

Urban home gardening movement in Kerala

Role of social media collectives

Anita Pinheiro

Urban home gardening, limited to private residential spaces, has a potential to address the urban food supply chain, when expanded. In Kerala, urban home gardening, supported by governmental intervention and people's social media-based initiative has become a wider societal movement.

Light weight designed grow bags are used for rooftop garden



Kerala, a state with rural-urban continuum, is overcoming its geographical and spatial limitations in agricultural expansion through extending vegetable production from farms to home gardens in rural and urban areas. Since 2012, the state government of Kerala has made a huge hike in budget allocation for vegetable production in the state through ‘Vegetable Development Program’ (VDP). Urban home gardening received a vital place through allocation of nearly 10 percent of the total annual allocation for VDP. One of the key strategies was to extend vegetable production into otherwise unused spaces - households, schools, and other government and private institutions.

The support included subsidized (75% subsidy) distribution of grow bags planted with different vegetable seedlings, enabling beneficiaries to set up an urban home garden at a cost as low as Rs.500 on the roof tops and balconies. The light weight design of grow bags and use of coir pith in the potting mixture have contributed to reducing the weight of containers, thereby reducing fear of damage to the home roof structure. The government subsidy (ranging from 50%-75%) also supports various ecofriendly inputs like biocontrol agents and organic pesticides, water-saving technologies such as wick and drip irrigation, and domestic waste management units (pipe composts, portable biogas plants etc.) enabling recycling of the household wastes. The subsidized inputs were complemented by support of suitable institutional mechanisms - government research organizations for development of space-saving and resource-efficient cultivation methods; extension services by *Krishi Bhavans*; training programmes and establishment of urban agro-service centres for easy and affordable access of gardening inputs and technologies. Home garden vegetable production was also given a cultural dimension by linking it with the traditional festivals of *Onam* and *Vishu*.

Government provided subsidized eco-friendly inputs and created institutional mechanisms to support initiatives

People's response to the government interventions

The following observations are based on the review of various government documents, news reports, a household survey conducted in Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, and a questionnaire survey conducted among participants of a physical meet up organized in Thrissur by HOPE foundation across various FB-agriculture groups of Kerala.

The primary survey conducted in Thiruvananthapuram Corporation indicated that the government interventions have been instrumental for many urban residents to start home gardening. Besides reviving the traditional practice, with subsidy support, it was easier for the people to quickly adopt vegetable gardening in their households with low financial investment. Another major reason that sparked people's interest in home grown vegetables has been health concerns with regard to awareness on dangerous levels of harmful pesticide residues in commercially available vegetables including those sold as ‘organic’. The results brought out by Kerala Agriculture University since 2013 in the print and visual news media helped in building awareness. Memories of the endosulfan pesticide tragedy, increasing incidence of cancer rate alarmed the people to think about alternative options. In this context, home garden vegetable production adopting organic and agroecological approach seemed to be the best option.

Social media, particularly Facebook groups created in the vernacular language, Malayalam, have become a platform for popularisation of these home gardening practices in Kerala. Soon, home gardening in rural and urban areas became a social movement

Thus, in Kerala, the home garden movement picked up with awareness on agroecological options supported by government's Organic Agriculture Policy (2010) and supportive interventions for self-reliant vegetable production and adoption.

Building social media networks

Social media platform Facebook was used widely to create networks of interested people. Among the active Facebook (FB) based agriculture groups in Malayalam, more than ten focus primarily on home garden cultivation. While specific objectives of these collectives vary, most of these collectives share a common ground - building

Table1: List of FB agriculture groups with membership over 1 lakh

FB-group	Membership as on 31st January 2022	Year of formation
Krishi (Agriculture)	454743	2014
Nammude adukkalathottam (Our kitchen garden)	409613	2014
Krishibhoomi (Farmland)	391139	2014
Karshika vipani (Online Organic Agricultural Market)	153532	2014
Adukkalathottam (Kitchen garden)	137333	2016

a healthy eating practice through agroecology-based home garden cultivation of vegetables and fruits. Many of these collectives extend their support to both rural and urban home gardens, while being largely beneficial to the urban residents with space and resource constraints. However, there are also some FB groups that intend to cater primarily to the urban home gardeners. Some collectives focus primarily on providing a marketing space for sales by the gardeners themselves of home-grown surpluses. Until the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, many of these groups have organized annual in-person meet-ups to further strengthen the networks.

Learning from each other

One of the challenges many people faced, in the initial phase of starting home gardens was, lack of a support system that can rapidly respond to their gardening-related queries. Facebook groups evolved as a convenient option for many of them, as it did not affect their work hours. Another advantage is the availability of a multitude of experts, both trained agricultural personnel including scientists and expert home gardeners, to respond to their queries. These collectives quickly became a platform for learning from each other's knowledge and experience.

