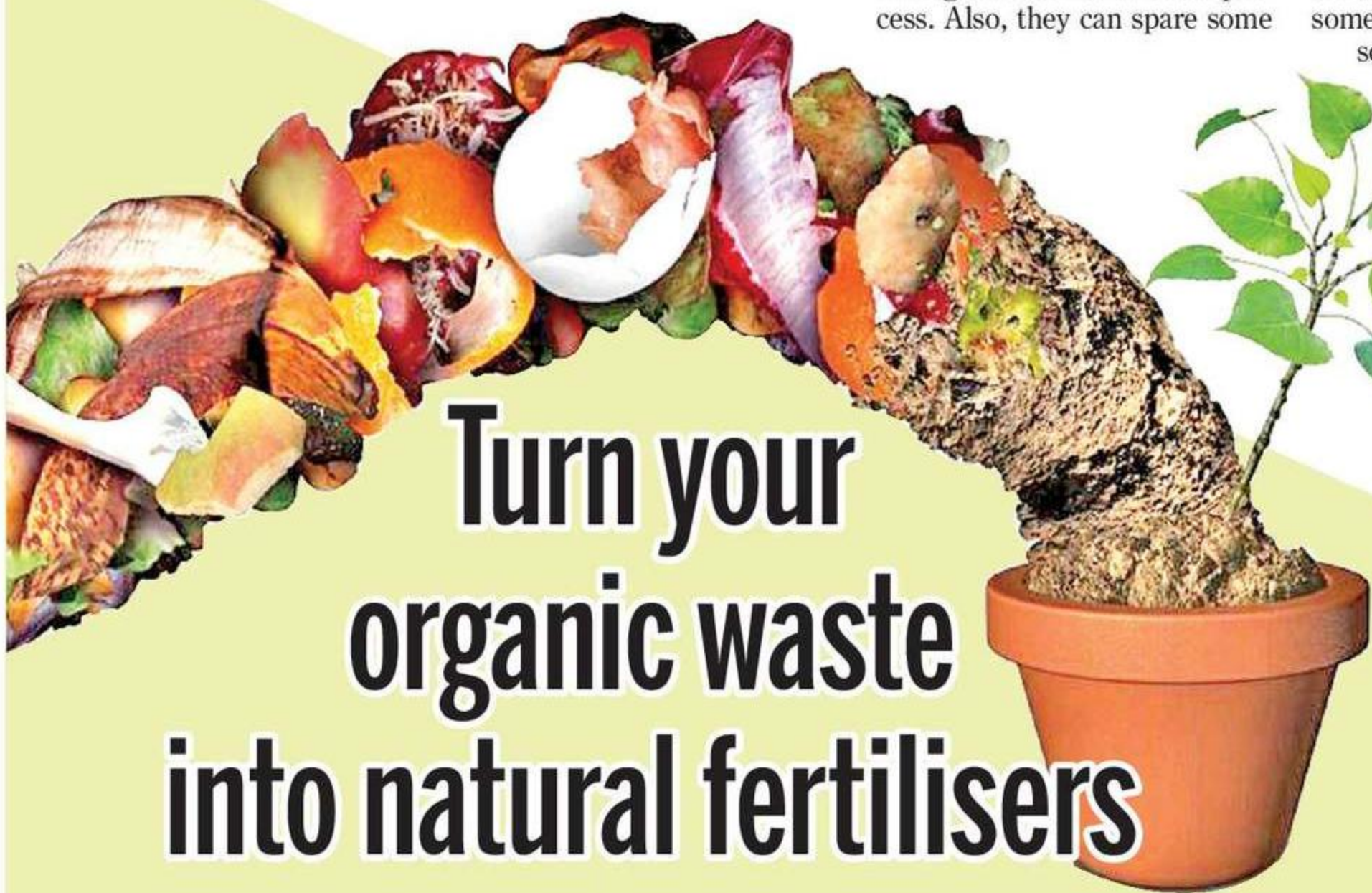
Weerakoon has spoken about Metta Gardening (loving kindness) in previous Green Thumbs articles. We asked Weerakoon how Metta Gardening can help us prepare for 2022?

WATCH THE GARDEN

“It is a process. Start watching the garden more closely. You will observe many animals and new plants, and you will start seeing the details or their actions patiently. Be happy that they are there. Start thinking that they too are living beings and they have made their home in your property. Do not disturb them. Pray for their happiness and wish them long life. This is Metta,” explained Weerakoon.

Making organic fertilizer is easy and less costly. Whatever left over from your home can be used as a fertilizer. Fish waste can be used to make Fish Tonic for leafy vegetables. Rotten fruits can be used to make Fruit tonic for other vegetables. Egg shells, Sprats or prawn waste can be dried and used as calcium source. Even left-over vegetables can be dried, crushed and can be used as a manure. Making compost is a process.

“Gardening is a hobby, but it is also a responsibility as you are dealing with many other lives. So you have to have compassion, loving kindness, patience and Upekka (Unshaken status of mind) when you do Gardening. You will easily get disappointed when things go wrong, but never give up. Learn through mistakes and start again. You will be mentally and physically fit once you own a healthy garden.”



Turn your organic waste into natural fertilisers

SACHIN GUPTA

If you want to see nature’s finest magic, then start composting. Put simply, compost is the rich, nutritious stuff in soil that helps plant grow, retain moisture in the ground and build soil.

