

UNCOMMON GROUND
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TILLING THE URBAN SOIL

Nowadays, at almost every meal, we have some ingredient that has come in straight from our garden. Sometimes, we get vegetables such as beans or *bhindi* (okra), and greens such as spinach and *methi* (fenugreek). On other days there are tomatoes, coriander leaves, coconut, ginger, other herbs and tubers. And then there are the seasonal fruits, mangoes and sweet lime, pomegranates, guavas, chikoos, bananas and more. This past summer, we had copious amounts of crunchy, flavourful bell apples from the one tree that came as a wee sapling all the way from my grandfather's farm in Maharashtra. The tree, peculiarly, fruited not once but three times this year, and we finally ran out of people to share the fruit with.

It is remarkable how much you can grow in a small space with very little fuss. My colleague Vishwanath, who himself has demonstrated the viability of growing paddy on his small rooftop garden, taught me to grow vegetables in the boxes in which truck batteries are sold! Sitting pretty on the terrace, they provide an environment safe from bandicoots to grow consumables.

And the joy of having something that is grown around us, and plucked fresh for the kitchen, is indescribable, the experience priceless. And of course, the food tastes much better, too.

What's more, the kitchen and garden

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waste is composted and goes back to feed the plants that we then consume, which means we send out less garbage from the home. The next thing to do will be to reuse the grey water from the kitchen to water the vegetables.

At the rate we are going, we may soon belong to the growing band of urban farmers, who are popularizing the idea of urban agriculture the world over. I read recently that there are an estimated 800 million people employed in tilling urban and peri-urban soil the world over. And as planners, citizens, and conscious consumers recreate and reshape the idea of the city, many innovative practices are being deployed to use every available space, from mu-

nicipal vacant lots to spaces along drains, and of course rooftops and terraces to grow a bit of low-cost nutrition.

The gardens and windowsill pots of the elite or the middle class are only a small part of this story. Urban farming provides employment to thousands of people living on the edge of poverty, especially women. It allows the urban and suburban poor also to grow some food for their personal consumption, saving a little money for other things.

There are obviously many unresolved problems with urban agriculture, especially since cities are not planned to provide spaces for growing food. There are questions about competitive land use, about land rights, about encroachment, about the tragedy of the commons—when crops are grown on public land. Some public health hazards can be created when, say, spinach and other leafy greens are grown on wastewater contaminated with sewage. Clearly, some new policy frameworks will have to be put in place, if local systems have to be established to grow and process food and make sure it goes from producer to consumer with benefits for both.

If we focus on the positives, however, there are many. The livelihood generation opportunities can be expanded manifold if there is proper planning for growing food as close to the point of consumption as possible. Urban farming can be cost-effective and energy-efficient since food has to travel less on fossil fuels. The produce is healthier, as it needs fewer chemical inputs since it need not be stored over long periods. City waste composted can serve as manure, and also reduce the heaps of garbage we feel so helpless

about. Urban farming enthusiasts believe that it is the best way to green the city in a sustainable and participatory manner, while providing a little food security along the way.

There are other benefits. City dwellers can be remarkably ignorant about how the food they eat is actually grown and where it comes from. Watching vegetables growing around you, visiting urban farms, getting your hands dirty with soil—all these things can partially restore the connection with the earth that we all have an unfulfilled desire for.

As we come to terms with the formidable environmental challenges before us, urban citizens will have to become a large part of the solution. Especially since we know that it is in no small measure the deracinated, mindless urban consumer that has helped worsen the crisis.

If we accept that responsibility, so many things are possible. There are many examples around the world, and in India too, where small bands of determined people have been working to alter the cityscape to become more of a continuum into the natural world. It is time to end the isolation of the city.

So next weekend, go buy a few seeds and start your own microfarm. Or lobby with your councillor to use the vacant space near your community park to grow food and plant fruit trees. The whole city, and your own stomach, will soon thank you for it.

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