Queries related to almost all aspects of home gardening are posted on these groups and people get rapid response. Common discussions include agroecological methods, development of home-based remedies for crop management and innovative space-and resource saving methods of cultivation. Use of photos and videos of crops or gardening methods helped to get a better grasp of the topic. Field visits to well-established urban home gardeners have helped in learning innovative gardening practices and technologies. These collectives help newcomers immensely in gathering basics of gardening, less dependence on external inputs, adoption of less

expensive gardening and effective utilization of available space.

The upsurge of home gardening movement in urban areas triggered a platform for development of innovative technologies of practices for space-resource efficient home gardening. Many people who developed these technologies and practices freely shared their ideas through FB groups while others have found potential buyers of their technologies from these groups.

Fostering competitiveness and recognition

Before onset of COVID pandemic, many of the FB collectives were highly active in organizing competitions and challenges to encourage home gardening. These initiatives were varied. They all focused on fostering the momentum on encouraging innovative home garden practices maximizing cultivation of diverse vegetable varieties organically in limited spaces available. During the competition/challenge period, participants upload photos with description of vegetable cultivation from day one to final harvest. For some of the competitions, recognitions and awards were distributed during physical meet-ups.

To give it a festive fervor, these initiatives were held coinciding with the traditional festivals of Kerala especially, during *Onam*, the harvest festival of Kerala, so that people can have a safe-to-eat feast. Some of these competitions are named after the cultural connections of the state such as *sambar challenge*, *Onathinu oru muram pachakkari* (A Winnowful of Vegetables for *Onam*). These initiatives were either organized by the specific FB groups or across the FB agriculture groups by the interested parties.

One of the FB-based home gardening challenge named *Onathinu oru muram pachakkari* led by P.C. Harikumar in 2016, an agricultural officer with the state government, was later incorporated as the mainstream intervention. Being a rooftop gardener himself for over a decade, Harikumar realized the importance of boosting home garden production across Kerala. Accordingly, he prepared a proposal to the Government and successfully got it mainstreamed. The proposal was soon accepted and incorporated into the government interventions. (See Box 1)

Box 1: Onathinu oru muram pachakkari

Onathinu oru muram pachakkari challenge, organised across various FB agriculture groups, is the brainchild of P.C. Harikumar a.k.a Harikumar Mavelikkara. He encouraged people to plan for festive season ahead in order to be able to produce sufficient quantities of vegetables from their home garden.

In 2015, Harikumar posted this challenge *Onathinu oru muram pachakkari* on FB group, one month before the scheduled start of planting the seedlings. The plan was to start planting seedlings approximately 85-90 days before Onam so that adequate quantities of vegetables can be produced for the entire period of Onam celebrations. Once the challenge started, every week he posted tips and techniques of gardening, how to take care of vegetables etc. Throughout the period of cultivation, from planting to harvest, interested people shared photos of progress of their garden on a daily or weekly basis. In 2015, approximately 15000 families participated in this challenge, as Harikumar recalls. The challenge

was continued for three consecutive years across various FB platforms and in some years, similar challenge was taken up to meet extra vegetable requirements for Vishu festival season as well.

In 2016, to expand the challenge beyond social media, Harikumar prepared a proposal and discussed the idea with the minister at the FB meet-up in Thirssur. Later, in 2017, the state government introduced *Onathinu oru muram pachakkari* component under VDP, as a means of promotion of home garden vegetable production targeted at Onam festival season. In this special drive, assorted seed kits were distributed freely to school-going children, farmers, households, through media etc. Apart from seed kits, vegetable seedlings were also distributed at subsidised rates to households through Krishi Bhavans. The *Onathinu oru muram pachakkari* component is an ongoing component under VDP.

Source: <https://keralaagriculture.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/021/06/Final-VDP-2021-22-Working-Instructions.pdf>

Low cost vegetable gardens in urban households

Sharing and exchanging inputs

The FB collectives also fostered a culture of sharing and exchanging of gardening inputs, primarily seeds and seedlings. Many gardeners prefer traditional and local vegetable varieties that are not commonly available in the markets. The FB collectives facilitate preservation and dissemination of seeds of these varieties. Exchange and free distribution of seeds takes place throughout the year using the postal services. People with surplus seeds mention the list of available seeds on the FB groups and if someone wants the seeds, they send a stamped envelope within another envelope mentioning the name of seeds they need. This way, the person distributing the seeds does not incur any additional cost. Some of the collectives also maintain 'seed banks' so that people with surplus seeds can send it to the seed bank. Free exchange of seedlings and other inputs takes place mainly during the physical meet-ups. Many friendships developed owing to active interaction in these FB groups. The physical meet-ups create a great opportunity for strengthening the bonds and friendships through gifting and exchange.



