

SPECTRUM

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Feel the taste of 'self-sufficiency'

The joys of home gardening

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An old - yet young at heart, poor - yet rich in ideas - home gardener from Peradeniya once told me that his happiness lies in his garden (*Mage Sathuta Thiyenne Mage Gewatte*.)

I knew exactly what he meant, but just let him put his thoughts into words.

"The first thing I would do in the morning is to rush to my small garden. Nothing makes me happier than touching the tender leaves, watering the plants, or tightening the plant roots by adding a little soil," he said.

He wants to remain anonymous, but wants his 'healthy' story to be heard.

As the first rays of the morning sun filter through the trees of his garden, as the birds perched on tree tops start chirping, he is among his plants!! His love affair with his garden dates back to more than thirty years. It all started when he was still doing his job at a government office.

"Years ago, when my children were still schooling, I had to buy vegetables for them from the market. My wife looked after household chores and I used to buy the essential food items on my way back from the office. And for years we had to eat all highly sprayed fruit and vegetables."

But on one fine day, he made a firm and 'healthy' decision that changed not only his life but also the condition of his entire family for the better! He told me that he was offered a 'lift' by a "kind" lorry driver carrying vegetables and fruits to the market as public transportation was scarce on that day.

"You won't believe this. The driver worked for a wholesale vegetable seller and when I inquired about the huge amount of vegetables and fruits that were tightly packed behind me he said, "*Dawas Ganan Thiyaganna, Hondata Beheth Gahanna Ona* (To keep the vegetables in good condition and shape, chemicals have to be sprayed endlessly.)"

However, it was about an hour later that the driver came out with his "*Podi Rahasa*" (Little (a big, of course!) secret!) The driver had told him that his owner grows chemical-free vegetables and fruits for his home consumption separately in his own garden because it is almost impossible to do mass cultivations or sales without relying on chemical fertilizer or preservative methods!

"The driver also added that his owner is nice enough to give his staff some of the homegrown vegetables and fruits!"

When my protagonist heard everything straight from the horse's mouth, he certainly could not ignore the gravity of it. So years before the pandemic hit us, decades before the topic of climate change and food crisis came up, this simple public servant who survived on one salary thought it is high time he started testing his green thumb without depending entirely on fruits and vegetables that were being sold in the market!

"I am not a philosopher. I read Sinhala newspapers only. I don't know much English. But I know the "Mantra to be healthy," he said.

And this is his mantra for a healthy and happy life - grow your own food, love the soil, dig the soil, and be amazed by what it has to offer you.

The happy soul also added that he is not the least bothered by vegetable price fluctuations in the market as he has grown enough vegetables and fruits in his small garden.

"I don't have expensive vegetables (*Sobana Elawalu Naha*), but I have everything which is needed to make a complete meal. I grow brinjals, chilies, ladies fingers (okra), *Gotu kola*, spinach, cucumber, *Dambala*, turmeric, manioc, cabbage, and sweet potatoes. I am 75 percent self-sufficient in food. All organic food (*Wasa Wisa Nathi* food.) I cannot grow rice, but I am self-sufficient in healthy food and I am pretty healthy," he went on.

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His story is not just one among thousands of success stories. The striking feature of his is that he has been courageous enough to retain his habit of gardening for thirty long years. And today, his children are married. He is retired after nearly forty years of government service. And, what still remains intact is his passion for gardening.

More success stories

Yes, the truth is that those who do mass-scale vegetable and fruit cultivation find it extremely difficult to avoid chemical fertiliser or preservatives altogether. And that's exactly why we should grow our own food in our compound.

A Food Science lecturer who is reading for her Ph.D. on 'food and use of fertiliser' told me that she knows very well what real Organic food is! "It is not always what you find on supermarket shelves' labelled 'organic.' It is what you grow in your garden using natural fertiliser or compost."

Is there anything more satisfying than enjoying fruits and vegetables that we have grown ourselves?

"Small-scale home gardeners are better than any food scientists," she said. "They know how to make their own food using natural fertiliser such as dried leaves, compost from kitchen waste," she said.

School gardens

A teacher, also a mother of three, said that she lives on the third floor of an apartment that houses more than 100 people. A slot of land has been allocated to them for gardening and they maintain a community garden on the ground floor. She, along with her own children and others living in the apartment maintain a community garden on the given slot.

"Doing gardening as a team is simply amazing. It not only teaches the children the importance of growing our own 'fresh food,' but also promotes togetherness and offers the children an opportunity to mingle with the community in a more pleasant way."

She said today people are more interested in "performing media parades" than "actual work."

"In my school also we have a special period for gardening; however, we cannot limit the activity only to one period, that means for 45 minutes or so," she added.

The home-gardening concept is nothing new to this country. As we know many schools have already started their own school gardens. But with constant school closures due to the tense situation in the country, fuel and transportation issues, and protests, maintaining those gardens faced practical difficulties until recently. But now that students stream



back to schools for in-person classes after a long time, they should be able to revive the gardens along with the help of their teachers.

