

NATURE COMES HOME THROUGH CORONA SMART AGRICULTURE

Yogranjan* and Sarthak Pandey**

* Biotechnology, College of Agriculture, JNKVV, Tikamgarh (M.P.), India

** JNKVV, College of Agriculture, Jabalpur (M.P.), India

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Nature's gifts to mankind, from the air we breathe to the food we eat and from the clothes we wear, to the landscapes we stare at are uncountable. These, and all other necessities and luxuries of life that we enjoy are all bounties of nature. But what happens when we try to shut out the nature? What happens when we create confinements of our own plight? In fact, places and spaces are made not out of walls of bricks but actually of work pressure, gloom, and loneliness. The results of such profane constructions are much more toxic than we think or even imagine. Mental stress, frustration and a feeling of disconnect are consequently the most prominent backlashes of the infamously glorified 'modern lifestyle'. However these characteristic dilemmas are more commonly attributed to the urban dweller rather than his rural counterpart. This is certainly because of lacking an atmosphere of harmony between the professional and the personal sides of life. Broadly, the harmony between professional and personal life is nourished by nature. The re-entry of nature in the obligatory workaholic atmosphere of the modern day homes can truly do wonders in improving the lifestyle of the people living in the cities.

A synergy between work from home and work at home for the urban people

It is a well known fact that being surrounded by plants instills a sense of happiness and joy in humans as well as animals. And obviously, apart from the aesthetic purposes, these plants can also provide us with other essentials like medicines and food stuff. Using simple household items from our store room and a small portion of our time, we can actually grow a range of plants that provide us with fresh stock of herbs, fruits, vegetables, spices and other useful and medicinal products. Happily, it does not require much preparation or investment. Even the most mundane items like old plastic bottles, used tyres from vehicles coconut shells,



partially broken mugs or cups, or even tissue papers and gunny bags can be used as planters for the purpose of home gardening. This practice will not only make you happy by taking you closer to nature but will also instill a confidence in you that you are consuming pure, tasty and nutritious food.

Home-grown fruits and vegetables do not usually contain chemical pesticides, fertilizers and other agro-chemicals. They are easy to grow, easy to look after, and safe to consume. Additionally, they improve the aesthetics of our homes and might help someone discover a new hobby in gardening. Home gardening therefore is getting increasingly popular among people, especially living in urban cities, to get some time off their busy and hectic lifestyle and to avoid mental stress and depression.

The Indian culture of planting

Ocimum indicum or commonly known as the Tulsi plant, is an age old and classical example of growing plants at one's residence. This symbolizes a traditional approach of blending nature with one's lifestyle. For example; not only, does it have cultural value, but also is used as a key ingredient in a variety of medicinal preparations. Besides, it is a customarily considered as natural air purifier and also used to add flavour to tea. The compliment is that it requires very little water and can easily be grown in pots. Another commonly grown plant is the *Murayya koiniggi* or the curry plant. This plant is extensively used in Indian cuisine as an aromatic, especially in Southern India. It has a characteristic aroma and taste and hence is a common ingredient in preparations like Sambhar, Poha, Coconut Chutneys etc. Appreciably, it contains antioxidants which make it suitable for maintaining good health. Although the curry plant is a perennial tree, it can also be conveniently grown in earthen planters of suitable size.

Few other great options

Apart from the conventional options, there is actually a range of other not so common choices of plants that can be grown with very little care and management. The first on the list would be lemongrass or *Cymbopogon sp.* It is a perennial and hardy grass that easily grows on almost any type of soil, propagates through taking stem cuttings and growing them in water until they develop roots. Being a grass, water requirement is also very less. It has a characteristic citrusy aroma and is commonly used to enhance the flavour of our daily tea.



The plant retains its green foliage almost throughout the year and thus is also a popular choice as an ornamental plant.

The mint plant exemplifies another plant bearing beautiful green foliage. The leaves of the plant are known all over the world for its peculiar taste and freshness. But apart from its great taste, the mint plant can also be used as an ornamental hanging plant. The bright green leaves sparkle when watered and is a delightful sight to look at. It is extremely convenient to grow mint leaves at home from the stalks that are left behind after using the leaves that we buy from the market. The stalks upon simple planting in soil just before the monsoon season develop roots and grow new branches very soon. Stevia, is yet another plant that has gained importance in recent times owing to its ability to serve as a natural sweetener in our day to day meals. It is among the best substitutes for cane sugar and therefore is also being commercially exploited by private companies for the manufacturing of sugar substitutes especially for the people suffering from diabetes. The leaves of Stevia Plant can be sun dried and preserved for many weeks. Apart from being a healthy substitute for our regular sugar, this plant is also a popular candidate for a home plant. A popular choice among leafy vegetables, especially in Southern parts of India is the Water Leaf plant or the Sambar Cheera, botanically known as *Talinum fruticosum*. It is actually a type of weed that easily grows on almost all soil types and climatic conditions. The leaves of this plant are fleshy in nature and therefore are used in dishes like sambar, saag, pakoras etc.

