

MULBERRY, SUGARCANE AND BUSH ORANGE: MEET THREE ORGANIC GARDENERS WHO ARE GROWING IT ALL ON THEIR TERRACES

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Major Crops, Cropping Patterns and various Agricultural Revolutions

Madhavi Guttikonda, who runs the YouTube channel Mad Gardener with a following of close to five lakh, in her terrace garden at Arilova in Visakhapatnam. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

A sunbird peeks out of its nest in Madhavi Guttikonda's terrace garden, at Arilova in Visakhapatnam. Beside it, a bumblebee brushes past a tall bunch of sugarcane jutting out of a wide earthen pot. Between growbags and pots lush with fruits and vegetables stands Madhavi, busy harvesting mulberries.

"This is my abode of peace," she says, with a wide smile. What started as an experiment with growing organic leafy greens for her home kitchen a few years ago, changed the course of her life when she launched her YouTube channel Mad Gardener in 2018, with the help of her children. As Madhavi explained her methods of growing vegetables at home on the Telugu platform, her following grew steadily, and is currently close to five lakh. "I feel I am a part of the journey of so many people who are growing their own vegetables. This is my biggest satisfaction," says the Visakhapatnam-based YouTuber.

Walking with her through her thriving terrace garden is like getting hands-on experience in learning the science of the soil. "People just see the vegetable produce and marvel at it. But the real magic happens under the soil. That is the soul of the plant," she says. "New soil does not have microbes; hence the mechanism needs to take off; microbes need to breed. The important thing is to check the soil moisture and feed the soil dung and compost," she adds

Passionate about plants from an early age, Madhavi says she worked her way through the errors that most beginners make and learnt to understand the needs of the plant. Her videos seek to address that. "The first experience with growing vegetables can be a challenging one. Most people give up after the initial setbacks. That is where you should not give up," says Madhavi, who received the Rythu Nestham Award (a recognition for contribution to the field of agriculture) last year in the terrace gardening category by the Vice-President of India M. Venkaiah Naidu.

Her terrace garden has a dedicated section for flowers, with orchids, hibiscus and chrysanthemums. But her passion lies in growing seasonal vegetables that have a short harvest cycle such as varieties of gourds and beans, tomato, cabbage, chilli and cauliflower as well as leafy greens like spinach, amaranth and sorrel. Fruits such as mulberry, dragon fruit, papaya, strawberry, cherries, lemon and sugarcane are also a part of her home garden. "About 90% of my kitchen needs are met through this," says Madhavi, adding that she regularly distributes her produce among friends and neighbours.

Turning kitchen waste into compost is one of the major parts of her gardening process, as Madhavi uses it as a soil base for growing many of the vegetables and leafy greens. She also shares tips to deal with pests using natural fertilisers. "I talk about my observations and interact with others through comments on their experiences. So there's always that personal connection," she says. "Spending time in my garden is meditative for me. As kitchen gardeners, we are also designing the inner structure of the fruit and vegetables that we consume. I believe plants can sense our presence and this probably helps in increasing their yield."

Bindu CK's terrace garden is only about 800 sq.ft in area, but it produces everything from the local green chilly to the exotic zucchini. At Aymanam in Kottayam, Kerala, where temperatures range between 28 degree to 32 degree Celsius, it is difficult to imagine growing fruits such as oranges and strawberries, which are known to thrive in cooler climates. In over a year, Bindu has accomplished this.

In less than eight months, since she started her YouTube channel 'Chilli Jasmine', Bindu's viewership grew exponentially. Today, she has over a lakh subscribers. In each of her videos, Bindu takes her viewers through the basics of terrace farming — how to care for each plant, how and when to add manure, how to prune the plants and covers every possible query a new farmer is likely to have.

She also puts up videos on how to make organic manure slurry. One of the videos shows how to make pheromone traps to protect the plants from larval attack. "I have not learnt farming technically, I learnt it through hands-on experience and I give my viewers a few tips," she says.

Bindu likes to experiment with different seeds and documents her journey with each of the new plants. "One does not always require high-end facilities to be able to grow exotic vegetables and fruits even in hotter weather. Most of the plants I have are hybrid varieties that are adapted to thrive in our regions. But you need to take care of them properly. They need love and attention," she says.

Being a chemistry teacher has its advantages in farming, says Bindu. "Elements and their ratios play an important role in deciding a plant's growth. This knowledge has certainly come in handy." She takes chemistry tuition during the day, but ensures she spends at least half an hour in the garden every morning and evening.

"I have a habit of stopping at every nursery I chance upon. That is how I have curated my garden," says Bindu adding that she has so far grown over a 100 vegetables and fruits — tomatoes, brinjal, cauliflower, beans, carrot, salad cucumber, guavas, watermelon, muskmelon, dragon fruit, star fruit and pineapple to name a handful. She currently has three different varieties of oranges in her garden. "Usually orange plants take three to five years to bear sweet fruit, but the hybrid variety that I have, took only about six months to bear fruit. The plant has about 50 oranges now. In addition, she has smaller Israel orange and Bush orange plants too.

Bindu grows all her vegetables and fruits in grow bags or containers or paint buckets.

She does not sell her produce, but gifts excess produce to friends and family. Her garden is to her, a healing space. "I love talking to my plants, I have to see them every day. They give me indescribable joy. It is a space of solace and that is why I farm."

A thriving bio-diversity

In Coimbatore, Shanthini Balu, a landscaping consultant, is reviving forgotten native greens.

In her 800 square foot terrace garden at Raja Nagar, Krishna Colony, she grows a wide range of native greens along with heirloom vegetables, greens and flowers. Besides all this, she also grows basil, lemon grass, oregano, rosemary, and medicinal plants.

"Anyone can start a vegetable garden with a few pots and expand later. Radish, coriander, mint, tomato, green chillies, and radish, native greens, and palak are easy for beginners. Care should be taken to use right containers, fertile, drainable soil. ensure that your plants are watered regularly and there is sufficient sunlight," she says, adding that for over three decades she has

been growing guavas, sapota, mango, lettuce, strawberry, guava, cherries, oranges, and lime that attract birds, bees and butterflies.

As an apex member of Siruthuli (a city-based NGO that reclaims water resources and develops urban forests through green drives in the city), Shanthini reaches out to school children to make them aware on where the food on the table comes from. “ When children learn to nurture plants with love and care, they start understanding Nature and a change happens in them and they stop wasting food or fussing over consuming a particular vegetable.”

Shanthini ensures that kitchen and garden waste goes into making compost. She makes insecticides and pesticides with available resources like leaves of neem, custard apple, apple, and basil. Waste water from kitchen is upcycled and used to water plants, egg shells are powdered and used as manure. “Plants in containers have to be watered regularly to ensure that the soil is moist. Growing celery, spring onions, cauliflower and cabbage in tropical weather conditions was initially challenging but not anymore. We ensure that there is right environment for the plants to thrive,” she adds. Shanthini has been a part of a few school projects for kitchen gardens at schools in the city and also in Bengaluru. Her focus is on sustainable living. “I want to ensure that my family and other living creatures in my garden consume vegetables and fruits that are free of pesticides or chemicals. “

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