

# Growing on the Best



A rich, plump harvest that has thrived on organic 'feed'

**A visit to an organic farm in the Northern peninsula displayed the fertility of the land.**



Papaya in plenty

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The Thinnai organic farm spreads like a green mass of hope in the principally arid land of Chunnakam in Jaffna. Inside its vast seven acres, extra labour and expensive chemical-free rearing are used to yield a healthy artisan crop. The daily routine of the farm is clocked by the needs of the plants and the growing livestock.

This organic farm grows a large bounty of vegetables, prime among them leafy carrot, beetroot, leeks, winged beans, long beans, onions, brinjals, tomatoes and green leaves. But the organic farm is to be sweetly and aesthetically appealing as well. Hence the fruit trees stand in rows between the vegetables. The idea is to cultivate together blood-crimson pomegranates, ripe yellow bananas and shiny

emerald guavas stud the trees, creating an ornate splendour.

The baking heat of Jaffna favours pungent, bright coloured vegetables like brinjals, onions, long beans and ladies' fingers, while the coy pale upcountry cabbage needs the shelter of a greenhouse.

Running an organic farm is quite a delicate and an expensive task. It's like going back in time to do things the hard, primitive way. The soil itself has to be nourished laboriously, ploughing and adding manure repeated many times. Not a whiff of chemical taints the air here, though of course, as a consequence, the effect of weeds and pests have little hindrance.

The typical day starts first with watering. The farmworkers operate the bubbling sprinklers, which is a tricky business, because it's all an interconnected maze, requiring the correct skill to know which valves to open. Then the farmworkers can get to the shade and prepare the biological pesticides, the organic fertilizer and other concoctions needed to be made.

The fertilizer is fermented in big barrels where cow dung and urine is mixed with leaves of *Gliricidia*, those highly useful plants to have in a farm, multifunctioning as fencing, rough fodder, firewood, raw manure, intercropping and also acts as wind barriers in the farm. Apart from the mixing up of concoctions, the farmworkers also make sure that planting happens correctly.

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The male labourers plough and prepare beds for the harvest while the female labourers do the weeding, harvesting and planting.



The arid earth has nourished orange carrots

Everyday, a new list of fresh produce needed for the day is sent to the farm and is harvested at three in the afternoon, to be sent to The Thinnai Hotel and the balance to Colombo.

Sickness and pests are kept at bay by natural means. The strong scent released by the Orange marigold and Holy Basil is nauseous to the harmful insects. The method which is used to stop rampant weeds is also natural, called 'mulching'. This means making a thick, dry carpet of old hay on the soil so that the weeds can't germinate. Mulching is not hundred percent fail proof. But that, inevitably, is the way with biological methods.

Soon, introducing livestock will complete and enliven the farm. The poultry they rear will be free range and they will also raise goats and cattle. Once the farm has grown to adult size, a proper green paradise, guests can put up there, plucking the vegetables to be carried for their dinner, slicing pomegranates to suck at pearly seeds, or assist in milking and the collecting of eggs from the farm.