We all have heard from our parents that “Desi” varieties of vegetables are getting harder to find by the day. The desi chillies that are hot enough, tomatoes that are tangy enough and pointed gourds having seeds that are crunchy enough are not just food items for some people, but also a vehicle that brings back the memories of the good old days. Wouldn't it therefore be perfect to bring all that nostalgia back home by growing these delicious desi veggies in one's own backyard. All of this comes along with the added benefit of conservation of our indigenous land varieties of plants other than the conventional ones being cultivated in the fields.

Some low-care fast growing options for the busiest of people

Despite being great options to start one's own kitchen garden, the above stated examples might still not sound convincing enough to someone who is ultra-low on space, or



someone who has hardly more than five minutes to spare for growing some green foliage at home. But as mentioned earlier, miracles of Mother Nature do not seem to cease. These people can easily grow what is known as “Microgreens”. Microgreens are nothing but seeds of plants like chickpea, green gram, radish, mustard, oregano, etc which are grown on simple substrates such as cocopeat, garden soil or even on moist tissue paper. The basic concept behind growing microgreens is to include all the nutrients in our diet, present in the leafy parts of the seedlings. These nutrients are absent in the sprouted seeds we all are used to eating. All the care these little plants need is regular watering and ample amount of sunlight. They require absolutely no fertilizers, or other chemicals. They are easy to grow and are ready to eat in usually twelve to fourteen days. They have high amounts of nutrients and therefore are classified as superfoods. The tiny green plants are an absolute delight to the eye and also pair well with our salads and snacks as garnishes.

Learning by example

A kitty group of housewives in Tikamgarh city of Madhya Pradesh took up home gardening a few years back starting mainly with decorative plants. Little did they know that this small step towards greening their home would later on develop as a passion for growing their own food, at least some of it. Their efforts now resulted as lush green apartments, decorated gardens in balconies, and a fully functional terrace farms. They grow a variety of vegetables ranging from gourd, tomatoes, chillies, pumpkins, egg plants and many other seasonal veggies and herbs including mint and coriander etc. The best part is most of these vegetables are grown in planters made from household discards like gunny bags, plastic buckets and containers. Even the rag cloth which after continuous use is usually thrown away as garbage by people was turned into an attractive planter at their home itself. Mrs. Meenakshi, one of the group members says that this habit of theirs has improved their lifestyle in many ways. The atmosphere of the house has not only turned into a greener one but also invites a lot of compliments from anyone who visits their place. A fresh stock of vegetables is available almost throughout the year. She recounts the Corona period by revealing that when she was afraid to bring vegetables from outside, or when the supply of vegetables was not available in the market, at that time she used to use home grown vegetables not only herself but also distributed among the neighbors and this is reason, she calls this practice as “Corona Smart Agriculture”

Why to take up Corona Smart Agriculture?

We all have heard the saying, “Prevention is better than cure”. The corona virus pandemic taught us well the values of becoming self-reliant individuals rather than overly-dependent ones, particularly in terms of our own health, immunity and well-being. Staying healthy and fit is the first step towards surviving successfully in this constantly evolving world. It is rightfully the best way to prevent the occurrence of any disease or disorder in the first place. While daily exercise and workout helps us stay in shape and maintains our physical health, what’s equally important is our immunity and natural resistance to diseases. This immunity can only be boosted by healthy eating habits. Eating nutritious and healthy food is vital for our body. Enough stress can never be laid on the importance of having a healthy and balanced diet daily, in order to add some extra days to our constantly decreasing life span. Sadly enough, a supply of healthy, fresh and unadulterated food items is already turning out to be a myth for the people living in jam-packed cities. They seldom get any reliable assurance regarding the quality of food they consume on a daily basis.

The dawn of commercialization in our world brought with itself the practice of extensive use of chemicals at almost all stages of food production. The use of chemicals in the name of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides for farming introduces them in our food chain right from the production stage. The food grown therefore isn’t just dangerous for human consumption, but also is degrading our natural resources like soil, rivers, streams and the air that we breathe in. At the post-harvest or value-addition stage, the adulteration of food materials like milk oil, honey, butter etc is a common occurrence in order to bring down the cost of production and increase margins of profit for the manufacturers. The use of chemicals as preservatives is a ubiquitous example at the later processing stages. These are some of the many wrongdoings that put thousands of innocent lives at stake. However, every coin has two sides. The flip-side in this case is that commercialization is, unfortunately, a necessary evil. Without commercialization, feeding the ever increasing human population cannot even be dreamt of. Quality control for obvious reasons therefore is one such area that needs the immediate attention of the concerned authorities. The amount of chemicals that go into our food chain must be strictly monitored. It is neither practical nor feasible for the end user to do so with every other food stuff bought by him.

So what can be done by us at an individual level, to avoid the trafficking of chemicals, inside our bodies? The answer is simple. Reducing our dependence on market bought items, at least partially if not completely. What we all can manage to do is, take a small initiative to start growing at least a few edible plants at home. Even starting with something as simple as the aloe-vera plant, widely regarded for its medicinal and cosmetic value can motivate someone to start his/her very own kitchen, balcony or rooftop garden.

