Sky Garden

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We climbed up the stairs to the upper floor balcony, where rows of neatly arranged plants could be seen. A net was draped over the garden to minimize the harshness of the sun, while the drip irrigation system was laid out in symmetry. There was a sudden coolness when we reached the Wellawatta's home garden that reflected lush greenery of various shades. The cute little plants were bearing fruit, with over 20 varieties of vegetables all planted in a small area, we had arrived at the unique Sky Garden.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe. | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

The lush green Sky Garden has over 20 varieties of vegetables.

Jagath Wellawatta.

Jagath and Shalika Wellawatta were thinking of what to do with the unused space, which was their upper floor balcony. During the lockdown period while the entire family was at home, a thought process had entailed to convert it into a home garden. Following the Urban Home Garden concept that is also the think-ing of the Government, the duo felt that their Sky Garden would be a good example for others to follow as well. In urbanized Colombo, where there is a limited amount of land almost every house has a balcony, a rooftop or an unfinished upper level that could be easily utilized for this purpose. The soil mixture is prepared by the Sky Garden team, where four such soil mixtures were first tested by the Agriculture Research Institute and the best was selected. The plant seeds are sourced from areas that are known to have the best quality seeds of a particular plant. Therefore, seeds are sourced from areas such as Nuwara Eliya, Balangoda and Baddegama, to name a few. Thus the seeds, which are of the highest quality are planted in the rich soil mixture resulting in a long lifespan and a greater harvest from the plants. Organic fertilizer is added every two weeks. As artificial pesticides are not used, the vegetable plants tend to attract insects, but that as Shalika Wellawatta explains is

natural and they are currently testing a kohomba (neem) oil as an insect repellent. The duo stress on using seeds as opposed to plant saplings since if a sapling is planted then a home gardener would only be able to get only one harvest, where as plants from seeds would produce multiple harvests.

Nutritious greens such as gotu kola have been planted in coconut husks.

The plant seeds are sourced from areas that are known to have the best quality seeds.

A variety of chili known as waraniya.

Beautifully green capsicums.

A full grown bell pepper.

Hybrid tomatoes.

The multitude of vegetables in this 20ft x 20ft home garden is amazing. Amounting to over 20 varieties, the range includes types of chilies, capsicum, turmeric, bell

pepper, celery, ladies' fingers, two types of cabbage, tomatoes, turnip, know-cole, ginger, manioc, two types of egg plant, bitter gourd, snake gourd, banana, green leafs such as *gendha, gotukola, kangkung* and *neeramulli* and much more. Drip irrigation has been setup so that the plants are watered twice a day."In Sri Lanka, agriculture has been an integral part of our culture and it inculcates the quality of Upeksha in a person, because you plant the seed, nurture it carefully to grow, and you touch the plant and collect the harvest yourself," explains Jagath Wellawatta. It is an experience to come home and find that time to work in the home garden either in the morning, evening or during the weekend. Jagath Wellawatta says that they want to encourage people especially professionals to find that gap in their time, where they can engage in home gardening and the Sky Garden team will support them throughout the process.

"Many professionals such as doctors, lawyers and engineers like to grow their own vegetables at home. However, they may not know how to do so. That is where we would help them by setting up the home garden, and continuously supporting them through the process," explained Jagath Wellawatta. Such home garden's can provide a sufficient quantity of vegetable for household consumption, while also providing the opportunity for the excess to be sold. The idea is to have a stall, where the sources of the vegetables are displayed so that when people know that the vegetables have been grown by professionals, who like them value organic produce, the consumer will be happy. "Home gardening is another way that the entire family comes together to plant the seeds, look after and nurture the plants and also to collect the harvest and gather the vegetables," explains Shalika Wellawatta while collecting some of the newly picked vegetables in the Sky Garden. Each plant would produce a harvest on different days, thus providing a selection of fresh organic vegetables for monthly household consumption. While you require an effort to nurture a home garden to its full potential, there is pleasure as well as satisfaction in doing so where everyone can engage in this fruitful exercise.

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Shalika and Jagath Wellawatta introduced a new concept.

Nivithi vines (Spinach) grow along the intwined ropes.

Red cabbage and green cabbage can also be grown.

A refreshing basket of crunchy wholesome veggies.