

Tata Memorial goes organic for a cause

The centre has offered half an acre of its land in Kharghar to a group of volunteers, who are growing organic food for cancer-affected children

RAMA CHAKRABORTY



The group of young professionals who have volunteered to grow organic fruits and vegetables for cancer-affected children. (R) To keep the soil wet, they have placed plastic bottles filled with water and punctured at the mouth with a jute string, which releases water drop-by-drop over 5 to 6 days

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The Advanced Centre for Treatment, Research and Education in Cancer (ACTREC), a state-of-the-art research and development facility of Tata Memorial Centre located at Kharghar, has offered approximately 21,780 square feet of land (half an acre) in its compound to a group of volunteers to grow organic food for cancer-affected children.

The children hail from below-poverty-line families and come to the centre from across the country. While the treatment is provided free of cost by the hospital, the accommodation and nutritional support is taken care of by St. Jude India Childcare Centres, a non-profit organisation that works in association with Tata Memorial Centre.

The group of around eight volunteers, who come from different professional backgrounds, meet every Wednesday to grow organic food for the 41-member children's facility at the St Jude Building in the centre's premises.

Tyaba Bilgrami, manager at St Jude says, "This land was lying vacant for years. With permission from ACTREC director Dr Rajiv Sarin we decided to use it for organic farming around six months ago. Pesticides can harm the already weakened immune systems of the children who have undergone chemotherapy. We hope the organic food will make them get better soon."

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niture dealer by profession. Last year, Rego had been growing organic food for the patients' canteen at National Burns Hospital at Airoli. Word spread and he was invited to take charge of the Tata Memorial plot by Bilgrami.

Rego explains, "To improve fertility of the soil without fertilisers, we have prepared a number of soil beds by using natural residue such as coconut shells, fallen leaves, banana stock and branches. All such residue are rich in nutrients and decompose over a period of three to four months to form fertile soil. We plant seeds in this residue, cover it with soil and let it grow into fruits and vegetable."

So far, the group has planted a variety of organic vegetables including, radish, chilli, okra, egg plant, cauliflower, spinach, mustard, groundnuts, fenugreek leaves and green peas, and fruits such as guava, lime, papaya and pineapple. To keep the soil wet throughout the day, Rego has placed plastic bottles filled with water and punctured at the mouth with a jute string that releases the water drop-by-drop over five to six days.

Through his posts about organic farming on various e-groups, over a period of time Rego has attracted volunteers who are helping grow the organic food. The group comprises people of all ages and from diverse walks of life.

It includes 30-year-old graphic designer Sky Williams from Devon, England, who came to India two years ago on vacation and stayed on ever since. "I learnt about Rego's initiative through friends. My family in England is into organic farming, so I was interested in

ing rooftop, but doing something for these children feels real," he says.

Wanting to explore new avenues that would bring her close to nature is what lured 30-year-old freelance writer Sabita Rajendran into joining the group. "I am passionate about growing my own food and feel bad about the quality of life we live within concrete structures. It was a joy to find such a huge space within the city. I have also discovered the joy of serving these children who are quarantined for days during their treatment," she says.

Udit Aggarwal, a 30-year-old graphic designer, was bored with attending retreats every weekend and has taken delight in growing organic food for these children. "While working the whole week, the chaos in the city starts getting to you. So I used to take off for excursions. But that didn't feel fulfilling. Now, working for a good cause feels gratifying," he says.

Sharing their passion is Lawrence D'Souza, 40, a telecommunications executive at a BPO, who has an evening job and conveniently finds time to indulge in organic farming during the day.

And there's Trupti Kedari, 25, an assistant director of TV serials. Whenever she doesn't have a shoot going on, you will find her at the centre, attending to the farm.

The worthy venture is yet in its infancy though, and does not generate more than a few kilos of produce each day.

However, by next month end the volunteers hope to provide for at least five to six families on a daily basis. And, by the end of next monsoon, they aim to generate enough pro-

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The group, which call themselves Green Souls Mumbai, is headed by 54-year-old Julius Rego, an organic farmer by passion and a furniture dealer by profession. Last year, Rego had been growing organic food for the patients' canteen at National Burns Hospital at Airoli. Word spread and he was invited to take charge of the Tata Memorial plot by Bilgrami.

Rego explains, "To improve fertility of the soil without fertilisers, we have prepared a number of soil beds by using natural residue such as coconut shells, fallen leaves, banana stock and branches. All such residue are rich in nutrients and decompose over a period of three to four months to form fertile soil. We plant seeds in this residue, cover it with soil and let it grow into fruits and vegetable."

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Wanting to explore new avenues that would bring her close to nature is what lured 30-year-old freelance writer Sabita Rajendran into joining the group. "I am passionate about growing my own food and feel bad about the quality of life we live within concrete structures. It was a joy to find such a huge space within the city. I have also discovered the joy of serving these children who are quarantined for days during their treatment," she says.

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