FB based markets linking farmers and consumers

What if the home-gardeners want to sell their surplus harvest? In the early years of home gardening movement, especially when everyone was more interested in gifting the surplus, this question seemed to be a surprise to many, if not strange. The admins of the FB group named “കാർഷിക വിപണി Online Organic Agricultural Market” pursued this idea in Thrissur municipal corporation. A weekly Sunday market was started in a school premises in Thrissur city so that farmers, mostly home gardeners, can sell their products directly to the customers avoiding middlemen. Later on, they shifted the venue to a nearby club and the details of the available products with the respective farmers were posted on the FB group, every Saturday.

Nattuchantha - a niche market of organic produce was established. The weekly market called ‘*nattuchantha*’ entrusts upon selling completely organically grown produce from urban and peri-urban home gardens, while enabling ‘knowing the address of the farmer’.

The *nattuchantha* is organised by the FB group ‘Karshika Vipani Online Agriculture Market’ and the interested farmers contact the admins of this FB group to be able to sell their products through Sunday market/*nattuchantha*. If they succeed in passing the scrutiny process, they inform the group admins/organisers what products they will be bringing each time. The FB group admins cum organisers of *nattuchantha* display the details of vegetables/other products and respective farmers’ names every Saturday evening (except when Sunday market do not function due to COVID related restrictions) on the page of FB group ‘Karshika Vipani Online Agriculture Market’. This helps the interested members of the FB group in the locality to visit the Sunday market/*nattuchantha* for purchase.

The scrutiny process is however, stringent. Through discussions and field visits, the organisers of ‘*nattuchantha*’ make sure that only organic inputs are used for cultivation and no chemical pesticides are used along with organic inputs, as has been observed in some

Recycled cans for growing plants



instances. The products are considered reliable and can be tracked. In most instances, the producer, preferring to call themselves as farmers, sell their produce themselves enabling the customers to make a direct relation with the farmer. The '*nattuchantha*' provides an opportunity to earn extra income while creating and strengthening social bonding between the farmers and customers. Many of the farmers in this '*nattuchantha*' come from the borders or outskirts of the administrative city limits and therefore have relatively larger cultivation area than those from the core urban area. However, farmers can bring even small quantities of surplus produce, even 200 grams as has been witnessed by the author, a few years ago. When organic products are in huge demand and its reliability becomes a major concern, the Thrissur urban '*nattuchantha*' organized by the FB collective provides a platform that functions on the basis of trust, that can be verified. The major take-away from this initiative is its attempt to bring the independent initiatives of urban and peri-urban production into the larger fabric of urban food systems. Over the years, similar initiatives have been started in a few other district centers by other FB collectives. However, only a few of them have been successful to keep up the emphasis on complete organic production and 'know the customer' aspect.

Mathrubhumi daily, one of the oldest and most popular Malayalam daily has reported about the *nattuchantha* organised by the FB group Karshika Vipani Organic Agriculture Market in Thrissur. This created further momentum.

After the onset of pandemic, the number of farmers selling their products in this *nattuchantha* has been drastically reduced, from 15-20 farmers before COVID to 6-8, after it restarted after the lockdown. Although many farmers are expressing their interest to be part of the *nattuchantha*, many of these interested farmers are not able to pass the stringent scrutiny to ensure complete organic production methods. Moreover, the Sunday market organized by the FB group 'Karshika Vipani Online Agriculture Market' is an additional source of income and not a primary source of income for these farmers. This Sunday market/*nattuchantha* is still functioning at Banerjee memorial club, one of the oldest clubs of Thrissur. The only time(s) the Sunday market could not function was during lockdown period. However, during these periods, the farmers of

nattuchantha arranged home deliveries to a limited extent.

Only *nattuchantha* of the Facebook initiative functions on the principles of 'know your farmer' and complete organic production methods. Otherwise, many FB groups including 'Karshika Vipani Online Agriculture Market' permit the members to find customers (across India) through the posting in FB groups and admins do not take responsibility to ensure the quality of the products.

Challenges faced

Like any other arena, the involvement of FB collectives in urban home gardening was also affected by the Covid pandemic. Physical meet-ups came to an end, competitions and challenges have been halted, seed bank and seed sharing activities drastically reduced, and the '*nattuchantha*' has been stopped for over a year. Despite these challenges, the involvement of FB collectives reiterates the potential of social media in contributing to transition to sustainable agri-food systems while reviving traditional home garden practices.

References

Aarya, U. R., "**Thinking Out of the Basket**". The Times of India. 20th August 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/thinking-out-of-the-basket/articleshow/60133326.cms>

Anita Pinheiro

Adjunct Faculty, School of Global Affairs,
Dr. B.R Ambedkar University Delhi.
E-mail: anitapadiyoor@gmail.com
apinheiro@aud.ac.in