

Home Composting: A Silent Revolution

Kapil Mandawewala & Namrata Acharya

Urban kitchen gardening can be a means to having more control over how food is grown and what one eats. But to make the act more holistic and integrated, what happens on the forest floor naturally can be replicated in one's balcony through a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of effort.

Cities are designed in such a manner that the people are distanced from nature, from land. Concrete spaces are formed by eliminating nature, cutting trees and covering the earth with cement. As the responsibility of growing food is delegated to distant, 'invisible' and unknown farmers, so is the responsibility of taking charge of the waste generated in urban homes. While the former leads to a sense of alienation with the land and produce, the latter results in mounting heaps of waste and expanding landfills in cities.

In such a scenario, urban kitchen gardening can be a means to having more control over how food is grown and what one eats. But to make the act more holistic and integrated, what happens on the forest floor naturally can be replicated in one's balcony through a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of effort. Waste can be turned into an invaluable resource through the act of composting. Composting can be defined as speeding the natural process of decomposition. Many responsible urban dwellers in Delhi-NCR have been composting and taking charge of their kitchen and yard waste. We provide a snapshot of their actions and experiences here.

Snimer Sahni, a former agricultural economist from Greater Kailash, has been composting kitchen waste using a home composter with three earthen pots for quite a while. All her kitchen waste goes into the composter. "It takes about two months for the waste to decompose fully. I also recycle all paper, cardboard and most plastic waste. I am very happy with the system as very little goes into the garbage", she shares.



Shalini adding "waste" to her compost matka

Shalini Chablani is an occupational therapist with a green thumb and has been gardening for years now. She started composting six years ago. "I wanted to do something for the environment from home. I had read somewhere that the health of humans is directly connected to the health of the soil. When I began, there was initial resistance from people who shared the same space as they couldn't fathom why 'dirty' waste was being accumulated and not thrown out", she shared. Initially, her father resisted this change. But as he slowly understood that it led to no problems, but in fact produced such lovely compost, he then started distributing samples of it among neighbours and relatives and started spreading the word among all that home composting is necessary as well as beneficial. She further adds: "The process of composting not just gives compost, but the seeds in the pile also start germinating that can be then planted in the garden. I planted a *petha* sapling, and it grew into a hardy plant that gave many more *pethas* for us to consume!"

Another avid compost-maker is Rikita Dube from Gurugram. She has been composting kitchen and yard waste for over four years now. "Looking at all the waste being piled up in cities worries and scares me. I wanted to do something about this problem, and after a little bit of research, I found out that composting was a rather simple thing to do which had to start with the segregation of the 'wet' biodegradable waste and the 'dry' non-biodegradable waste. After I started doing it properly, I felt a sense of joy in not having to throw away stuff. I also observed that what was being created right in my backyard was a complex and stabilized ecosystem of various creatures—maggots, ants, birds and microbes. Interestingly, we noticed that near my garden and compost set-up, there wasn't a mosquito problem anymore. Whereas when we stepped outside in the vicinity, the mosquito situation remained the same.



It was probably because the birds that would visit the garden to eat the maggots near the composting unit would also feed on the mosquito eggs, thus keeping mosquitoes away!" She also points out that as she became more mindful of what she gets recycled and discarded, or 'what goes out', she also became more conscious of 'what comes in' by reducing waste, by not buying wasteful things and commodities that take more energy and resources to produce.

Ritika's Khamba kitchen waste composter

The silent revolution

From being merely worried but passive spectators earlier, these and many other people are now converting to dynamic change-makers. They now actively interact and understand the intricacies of nature, of the link between death and life, of waste and food. Composting is not that difficult, but it does demand that people put in sustained effort and incorporate little changes into their daily lives. With that perseverance and determination, urban people have been able to transform their gardens, their health and tackle the waste generation problem in their cities in their little way. It is a steady, silent and growing revolution. If these initiatives are encouraged at the community level by necessary and appropriate government policies, these positive effects can be multiplied manifold.

Kapil Mandawewala is the founder of Edible Routes, an organization dedicated to reviving and deepening the connection between people and the food they consume.

Namrata Acharya is a social entrepreneur currently based in Vyara, Gujarat. She likes to write, read, cycle and do various other things that interest her though she might not be too talented in them!