

Planting community bonds

Residents come together over fresh herbs and vegetables in this urban garden.

Ready, set, grow!

By Eats, Shoots & Roots

In a little corner of Kuala Lumpur, lies a green lung offering not only health benefits for the people living there but also a means of saving money and getting to know each other.

Muhammad Halim, 45, is a firm believer in using the edible garden of Taman Keramat AU2 to turn residents into "one big family", as he puts it.

Halim, a mechanical and electrical engineering consultant who has been living there since 1997, is the chairman of the area's Rukun Tetangga (neighbourhood watch) group and heads the committee that looks after the community garden.

Speaking mostly in Malay, he shares how the edible garden has progressed since it was kicked off in September 2015 with assistance from Maybank, the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council, the Drainage and Irrigation Department, and environmental NGO, the Global Environment Centre.

What is your gardening experience?

Back home in my village, in Besut (Terengganu), my father grew tobacco, some vegetables, and we also had a padi field – that's my only experience. Most of the garden's committee members are also from villages, so we merged our experiences and knowledge. We share input to come up with the best solutions for growing, watering, and fertilising the plants.

Why did this community decide to start an edible garden?

It was to help residents in this area cut down on their cost of living in the beginning.

A common misconception people outside the Klang Valley have is that everybody living in KL is well-off, but that's far from the truth. Here, there are people who have to live on just RM400 a month, and there are some who can't pay their

electricity bill every month.

Secondly, we really wanted to help retirees to stay healthy and pass their time with a beneficial activity. The garden gets all of us out of our houses and mingling with each other – this helps strengthen our relationships with each other.

Another reason is education. There are people who are over 50 years old who don't know what a rice plant looks like! The garden helps us teach the residents and their kids about the many different types of vegetables and herbs we grow – we even have a small padi field!

Tell us a little bit about your garden.

Other than being an edible garden, we also consider it landscaping. We beautify our garden so that it's not just a functional garden but also a nice retreat. We can come together, have conversations, see our friends. In the evenings sometimes, we have food together.

Of course, it also has many different types of plants. There is *ulam* (herbs) as well as vegetables and fruits like mangoes and bananas. In the near future, maybe two years from now, we will plant a durian tree, or petai plant. We are really excited about that!

We also have aquaponics here. Most Malaysians are still not familiar with the concept of aquaponics, what it's for, and how it works.

Can you tell us about the beginning

of the garden?

If you showed me a picture of the garden as it is today when we were starting out, I would have had a hard time believing you! The entire area was overrun by bushes and tall weeds. It took us four months to completely clear the space out.

Every weekend, the Maybank staff would join us to mow the grass, get rid of the bushes and weeds, move the rubble. Some of our committee members even fell sick from moving all the rocks, which took two or three lorries to transport away!

We started with only about 300sq m. The 12 core committee members and I went all out for a year plus and now we've filled almost 3,000sq m of land.

What drives you and your community to keep the garden going?

The spirit of helping others – that's deep inside us. We don't do this for profit, no. We have never taken any profit from this! Our intention is always to help people, to reduce their monthly expenses.

Teamwork is the other thing. The committee members come from different backgrounds, socially and politically, but we work together for the betterment of the community.

Most importantly, I want to bring together the residents. I want to make the whole community turn into one big family. It's so much better when we're all close. That's the spirit that we want. No hate, no jealousy, no animosity.

How did you choose the vegetables to grow?

The majority of the residents here are Malay, so we started with what Malays love to eat or cook with. Stuff like ulam, lime, lemongrass, pandan – everyday necessities.

We also have rare plants for educational purposes. For example, we have a rubber tree, a small padi field area for rice, herbs like *tongkat ali* and *kacip fatimah*. People know them only after they have been packed to be sold in stores or coffee shops, most don't know what the actual plants look like, the shape of the leaves or the branches.

How has it been taking care of the garden?

I think I can speak for everybody

when I say that it feels strange now if we go a single day without visiting the garden. Even though everybody is busy with his or her own life, each of us will still try our best to drop by, even if it's just for a little while.

My day feels incomplete if I don't visit. When I return from work, I usually go to the garden first to look around to see everybody – there are always people there! – and then make my way home. It feels almost compulsory.

Because when you walk into the garden, the first thing you see is all the green. When you live in the city, all you see are large grey buildings, and you're far away from nature. Out here, it just feels refreshing.

How has the garden changed your lifestyle or community?

Our health has gotten better!

Every time I come into the garden, there are vegetables or herbs I can harvest and take home for a home-cooked meal. Before, I'd have most of my meals outside, but when you have the luxury of freshly harvested produce to cook with, the desire to eat out

disappears. It also helps that the vegetables in the garden are yummier! And, of course, it's healthier to eat at home. So it has changed my eating habits, I can say.

Another thing that has changed is that we don't waste as much – we have more of an appreciation for the food and the produce.

And our relationships with each other have got closer, tighter. Some don't feel like we're just friends anymore, we're more of a family now. The garden has instilled a sense of love and care not just for its plants but also towards each other as well. Because we look after it together, and we see each other every day, we have come to appreciate each other's presence in a way that we probably wouldn't have if we did not have the garden.

What struggles or challenges do you face in taking care of the garden?

From a financial standpoint, we do it all for the community. We don't make any profit or charge for anything. But in the future we might look into collecting donations to help our committee members and the people taking care of the

garden.

