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Cut costs, plant your own vegetables

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WHENEVER Dr Rokiah Talib, 64, visits her sister in their hometown of Ipoh, she brings back plants and vegetables. And this tickles her sister.

"My sister thinks it's funny because it should be the other way around," says Dr Rokiah, a former sociology lecturer.

Rokiah's garden in Section 14, PJ, is full of greenery with both ornamental plants and edible vegetables such as pumpkins, spinach, ulam, chilli, tomatoes and many other herbs. There are also spring onions, lime and pandan plants.

"I come from a kampung and we used to grow plants everywhere. It remains a habit until now," she says.

Usually, her maids and gardeners tend the plants under her supervision.

"When my children or friends come around, they go into the garden and ask what I have for the day," says Dr Rokiah.

Her garden is also full of herbs -- one of which is claimed to give a better night's sleep and another that is good for lowering blood pressure. Outside her fence are papaya and rambutan trees.

Dr Rokiah says she does not use pesticides on her vegetables. It might not look as nice but to Dr Rokiah "A chilli is just a chilli," she says.

More importantly she saves on chillies, which are priced at RM10 per kg these days.

Dr Rokiah seldom buys vegetables, and estimates a saving of two-thirds on what she would spend on her food bill. She only spends about RM5 a week on vegetables for the consumption of three in the house.

"One bunch of vegetables costs a lot now, and all these small things add up in the end," she says, adding that there is the convenience of going into the garden and taking whatever she wants at anytime.

For Dr Rokiah, there is also the satisfaction of eating produce from her own garden.

"Maybe it's psychological, but I think home-grown vegetables are sweeter," she says.

During the economic crisis in 1997/98 the government encouraged edible landscape gardening, which meant the planting of vegetables and herbs in one's own garden, says Associate Professor Dr Siti Aishah Hassan of the Crop Science Department of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

"Until now, some people have used the concept in residential areas regardless of the space they have," she says.

In some houses, the colour purple is provided by brinjals, while chillies provide the red. Long beans, meanwhile, can be grown on a fence as a creeper. Pumpkin, another creeper, can reduce weeds as it covers the ground.

"There is an aesthetic value to grow these vegetables at home," says Dr Siti Aishah.

People living in apartments or flats can also plant vegetables -- in small pots or using the soil-less culture system.

They can use the inexpensive cocoa peat, padi husk and oil palm bunches which can be purchased in stores.

According to Dr Siti Aishah, almost anything can be planted and grown -- from tomatoes to ulam and spinach to chillies.

There is also the water-based hydroponics system, which is clean and simple to use. It was even known as the 3T system -- *tanam, tinggal dan tuai* (plant, leave and harvest), says Dr Siti Aishah. The system can be used almost instantly.

Besides reducing cost, Dr Siti Aishah says, these vegetables are safer to consume as there is minimum chemical residue and no insecticide or pesticide is used.



Safer alternative: Dr Rokiah does not use pesticides on her vegetables. It might not look as nice but to Dr Rokiah 'a chilli is just a chilli.'