

WHY TO OWN A ROOF TOP GARDEN IN URBAN AREAS

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The urbanites have stronger purchasing power and with extra money in the pocket they have choice to choose what to eat. With increasing financial sufficiency the focus has shifted more towards food for being healthy rather than just eating for surviving. But the irony is that with increasing wealth we have lesser and lesser choices to choose the source and quality of our food. Some of the grown up urbanites can still relate to the traditional farming and the traditional food and food habits. But the most of the other urban people especially below 30 years of age are definitely unaware of the bliss of the fragrance of village air, the richness of fresh milk and fresh vegetables, the piousness of fresh cow dung in village mud homes, the richness of unprocessed grains, vegetables and *desi* meat.

Today we are having sufficient money but it cannot buy any of these experiences. The big air-conditioned super marts offer us a choice of pick processed grains, legumes, flours, ready to eat bakery items, processed and packed juices with loads of preservatives, exotic shining, clean and appealing fruits and vegetables. As with improvement in the lifestyle we prefer to be more 'hygienic', even preferring to drink costly processed water and purchase fruit and vegetables which are clean, devoid of any blemish or insect damage. But these clean and fresh looking fruits, vegetables and grocery items that we consume are also likely have high residues of harmful chemicals far above the permissible limits prescribed by the Food Safety Standards Authority. Several toxic pesticides are now part of our diet. Some of the popular vegetables like brinjal, tomato, leafy vegetables, gourds etc, are more prone to pest and disease and thus have extremely harmful levels of pesticides. Consuming pesticide-laden fruits and vegetables for a long period of time can lead to severe health problems and may even prove fatal in long run. The toxins in pesticides have toxin which may affect the nervous system and other important organs such as liver and kidney. They may even lead to skin problems, loss of weight, sleeplessness irritability and even cancer.

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So where is the solution to such frightening scenario? How can we have safe food? How can we safeguard our own health and health of our children? Isn't there any way out? There are not many convincing answers.

The lack of awareness combined with casual approach towards self and family health is the core to the problem. We are more than happy to gulp down any processed soda or processed juices, eat processed food, and visibly 'clean' vegetables. Today we are more price conscious than being conscious towards our health and we are surrounded by vendors with acute commercial intentions. They are happy to sell you 'cheap and unhealthy food' because you are happy to purchase 'cheap, visibly clean and tasty food'. The lack of knowledge of the ill effects of these 'cheap and unhealthy food' and our casual and sedentary lifestyle is the main bottlenecks that we have to break through. If we demand safe food we will get safe food though on comparatively higher costs!! However till such a time arrives when we have to find ways to safeguard ourselves from unsafe food. To some extent we can reduce superficial pesticides by wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly about five to six times under running water. Some of the fruits and vegetables can be peeled before eating fresh or cooking. Avoiding purchase of big, shiny and extra clean fruits, vegetables, cereals and pulses reduce chances of pesticide exposure. Blanching fruits and vegetables after washing is also a good approach to reduce pesticide load. To blanch cut vegetables can be put either in hot water or steam for few moments.

It is always a good idea to befriend a farmer who will provide you pesticide free organic fruits and vegetables. However, the best approach is to grow our own food to best possible extent, especially fresh vegetables. But the space constraints in urban area would not allow us to take up cultivation of all food crops. But for the sake of our own health we can utilize whatever space available in, around and top of our homes to grow some fruits and vegetables. Growing small quantities of fruits and vegetables on roof top gardens (RTGs) is very easy and practically anyone practice roof top gardening. These roof top gardens can provide fresh vegetables like tomato, chilli, okra, brinjal, beans, gourds, root crops, etc. at least for few days every week according to the prevailing season. RTGs are especially suited for leafy vegetables like amaranths, spinach, *poi*, mint, coriander, etc. Several daily use medicinal plants like *tulasi*, lemon grass, *bacha* can also add value and diversity to the garden.

There are few perquisites for successful RTGs:

- ✓ First we need to safeguard the roof by water proofing it. You may consider constructing long potting channels along the sidewalls of the roof with sufficient

clearance from the roof surface. This will ensure that while we enjoy farming on roof we should not be having leaking roofs.

- ✓ It is advisable to keep the weight of potting media to minimal possible. For this purpose we can use vermiculite, vermicompost, cocopeat, etc.
- ✓ Using strong alkathene based grow bags while doing away with heavy cement or ceramic pots, further reduces the load on the roof.
- ✓ All pots should have drainage vents at the bottom or the sides.
- ✓ Source of water is invariably is roof top water tanks. Motorized self watering systems connected to these tanks with timers ensure regular watering.
- ✓ Erecting green shade nets on the roofs protect the succulent plants from direct sun light and heat.
- ✓ We need to decide the composition of different species of plants based on our personal preferences like number of flowering and ornamental plants, vegetable plants, fruit plants, medicinal plants etc.
- ✓ The urbanites have now become more and more enthusiastic and artistic about their RTGs that they create several features like fountains, lawn patches, micro-temples, sitting areas, etc. Creating such structures would require specialist's help.
- ✓ We should create structures for composting kitchen waste. Composting kitchen waste in small quantities also solves the issue of regular supply of organic fertilizers. The taste and flavor of organically grown vegetables are distinctly better.
- ✓ As we may desire that no chemical pesticides enter our RTGs, we need to ensure regular supply of organic fertilizers and pesticides for our rooftops.

The well managed RTGs provide regular fresh vegetables for the family. Regular work in RTGs does wonders to self health. Small activities like watering the plants, weeding, application of manures etc give mental peace and sense of satisfaction. The roof top gardens ensure that whatever food we consume that comes from your RTGs is devoid of any pesticide or chemical fertilizers.





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