

News

A New Role for your Garden

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'Use your garden to create a food garden in South Africa' What on earth does that mean?

Perhaps if I take you back to 2004 you will see the connection. Last year, on turning 70 I celebrated by launching a new charity, Thatu. Friends and family were asked not to give me presents. Instead of being invited to a party, they were invited to be creative about ways of raising funds for Thatu. Now, six months later Thatu is a registered charity. Using your garden for a party is one way to raise funds for Thatu. This is because Thatu aims to help initiatives in South Africa to create community and school food gardens.

This is organic gardening with a difference. How many of us have used old plastic bags to build up the sides of a vegetable bed? Or turned an old tyre inside out to make a worm composter or wheelbarrow? Visit the community and school food gardens in SA and you will find all of these, along with old bedsprings, and the wheels of an old pram topped by an old tin bath to make a wheelbarrow.

South African organic gardening is a growing urban as well as rural phenomenon. It is not, as here, a conscious choice, but a necessity. But to do it in a way that is sustainable needs external help and expertise. Poor communities which do not have the resources for chemical and other inputs, learn that a use can be found for every discarded plastic bottle or tyre, or piece of cardboard.

The impetuses for these initiatives to create viable food gardens come from very different sources. One is the realisation that people in communities displaced by political or economic forces do not have the basic tools, or even the know how to grow basic food. Many are dependent on remittances from family members [often working away from home] to provide the basic essentials of food. And HIV/AIDS and lack of jobs are having devastating results on families' abilities to feed themselves.

Expertise is often lacking as to how to withstand the effects of increasing droughts and occasional floods. Which is where permaculture and organic gardening methods can provide some much needed stability.

Helped by expertise from local organisations food gardens are springing up in unlikely places in South Africa. A group of pensioners has taken over part of a school's grounds to set up allotments. They feed their families from the produce, and with the excess raise money towards their grandchildren's education.

Staff from an HIV/AIDS clinic realised, on their home visits to AIDs patients, that the families had no food. As a result a food garden was started, and is now being followed by others as funds are found.

Perhaps the most exciting development is that of school food gardens where children in urban areas and informal settlements, learn not only about organic methods of growing food, but also about recycling by tidying up the school and neighbourhood. Plastic bags have been cynically called 'the national flower of South Africa' as they adorn every dead tree and lamppost in many areas. Now they have a productive use, helping vegetable beds retain scarce water, and, along with the springs from an old bed, make a windproof fence. And 'grey' or used washing water, brought from home in recycled plastic bottles saves the costs of scarce water.

These 'eco school' gardens also serve other purposes. Gardening activities are built into the curriculum, into maths lessons [a class calculates how much money has been saved by watering a vegetable bed with 'grey' {used} water], into geography and science lessons. And with the skills they have acquired, some children may be able to find paid work or start their own small business. Parents too are involved in preparing and keeping the gardens going, and from this can start growing some food at home.

There are many lessons for us in these community initiatives. There are a few eco schools in the UK. But here many schools, and householders say that they cannot grow produce because they do not have the space. These South African food gardens show that space is not the issue. Most of them are allotment size!

Thatu came about because, on a visit to South Africa I was inspired by the efforts people in disadvantaged communities were taking to improve their wellbeing. What interested me particularly were the food gardens which had been started in schools and communities. These are the result of work of volunteers, who have been taught how to set up systems which use and recycle all available resources to get maximum and sustainable yields.

Thatu is named after a young man who died of AIDS in an area with almost no paid employment. Three months previously he had been fit enough to do heavy work, but his undernourished body could not withstand the onslaught of the HIV virus

£5,000 will provide a community school garden with basic requirements, expertise and one year's support. We are more than half way there already. And if enough people take part this summer in our Jabula garden party fundraising we will be able to get the first garden started.

So will you help us Jabula [celebrate in Bantu] this summer by organising a fundraising garden party for us? We will give you ideas and help, to show how easy it is.

Or you could help us with running our Jabula in Holy Trinity Church grounds, Clapham Common from 2p.m. to 5 p.m. on 2nd July. Any help or ideas welcome.

And do come and join us on the 2nd July.

Margery Povall