Child gardeners

A child gardener will grow up to be a passionate gardener. Children who get used to gardening at an early age are more likely to stick to the good habit even as adults. An

octogenarian from a semi-urban area who has been living in limited garden space once told me that he simply cannot live without touching and caressing the plants of his pot garden.

"Years ago, it was my grandfather who taught me the ABCs of gardening. As a small child, I was introduced to his village garden when I was just a toddler. I used to touch the plants and flowers. I grew up seeing how

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these tiny plants grow up to be big ones that bear vegetables or fruits. I still remember how I started digging the brown-coloured soil in his garden. Then he helped me plant the tiny vegetable plants taken from the plant nursery on the vegetable beds. Every day he took me to the garden to attend to these plants," he recalled.

Today several decades ago, he still follows in his beloved grandpa's footsteps.

"Even though I have lived most of my life in an urban area where I own only a tiny land, I never gave up my good habit. To this day, I grow most of my vegetables and fruits in this tiny garden. As I attend to my plants and when I reap the harvest, I still remember my darling grandfather who left me about a half a century ago. Good lessons are never to be forgotten. Charismatic persons like my grandfather are never to be forgotten either," he said wiping away tears strolling down his cheeks.

Amazing experience

It is truly amazing if you can stay as fit as a fiddle in your eighties. He is one such and that is the very reason why he too wants to stay anonymous! "I don't want neither my name nor photo get published in the newspaper. Just let the world know the reason I have stayed away from doctors the most of my life - it is my garden - the good exercise I have got throughout my life from digging, cleaning, planting and touching the soil, fresh harvest I have been eating thanks to my garden, the mental satisfaction, and calmness I have enjoyed throughout my life by being close to nature!" he said.

As we are all aware people who do regular physical exercises have a much lower risk of dying prematurely from non-communicable diseases such as heart diseases, stroke, or even diabetes. They will also remain mentally fit - will be happier and stress-free to a large extent. The inspirational story of this octogenarian definitely sets an example to others who are keen to lead a happier, healthier and stress-free life without spending a penny!

International Research

Research has continuously shown that gardening also offers multiple benefits in addition to its main function - giving us healthy fruits and vegetables - providing a healthy meal.

According to recent research published in the journal PLOS ONE, the University of Florida "scientists found that gardening activities lowered stress, anxiety, and depression in healthy women who were totally new to gardening and had attended twice-weekly gardening classes as part of this research."

"Many people may indeed reap mental health benefits from working with plants - even if they've never gardened before," the study revealed.

As revealed by the principal investigator of the study, Prof. emeritus in the University of Florida/ Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), Charles Guy, "Past studies have shown that gardening can help improve the mental health of people who have existing medical conditions or challenges. But this particular study shows that healthy people can also experience a boost in mental wellbeing through gardening."

"At the end of the experiment, many of the participants were saying not just how much they enjoyed the sessions, but also how they planned to keep gardening," Guy said.

According to this study, being around plants make us feel good because of the important role played by plants in human evolution and the rise of civilisation.

"As a species, we may be innately attracted to plants because we depend on them for food, shelter, and other means of our survival," researchers noted.

Dementia patients

Gardening also offers multiple benefits to dementia patients including providing them with a sense of purpose, increasing their levels of physical activity, and most importantly enabling them to be close to nature by digging the soil and touching the plants. A study done by the University of Exeter, the UK in 2014 found that "gardens might be particularly good for dementia patients."

Agitation/ restlessness being one of the most difficult symptoms of dementia, the study had found that "there are promising impacts on levels of agitation in care home residents with dementia to spend time in a garden."

Many recent studies too have proven that gardening or activities related to home gardens are therapeutic for dementia patients.

According to a research study based in the UK and published in the journal Neurology in mid 2022, gardening can reduce the risk of dementia by 20 percent as the activities involved with gardening "may keep the brain healthy."

More than half a million people in the UK had been used for the study. They had been asked about their levels of physical activity and had been followed up for almost 11 years on average. As reported in the Daily Mail, UK the study had found that "those who frequently did tasks at home - from watering the lawn to mowing, digging and weeding - were 21 percent less likely to develop dementia than people who did this less frequently. Those who swam, cycled, or walked for pleasure were 35 percent less likely to develop dementia."

True happiness

The Sri Lankan government has already launched a massive cultivation drive to avert the looming food crisis. The need for introducing a home garden was largely felt during the time of the pandemic. Blaming the government or criticising its policies won't help! At a time not only Sri Lanka but also the entire world is heading for a grave food crisis, each grown-up individual is left with no choice, but to come up with their own innovative solutions to address the issue.

A home garden, no doubt, will come to your rescue! Be the creator of your own success story by starting your own home garden, roof-top garden or pot garden!

Every simple gardener knows where his/her happiness lies! They know where to rush to early in the morning! They are well aware of the pleasures of talking with a blooming flower, buzzing bee, or fresh tomatoes hanging on the tree! More than all, they know for certain that nothing is fresher, tastier, or healthier than home-grown fruits or vegetables.!

