

October 3, 2015

Rich pickings for green thumbs

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The Hindu

The proud owner of a terrace garden in Kochi, Kerala. Photo: H. Vibhu



Special Arrangement

“There is a huge market to cater to,” says Pankaj Arora. Photo: Urvashi Sharma

A growing tribe of young, yet experienced, gardeners and food growers shows that organic farming can yield rich harvests

Priyanka Amar from Mumbai was 22 when she started ‘iKheti’, an initiative to help terrace gardeners and urban farmers grow healthy consumable produce. Apart from providing them saplings and plants, gardening equipment, pots, soil, organic manure and garden accessories, she also advised them on plant care and waste management. ‘iKheti’ broke even within two years and it established Priyanka as an ‘ecopreneur’, as she likes being called.

Says the nature lover (her family includes 3 dogs and 6 cats), “Ever since ‘iKheti’ started, it has never been a business venture. It’s just been a smooth transition to the next best thing, which is helping me realise my passion and spread my wings at the same time.”

Growing vegetables, herbs and other edibles on one’s terrace, window sill or balcony has captured the imagination of city dwellers. The focus is on healthy food. While residents in Bengaluru pioneered the concept, the practice has gradually spread to New Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata, Nagpur and several other Indian cities, and is still growing. People have taken to organic food in a big way, aware of the harmful effects of pesticides and other chemicals. They now prefer to toil that extra bit to grow pesticide-free veggies and herbs in their own little spaces. And a new breed of young, yet experienced, gardeners and food growers are helping them professionally.

What Priyanka does in Mumbai, Pankaj Arora does in New Delhi. He says, “there is nothing like a minimum space required for kitchen gardening. You can grow various crops in whatever space you find, and if you want to expand, you can add layers to create more space.” He

helps people find more space for their plants, which includes more interesting varieties.

As a youngster, Pankaj was shy and could never explain to others what he wanted to do in with his life. With time, he found that his passion lay in creating his love in innovative bamboo designs. Later, after being associated with various social initiatives, he finally quit his job and became a full-time entrepreneur along with his mother in September 2014 by forming the 'Urban Farmers' League'. He supplies do-it-yourself kitchen gardening kits to households in New Delhi and surrounding areas, and is now reaching out to corporate organisations. "There is a huge market to cater to. For example, in my city, there are 60 lakh households interested in growing organic food and I cannot reach out to all of them."

For Kern Agrawal, founding 'The Urban Farmers' (TUF) was a decision taken after much introspection. He was completing his MBA from the Loyola Institute of Business Administration in Chennai when, along with four of his course mates, he researched and created a business plan for urban farmers as a part of the study project. The enriching and intriguing exercise stayed with them beyond the course.

"After finishing our MBA, we spent a whole year on related survey and research researching on the subject, despite our jobs," he says.

After five years in the banking sector, with ICICI and Standard Chartered, Kern quit his day job last year, and the five of them took the plunge into full-time urban farming, naming their collective social venture 'The Urban Farmers'. "We had developed 10 strategies for urban farming initiatives during our MBA programme and we have managed to work on only two so far," he says. They provide kitchen gardening kits, equipment and professional organic farming consultancy for households and corporates and also sell organic produce from their tiny city farms. "The opportunities are endless and it's impossible for one entity to tap these in their entirety," says a very enthusiastic Kern. "If one is focussed enough and can invest the required time and effort, the market for organic food and farming is wide and a very rewarding one." "TUF" is now trying to buy land in and around Chennai on which to cultivate and sell organic products. They are also working to provide client solutions in the areas of composting and seed, sapling, and microgreens supplies.

Which are the tasks in urban farming initiatives that require the most nurturing? Availability of the right kind of soil, manure and, most importantly, seeds and saplings are the biggest challenges home growers face, says many an urban farmer.

"To promote open pollinated seeds and organic food, to provide an interesting variety of good quality seeds to kitchen gardeners, and to document and conserve desi seed varieties, we came up with the idea of 'The Seed Store'," says Karan Manral and wife Yogita, owners of the Yogi Farm in Goa. The couple has been conducting workshops for enthusiasts for 11 years now and been selling seeds and other necessary requirements from their farmhouse. The 'Seed Store' is an online store. "Germinating seeds seems to be the single most challenge that puts city farmers off," says Yogita, "but the field is wide open here for whoever wants to till."

Ayesha Grewal found her calling in 'The Altitude Store' (TAS), the only one of its kind in the heart of New Delhi, which offers a whopping range of 3,500 organic products — from herbs and vegetables to milk and meat and cheese. When she returned from the United States in 1999, with a degree in global finance, she dreamt of floating her own dot com ventures. When these failed, she joined a non-governmental organisation, and soon after launched the 'Environment Energy and Enterprise Ventures' (e3V) to work on rural development projects in Brazil, the Caribbean, China and India.

It was when she met farmers in Uttarakhand and tried solving their myriad problems during her e3V projects and numerous trips to the highlands that she came up with the idea of bridging the gap between the hills and New Delhi and its neighbourhood in terms of supply and demand. 'TAS' was created as a part of e3V, to test the water, and began selling products online in 2010. Within six months, it broke even and became a separate entity. Within the next two years, the store expanded and shifted to its present address at Mehar Chand market on Lodhi road.

"We spent most of our growing years either at our 40-acre farm in Sonapat in Rajasthan or on other farms across India. Working with organic produce seemed the most natural thing to do," she says. Most of the produce at 'TAS' comes from whatever she grows on her own farms and sourced from farmers in the hills, with whom she maintains close and cordial ties.

Even though Ayesha, Kern, Pankaj, Yogita and Karan grew up in cities, they are comfortable handling mud, manure and managing manual labour, all for the love of fresh and pure food. And they are generous in helping other food growers in the city. To each of them, what they are doing is not just a commercial activity but also a social enterprise. It's how they have chosen to live, and it is proving to be quite profitable, healthwise and moneywise.

"For others who dread the idea of having to handle soil and 'dirt' or use space in the house for plants that could easily form another utility area, we need to usher in a paradigm shift," says Priyanka.

"For me, a social enterprise like iKheti is successful or profitable only when you are able to convince people to take that first step of growing edibles using balcony space instead of using it as laundry space or another room, or even when schools and corporates inculcate the habit among students and staff of spending some time amidst nature.

"It is said that India would be the most populous country with 1.7 billion people out of whom 900 million will be living in its major cities by 2050. Meeting the food, nutritional, health and environmental needs will be a serious challenge. With land dedicated to farming decreasing in the rural areas and farmers migrating to the cities in search of a better livelihood, who do you really think is going to grow food for us," she asks.

Urban-based agriculture has the potential to turn urban locales into food production units, encourage people to learn and practise sustainable lifestyles, and offset carbon emissions. And it can also turn out to be a lucrative career option or business idea for people who have the knack for growing plants. So, happy farming!

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