

Thyme on their

Covid-19 lockdowns have nipped many hobbies in the bud, but one just keeps on growing: gardening. Even Bollywood fingers are turning green

BY **KIMBERLY LIM** and **KALPANA SUNDER**

AS THE CORONAVIRUS ravages economies, forces countries into lockdowns and empties supermarket shelves, millions of people across Asia have been forced to put their former lifestyles on hold. But amid all the destruction, one pastime has just kept on growing: gardening.

In the half a year since the virus first came to public attention, urban farming has boomed in popularity, as green-fingered Asians spot an opportunity to while away those lockdown hours while cutting living costs and putting food on the table.

Among those whose fingers are turning green are Bollywood celebrities who, locked down in their homes away from the red carpet, have picked up their shovels and trowels and tried their hand at growing fruit and vegetables, often involving their young children.

Actor Twinkle Khanna shared a post about growing Ceylon spinach, while fitness guru Shilpa Shetty Kundra showed off her fresh harvest of brinjals and chillies. And in a post that really set the media's tongue wagging, Kareena Kapoor shared a picture of her actor husband Saif and son Taimur gardening together.

Not only does the hobby benefit people's wallets, but clinical psychologists say being surrounded by nature also helps to boost

serotonin levels and overall well-being – just at the time most people are in need of a mental boost.

What's more, experts say that if the trend is sustained it could even help countries secure their food supplies and reduce the impacts of climate change by boosting locally sourced produce.

The coronavirus, they say, is accelerating a green-fingered trend that had already taken seed. A study in the scientific journal *Earth Future* in 2018 predicted that by 2050 urban agriculture would feed two-thirds of the population living in cities and produce up to 180 million tonnes of food annually.

THE GREEN GREEN GRASS OF HOME

In Thailand, a 90-day home vegetable gardening campaign by the Community Development Department to promote food security and reduce living expenses during the pandemic reached over 9,448,000 households.

In Malaysia, 86 per cent of people bought gardening tools during the movement control order that began in March and ended in June, found a survey by the market research firm Vase.ai.

In the Philippines, local governments encouraged backyard farming by distributing free

BELOW FROM LEFT: KALPANA SUNDER'S GARDEN IN CHENNAI; SHILPA SHETTY; ANITA DE CANAGA'S GARDEN IN PONDICHERRY; SAIF KAPOOR AND SON. Photos: Handout, Instagram



hands

vegetable and fruit seeds to residents. And in Singapore, gardening shops and seed suppliers reported a spike in sales during the country's partial lockdown in April and May while the government in April pumped S\$30 million (US \$21.8 million) into promoting the production of eggs, vegetables and fish and identifying alternative farming spaces. Sales for businesses like Horti Flora tripled while others like O Green Living, The Garden Store and Green Spade saw increases of about 80 per cent, 50 per cent and 30 per cent respectively.

And while Singapore may be short on space, as a small city state with no hinterland, it is not short on ambition. It topped the Economist Intelligence Unit's global food security index for 2019 and has revealed plans to produce 30 per cent of its nutritional needs by 2030 by increasing the local supply of fruit, vegetables and protein.

Sakina Dhilawala, the founder of Everything Green, which specialises in micro-greens (young vegetable greens), said many people had turned to home cooking and growing their own vegetables during the partial lockdown.

"Since almost all Singaporeans were working and studying from home, they had the time to do this.



I LOVE TO COOK AND IT'S A PLEASURE TO GROW MY OWN HERBS

Chef Milan Gupta

Another factor could also be that there was a fear among the general public that fresh produce would not be easily available," she said.

In India, which implemented a lockdown in March, gardens began to sprout on the tiniest of terraces and balconies. And as their interest grew, many Indians turned to social media for tips and advice.

HomeCrop, a start-up in Hyderabad which has over 1,600 followers on Facebook, was created to help people start their own kitchen garden during the pandemic, while The Edible Garden club runs a Facebook page connecting gardening enthusiasts across India and the world. Members share photos of their gardens, recipes using home-grown ingredients and tips for sustainable gardening. "It's been very active in the pandemic, improving everyone's physical and mental well-being," said

Chikki Venkat, the US-based artist who runs The Edible Garden club.

FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Many people have turned to gardening because they found the lockdown gave them more free time.

This was the case for Chef Milan Gupta, 47, who runs a restaurant in Mumbai and is a consultant for setting up restaurants and hotels. He said he had always loved gardening, having inherited the passion from his green-fingered father, but it was only when the pandemic started that he found he had the time and focus needed to tend to his balcony garden.

"I love to cook and it's a pleasure to grow my own herbs like basil, mint and coriander and micro-greens like mustard and fenugreek which I use in my salads," he said.

Anita De Canaga, 49, who works for the Scandinavian Tourism Board



in India, said she too had always loved gardening, but because of her hectic work schedule and business trips, had never been able to focus on it until the coronavirus came along.

"During the pandemic I started planting vegetables, fruit and flowers in my garden in Pondicherry, from chillies and aubergines to pomegranates and hibiscus. I also make my own manure from vegetable peels, coffee grounds and egg shells and utilise all household grey water in the garden.

"Besides giving me fresh produce, it gives me peace of mind amid these dark times," she said.

Clinical psychologist Akanksha Pandey of Fortis Hospital in Bangalore said being surrounded by nature was beneficial for mind and body.

"During the pandemic most people are stuck at home and gardening has been both a physical activity and a

mood elevator, with the different colours and fragrances improving serotonin levels and decreasing the levels of cortisol because of the anxiety and stress."

For some of the keenest gardeners, producing their own fruit and vegetables has become more than a pleasant way to pass the time.

Coal trader Mark Nathan, 31, who is based in Singapore, is turning his balcony farm into a business. When lockdown measures were eased, Nathan rented a new apartment where he could plant more vegetables and fruit. He has begun giving samples to neighbours.

"It started as a hobby and an idea quickly turned into a passion, and I wanted to do something with my time. The lockdown was the only time in my hectic schedule when I had free time to figure stuff out."

Nathan said gardening gave him a better sense of time and helped him adjust to no longer having a fixed schedule as he was working from home.

"I would have to check on how everything is doing and get my morning started – it gives me a sense of duty. Now that I have more responsibilities, there's another reason to get up, like to check if the soil is dry, add water and, essentially, take care of the food you are going to eat." ■