We are facing a huge garbage crisis, our landfills are challenging mountains and our arable lands are rapidly becoming deserts, water is getting scarce and food more expensive by the day. An average Indian household produces more than 250 kilograms of wet waste every year, multiply that by the urban population of Delhi and you get a mind boggling 4.5 million tons of compostable waste from just one city! That’s a lot of waste to be handled, transported and managed, all at the expense of the taxpayer. But it needn’t be like this; simply by starting composting at home you’ll not only be helping your plants or community garden by eliminating the need for store bought fertilisers and khaad, but also helping the environment and setting a great example for your kids.

If something was alive once, it will live again. This is the very nature of nature: reorganisation and metamorphosis. Every fly you see that sits on every laddoo of every halwai, who whacks it lifeless came from another tree, dinosaur, beetle and banana. This metamorphosis takes place with the help of tiny microorganisms that exist in our environment. Bacteria are the masters of composting, aided by fungi, worms, insects and a bunch of other critters they eat and digest organic waste converting it into sim-

pler organic material which we call compost. This is then used up by plants and trees to make leaves, bark, fruits, flowers and roots, which are eaten by animals and humans, and every time these living things die and return to the ground, the entire process starts again.

There are dozens of ways to compost that you can find on the internet and books but the primary steps remain the same: Put all your organic waste together and let nature break it down.

Here are some tips to help you compost more efficiently and successfully:

◆ Start with collecting all your ingredients which can be easily done by having two different bins, one for organic waste and the other for inorganic waste. Segregation at source is essential because it frees you from the unnecessary task of having to separate it once it’s mixed, also the dry and unsoiled waste can be collected and sold. A great way for kids to learn segregation and earn some extra pocket money!

◆ If you’re in Delhi, the city is luckily still blessed with trees in parks, roadsides and around neighbourhoods and you may have observed as soon as the weather starts to warm, many of them start shedding their leaves preparing for the dry hot Delhi summer. Parks and roads are littered with silk cotton leaves, Amaltas leaves and Ashok leaves. This, my friends, is treasure! Collect as much as you can, preferably enough to last you an entire year of composting. Street sweepers will gladly give you all you want.

Dry leaves are important because they are the fastest ready source of carbon essential for composting.

◆ Everything organic has a different proportion of carbon and nitrogen. How do you tell if something has more carbon or more nitrogen? Simple, if it’s dry, hard and doesn’t smell then its carbon or ‘browns’ (because most carbon heavy waste is shades of brown) such as dry leaves, cardboard, woodchips, sawdust and newspaper. And if it’s wet, soft, slimy and has an odour, it’s nitrogen or ‘greens’ (as much of it is green) like grass clippings, kitchen waste, wilted flowers, weeds, etc.

◆ Once you’ve collected all your ingredients, decide how you would like to compost. You could use a stack compost or khamba (Terracotta pots or buckets that one rotates when they fill up. You can find one at organic or gardening stores or make one yourself), many homes use these owing to its compact design and visual appeal. You can even use an empty drum or box, even just piling everything up in a heap works fine. Just remember to punch a few holes on the sides for aeration if you are using closed containers. This decision is yours to make, considering available space, amount of waste generated, what looks nice and affordability.

◆ Next, put these ingredients together.



Start with a 1:3 greens to browns ratio. I’ve always felt it’s a good place to begin composting, just like baking a cake. Once you become proficient you can alter the ratio depending on what ingredients you have at hand and like in a lasagne, alternate the browns and the greens, start with a layer of browns at the bottom followed by a layer of greens and so on. Remember to keep a thick layer of browns at the top (this controls the smell, thereby keeping rodents and crows away).

◆ Really fine compost can take over six months to be ready if left to its own devices. But you can really speed up the process by turning it every few days, that is, mixing up all the material in the heap like a salad. There will be some smell in the initial days of decomposition and you will know the compost is ready when it starts to smell very pleasant like first rain.

◆ Good compost heats up. Bacteria generate heat in the compost so mixing helps new material come in contact with the bacteria at the same time aerating the pile.

◆ You don’t want the compost heap to dry out or get drenched. The first dehydrates and kills the hardworking aerobic bacteria and the other kills them by drowning them. Cover your compost with a lid if it’s a drum or a box, or a sheet of tarpaulin/plastic. This

also reduces the need of watering it in summers.

◆ You should get usable compost in three weeks, many large or hardy pieces might still remain. These can be sieved and put back into the heap to decompose; the rest can be used in your garden and plants.

Some common household waste you can add to your compost:

Hair and nail clippings, dust from sweeping, pet hair, weeds, grass clippings, food waste, egg shells newspaper, tea leaves, ground coffee, cardboard, cotton fabric.

Some things to avoid:

Dog and cat poop, fish, meat and bones. The reason to avoid these is the risk of disease since children will also be handling the compost heap. Plus there is a higher chance of these wastes attracting rodents. Only after you are absolutely confident with composting should you attempt to compost the above items and even then only use it for trees and not vegetable gardens.

Composting is by far one of the easiest things to do because you have to do so little. It’s an extremely rewarding activity for children as they learn to see nature work up close; this generates love and respect for all creatures big and small. It empowers them to take responsibility for their own waste thereby making informed decisions about what they eat and what they buy. They begin to see waste not as garbage but something valuable and useful. Let’s not waste away this great opportunity, let’s compost!

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