



Farm-tastic!

Text and photos by Dr Tan Ze Jia

Since Singapore's urbanisation, greenery has always been incorporated into the city's design. As we moved from farms and kampongs to skyscrapers and buildings taller than the trees, we brought this "green culture" up along with us. Plants which, in nature, grow in the undergrowth and shrub layer are now thriving on high floors in Housing Development Board flats and office buildings. Over the past decade, we Singaporeans have taken this "green culture" up a notch through urban farming, community gardening and incorporating greenery into architectural designs such as the PARKROYAL COLLECTION Pickering, Singapore hotel.

Urban gardening and farming started about seven years ago for me. My family would consume one tub of yoghurt each week and I would keep the containers with the intention to reuse them. However, after almost half a year, the "new use" still eluded me. One day, I chanced upon an article on upcycling. It suggested ways we could repurpose some of the things that we usually throw away at home. That inspired me to start my 20-upcycled-yoghurt-container garden. Over the years, this home garden not only expanded in its scale, but also evolved from urban gardening to urban organic farming. Currently, my urban garden's harvests include pandan,

lemongrass, ginger, spring onion, celery, parsley, lime, chilli, bell pepper, tomato, basil, mint and rosemary. Needless to say, these are no longer in yoghurt containers.

Cheap, fresh organic food

The most direct benefit of organic urban farming is the cheap and fresh organic produce on your table. The taste of a freshly plucked tomato and bell pepper is something that you can never find in the supermarket. And you can be 100% certain that they are organic. Depending on your garden scale, the produce can be periodic, but the wait is definitely worthwhile.





Promoting mental wellness

The last habit in Stephen Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" – "Sharpen the Saw" – talks about the importance of mental and spiritual renewal. In our field of work where everything happens rapidly, our minds are constantly in overdrive. Hence it is imperative that we slow ourselves down to decompress at the end of the day, and gardening is one ideal activity to help us do so. Whenever I attend to the garden, tranquillity calms my mind and allows the brain to rest and prepare for the next hectic day. The nurturing nature of the process and the eventual satisfaction of seeing the plants blossom and come to fruition has similar therapeutic effects.

Appreciation of food and reducing food wastage

Food security is one of the many benefits that urban farming provides. However, a bigger lesson I have learnt is the appreciation of food production. In a world where food wastage is a global problem, we need to consider its impact

on carbon emissions and the efforts of the farmers and people involved in putting the food on our table. I have come to truly appreciate the value of food after I experienced the duration it takes to grow enough tomatoes for a simple salad.

Reducing food miles and foodprint

Similar to reducing food wastage, the benefit of urban farming in reducing food miles eventually leads to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions created by food production and transportation. The impact of individual efforts may be limited but the collective impact of a community can be significant. Therefore, everyone has a part to play in this.

Aesthetical and cooling effect

Plants are versatile elements in the house which can help to enhance its aesthetics. I often find myself recommending my friends to buy plants or end up gifting them with one instead. One other main

benefit to the house is the cooling effect. When I moved into my current place two years ago, I only moved a small portion of my urban garden over. As the unit is on the top floor, it warmed up throughout the day, making it rather hot by the late afternoon. I then expanded my urban garden in the next month and could feel the reduction in house temperature almost immediately, reducing the need to switch on the air-conditioner or allowing a higher temperature to be set on it.

Urban farming has its banes as well. As a pet owner, I find many parallels between caring for my dogs and plants – one of them being the commitment.

Knowing your plants and their enemies

Different plants have different requirements such as the amount of sunlight, water and the pH level of the soil. I had to research on them before I could decide where to place them and how to take care of them. Similar to knowing your plants, there is also a need to know your pests. As an organic farmer, pests are our nemesis and sometimes more than half of our efforts are spent on preventing, monitoring and fighting them. This takes up a considerable amount of my time. Fortunately, the good news is that once you get it right, subsequent efforts will be easier.

Once a farmer, always a farmer

Unlike in the open ground where roots can grow deep and the soil can hold more water, urban farmers need to place more attention on watering. Hence whenever I travel out of Singapore, I will need to make care arrangements for the "farm", like what I do for my dogs. It can be teaching someone at home how to water them or getting someone to house-sit or plant-sit. One other method which I find helpful is to plan the harvest before you go out of town, so you have less to worry about.



Starting on the right foot

Like all things in life, failures and challenges are inevitable. However, the benefits from urban gardening and farming are definitely meaningful. I hope I have succeeded in encouraging all of you to be part of the green movement.

Legend

1. Overcome the common constraint of space in urban gardening by using vertical or hanging pots
2. This is half a harvest from one plant about two to three weeks after flowering
3. Humans are not the only ones who can benefit from urban farming!
4. Cherry tomato has very small yellow flowers. Sometimes we help to pollinate them using an electric toothbrush
5. Can you see all seven growing bell peppers in the photo?

Dr Tan is currently a consultant with the Institute of Mental Health. His areas of interest are in geriatrics and community psychiatry. Outside of work, he spends most of his time with his dogs and plants. He is also a theatre and film enthusiast.



Tips for starting your own urban garden or farm:

1 Choose a space

Look for an available space at home or in your office. It doesn't matter how big or small it is, like the effort in this movement. Next, determine if the space has full sun, is partially shaded or is fully shaded. Most vegetables and fruits need at least partially shaded to full sun. If you only have a fully shaded space you can still have a garden, just not a farm. Consider starting small, to gain experience and then expand.

2 Ensure safety

One of the most ideal places for plants would be by the window. Hence it is important to ensure that they would not end up as high-rise litter. As your plant grows taller and bigger, a gust of wind can easily topple the entire pot. So avoid depending on the weight of the pot for stability.

3 Choose the plants

Start with something simple. I recommend spring onion, basil, mint, chilli and pandan for a start. At the next level, you can try cherry tomato, lady's finger, bell pepper, *kai lan* and lettuce. You can get them from a nursery or buy the packaged seeds. Otherwise, you can try growing them from the seeds of the fruits you buy from the market (works for cherry tomato, bell pepper and chilli).

4 Getting your equipment

If you are not getting pots and intend to use upcycled materials, ensure that you have holes at the bottom of the containers and a filtration layer in it before adding your soil. There are guides available online on how to do it.

5 Find your co-farmer

Try to look for more than one farmer. If you are doing this in your office space, it would be fun to do it with your colleagues.

6 Change and rotate

For sustainability, I recommend changing the plant or the vegetable from time to time. After each harvest, try something new.

7 Have some fun

Last but not least, have fun and enjoy the rewards of your efforts. ♦