

Malaysian woman saves about RM500 a year by planting greens in her garden

Zarah Mokhlis rarely buys vegetables anymore. That's because, since the pandemic, she and her family have been growing their own vegetables and harvesting them for their meals.

Before cooking, all the 44-year-old mother of three needs to do is to step out into her garden and survey what's ready for harvesting.

Zarah has about 12 types of vegetables growing in her garden – from leafy greens like sawi (green mustard), kangkung (water convolvulus) and winged beans to Japanese cucumber, lettuce and okra. She even has herbs like coriander, mint and kaffir lime thriving in planter boxes.

"We have been planting vegetables in our garden since the (first) movement control order (in 2020). I plant whatever that grows in abundance. These days, I only buy imported vegetables like celery, broccoli and cauliflower," says the homemaker.

Zarah and her family live in a corner-lot terrace house in Bandar Menjalara, Kepong in Kuala Lumpur.

The garden isn't big, measuring 3m x 21m, but Zarah and her husband, engineer Ahmad Fairuz Zainudin 45, have utilised the limited garden space to grow quite a range of herbs, vegetables and gourds for their family's consumption. After all, it's nice to be able to eat a variety of produce.

One of the current highlights in their garden is a plump watermelon that's growing in a "hammock" made from raffia string.

They reuse empty mineral water bottles to plant chillies and aubergines. Kangkung flourishes in planter boxes neatly arranged by the fence. Ahmad has also erected a few trellises for creeper plants like winged beans, Japanese cucumber and bitter melon.

In March, Malaysia's inflation rate – as measured by the consumer price index (CPI) – increased 2.2% from last year, according to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia**. Continuous rainfall across the country has also reduced crop yield and has caused a 20-30% dip in the supply of vegetables, according to news reports.

Zarah too is feeling the inflation in food prices and is trying to stretch her ringgit as best as she can. By planting greens in her garden, she is not only moving towards a more sustainable lifestyle but is also spending less for her groceries.

She's grateful that she has space in her landed property to plant various types of greens.

She's not the only one. Increasingly, since the pandemic, even those living in apartments have started cultivating leafy vegetables in pots and glass jars in their living rooms, kitchens, or balconies.

What's more important, Zarah says, is that her family is consuming fresh crops that are free from chemicals.

“My monthly vegetable bills have dropped significantly, about 50%. I only spend about RM30 a month on imported vegetables. I encourage my children to eat vegetables from our garden that we grow ourselves as they are nutritious, fresh and minus pesticides.”

Green thumb family

Zarah was never interested in gardening... till the pandemic struck. Like many people, she assumed she didn't have green fingers.

“When we moved into this neighbourhood in 2006, we didn't plant anything in our garden except for two palm trees. Gardening seemed difficult and I never thought it was my cup of tea,” Zarah explains.

But things changed during the movement control order. With extra time on her hands during the stay-at-home period, Zarah and Ahmad decided to get to know the people involved in their neighbourhood community garden.

“Our community garden is pretty active. Many of our neighbours gather to plant all sorts of vegetables in an empty plot of land. Many seniors attend to the garden and are happy to teach anyone who is interested in cultivating vegetables. And they generously share their fresh produce with others too.

“During one of these visits, one of the avid gardeners handed me some seeds and vegetables seedlings. I brought them home and encouraged my youngest son Muhammad Idriz,¹⁰ to help us cultivate the vegetables,” she recalled.

Zarah and Ahmad also began reading about growing vegetables and surfed the Internet for ideas on how to plant greens in their garden.

“The Internet is an excellent source of information. In no time, we could find many articles on the benefits of home-grown vegetables.

“There are also many tutorials on how to plant leafy greens and creeping plants on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram and Facebook,” says Zarah.

They then started buying seedlings and plant boxes from plant nurseries and e-shopping platforms.

Her husband loves to build and modify things, and so he started making trellises for the creeping plants. He even created a water harvesting system and makes compost from kitchen waste.

Over time, their older children, Muhammad Malik, 16, and Rania Yasmin, 14, were also roped in to help in the garden. They started off with small tasks like planting seeds in mineral water bottles and planter boxes.

“Muhammad Malik and Rania were tasked with germinating seedlings in reusable containers like coffee cups while Muhammad Idriz waters the plants. After several weeks, we could already harvest kangkung, sawi and chilli. The kids were thrilled as we never expected to grow vegetables in our garden. Slowly, I too developed an interest in gardening.

“Muhammad Idriz planted kangkung, and he is so happy that there's been a constant supply of kangkung in our garden. We always share our harvest of vegetables with our neighbours and family members. My father jokes that I can open up a pasar sayur (vegetable market) at my home,” she says.

Zarah says that gardening has also taught her children new skills and they have learnt a lot about nature by growing their own food. And, she notes, they are happier spending time in the garden than playing games on their devices.

“Rania enjoys sleeping in the hammock in the porch, while the boys love to potter around the garden. They are also learning about upcycling, composting and water harvesting.

“The kids are excited to see the fruits of their labour. Gardening helps us to bond as a family. And it teaches our kids about responsibility as they need to care for their plants,” she says.

In the last three years, Zarah’s garden has become quite “popular” in their neighbourhood and quite often, neighbours stop by to give them more seedlings, organic fertiliser and even plants.

“My house is the end lot. Next to my garden is a pathway that leads to the neighbourhood playground. So whenever Ahmad’s in the garden, he always talks to people who walk past our house. I think it’s nice as we are slowly getting to know our community better. For 16 years, I didn’t know many people in my taman. Never did I think gardening would enable us to form a bond.”

She feels anyone can plant vegetables with a little knowledge, passion and creativity.

“Gardening isn’t difficult. I think many people have the ability to grow vegetable, ornamental plants or flowers. But, we need the right guidance. I’ve been lucky to have neighbours who’ve taught me how to trim the branches of my plants or provided me with organic fertiliser,” she says.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/living/2022/10/07/malaysian-woman-saves-about-rm500-a-year-by-planting-greens-in-her-garden>