What is your go-to pest control/pesticides?

We use this fragrant lemongrass spray to repel pests and bugs from the vegetables and plants. Most of the time, it's the tiny white stuff on the plants. That's it. Our gourds get these most often.

But so far, there are no other problems. Our produce all come out great.

Any plans on expanding the garden?

If possible, we want to show the residents what a greenhouse looks like, how to build one, what its function is.

What do you do with the produce that you grow?

We have a lot of herbs in our garden, which are much sought after by the residents and other nearby communities.

There are herbs here that are known for their medicinal qualities that can treat high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. The *rama-rama* (butterfly) plant is our most sought after – many take this for its cancer-preventing qualities.

We use roselle to make drinks by boiling the roselle with some water and sugar until it turns into a syrup. The boiled roselle can then be used to make *asam* (sour candy). All you have to do is leave it to dry completely.

The leaves from the plant is also eaten as ulam. You can also cook it in a savoury-sour soup.

In your own words, why do you think urban gardening is important?

Nowadays, there are people in their 20s and 30s suffering from diseases.

Usually, when we plant anything in our garden, it takes about three months before you can harvest the fruit or vegetable. But the ones in the supermarket, they can grow in, like, two weeks, in less than a month. My guess is that they use chemicals to make the plants grow bigger, faster. And when we consume such produce, it causes illnesses.

Also, we sit in offices all day so gardening is a healthy activity to counter such sedentary routines. So by eating healthier, organic produce from your own edible garden, and also by being a little more physical in the garden, we can live a healthier lifestyle.

Another thing is that many of us in the city are not aware of how food grows. With an edible garden, we can teach people how to appreciate what they eat. Because it's not easy to get even that one piece of fruit or vegetable that you are eating, and the residents can see that. They see the value of food.

Do you have any advice for someone that's just getting started in gardening?

Where there's a will, there will definitely be a way. My advice is to just start. Without the first small step, we can't reap big.

Even if you live in an apartment building or flat, you can start your own edible garden. Try it with a pot or a small container first. When people visit our garden and say they don't have enough space, we tell them that it's not impossible for them to start by showing them alternative ways.

Also, a garden is a great way to reconnect people with the community. We're most happy when we're together, and I think that's how you know: We're not just a community garden anymore, we are a one-stop centre for all community needs.

Eats, Shoots & Roots is a social enterprise that champions urban edible gardening. For more information, go to eatsshootsandroots.com or facebook.com/eatsshootsandroots; if you have any enquiries or comments, e-mail them to hello@eatsshootsandroots.com.

Green events

AN ARBORIST'S INTRODUCTION TO TREES, TREES, TREES

If you have always wanted to learn more about greening your space with trees, this workshop is an introduction to the edible tropical trees, characteristics and identification of trees, different propagation methods and general care and maintenance of trees in an urban setting.

This workshop will be taught by Nik Ikmal Fathi, a certified arborist from the Malaysian Arborist Association.

Date: Saturday, Sept 23, 2017

Time: 9am to noon (registration is at 8.30am)

Location: Eats, Shoots & Roots HQ, Petaling Jaya (full address upon registration)

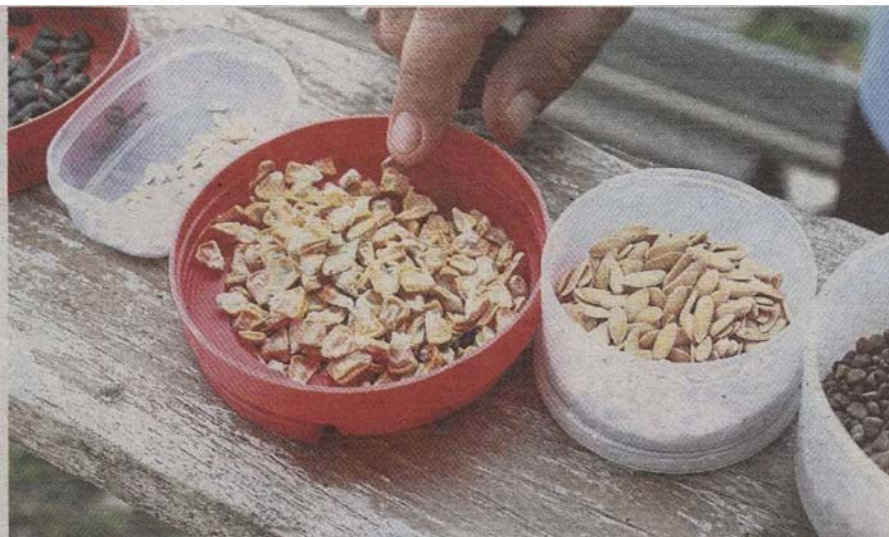
Price: RM185 (RM165 (special price if you mention Star2's Ready, Set, Grow! column))

To register: Go to the following website, workshops.eatsshootsandroots.com

For enquiries: E-mail clarice@eatsshootsandroots.com



Pak Raja, one of the full-time caretakers at the garden, tending to long beans.



Seeds harvested from the garden ... (from left) long beans, cucumber, corn, bottle gourd and roselle.



Loofahs, grown without any pesticides or chemicals, at the garden.



The Keramat AU community gardeners proudly showing off their daily harvest. — Photos: Eats, Shoots & Roots



The space before the Keramat AU community started their garden.