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The good earth

STORIES BY LEONG SIOK HUI



A Japanese couple's decision to lead a sustainable lifestyle is inspiring others to do the same.

Shrubs and wild herbs jostle for space on the leaf-carpeted ground. Straggly vines and sinewy trees shade leafy plants amidst blooms of red, yellow and white. At the pond, dragonflies flit and frogs croak.

The place looks more like an enchanted forest garden than a vegetable farm.

Nestled in the Kitayama Mountains in Kyoto Prefecture, Earthgarden is a privately-owned garden opened for lunch and garden tours. The owners, Chisa Uetsuki and her husband Hitoshi, run their organic garden according to the permaculture concept, a holistic approach whereby one grows one's own food, restores eroded landscapes, builds one's own home, stores rainwater and so on in a sustainable way.

Basically the Uetsukis' garden mimics the design of a natural forest. It not only produces food, but also provides a habitat for pollinating insects and songbirds, all the while managing to be aesthetically pleasing.

Earthgarden is located in Miyama-cho, a picturesque township famous for its thatched-roof farmhouses. One of its villages, Kitamura, with its 50 thatched farmhouses, has been designated a national preservation site and is a magnet for Japanese tourists on weekends.



Strawberries are grown at Earthgarden

A design concept

The bubbly Chisa, 58, takes us on a short tour around her garden.

“Our garden is for self consumption, and any surplus is used for our guests’ lunch,” explains Chisa, who studied permaculture at Crystal Water Permaculture EcoVillage in Queensland, Australia (see sidebar).

Earthgarden, which she founded six years ago, sits on a 650sq m piece of land, with an additional 50sq m leased for their vegetable patch.

They grow more than 150 types of edible plants, including pumpkins, tomatoes, zucchini, edamame, eggplant, asparagus and cucumber.

More than just providing food, the plants usually also play other roles. The snowdrops, for example, signal the arrival of spring. The nasturtiums, when they bloom, say summer is here.

The 10-foot tall kukuimo (Jerusalem artichoke) doubles as a windbreaker, while the ubiquitous comfrey, planted next to most fruit trees, supplies potassium.

“Our small pond increases the bio-diversity in our garden by providing a habitat for living things like frogs and edible plants,” explains Chisa.

Everything has a function to play, including the couple’s cute pet rabbit, which churns out an average of one bin of rabbit compost a year, while their two ducks supply eggs, control slugs and provide compost.



a variety of vegetables too...

Wholesome, tasty spread

After our enlightening tour, we head to the café for lunch. The café is stacked with books and other literature on permaculture and organic farming. Guests can also get to leaf through a photo album that depicts Earthgarden in the four seasons.

Hitoshi, the resident chef, whips up creative grub with the fresh produce from their garden and the local farms. He uses mostly organic and seasonal ingredients, avoiding vegetables grown in greenhouses warmed by oil or electricity. Artificial colouring, chemical additives and monosodium glutamate (MSG) are a big no-no in Hitoshi's kitchen.

For all that, our lunch is simply delectable!

It included minced free-range chicken seasoned with mirin (sweet rice wine), sake (Japanese rice wine), shoyu (soy sauce) and roasted in the oven; boiled spinach tossed in Japanese mustard, shoyu and mirin; and crunchy takenoko (bamboo shoot) slathered with red miso paste and white sesame seeds.

We also manage to sample a spring delicacy, a wild vegetable called taranome. One of Hitoshi's favourite ingredients is okara, a high-protein, low-calorie by-product of tofu. He sautés the okara lightly, mixes it with boiled minced carrots and sliced onions, then tosses it in a home-made dressing.



... all due to the large compost heap.

Eco-friendly abode

A mere 140sq m, Earthgarden's quaint rustic house was designed by the couple. The café, kitchen and study take up the ground floor, with the bedrooms occupying the upper floor.

The owners do away with air-conditioning, even in summer, allowing the padi field next to the property (usually filled with water after seedlings are planted) to cool down the house. The eaves, like the deciduous trees they plant, are set at an angle to prevent the scorching summer sun from entering while allowing in the winter sunshine to heat up the house.

The wood-fired stove is fitted with a chimney that extends from the ground floor to the upper floor, between two bedrooms, till the roof. When the oven is lit, it warms up the café and the bedrooms, thus saving energy. Solar panels power the hot showers. Rainwater is harvested, stored in the tank and used for gardening and washing the garden tools and rabbit's hut.

Lumber is sourced from local plantation forests instead of cheaper woods from Malaysia or Papua New Guinea to minimise carbon impact.

The grey water from their kitchen sink goes into a bio-geo filter system, where soil and gravel filter the waste water while the roots of reeds purify the water. The café's grey water goes into a septic tank and is treated by microbes. The recycled water is then used for gardening.

Earthgarden only uses biodegradable soaps and detergents. Plastics, aluminium and glass are recycled while food waste goes into the compost. The Uetsukis next plan is to install a bio-gas toilet which can convert human waste into cooking gas.



A typical kayabuki-yane (thatched-roof) farmhouse in Miyama-cho overlooking a padi field.

Inspiring others

Aside from garden tours and lunches, Chisa also runs workshops at Earthgarden on such topics as permaculture, edible garden design and worm composting.

“I want to share the charm of gardening and the great benefits of having an edible organic garden with my friends and other people,” she says.

Occasionally, Chisa gets invites from citizen groups, schools and local government branches to talk on permaculture and organic garden. She also writes and translates articles and essays on permaculture and organic gardening.

Chisa’s resolute spirit and enthusiasm are really contagious.

I came back to Malaysia inspired to start growing my own food. As this article goes to print, I’ve started a composting bin and am getting the pots ready for a vegetable garden in my little balcony . . .

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Getting the garden off the ground

Long before climate change became topical, Chisa Uetsuki was already taking baby steps towards sustainable living.

Born in Osaka Prefecture, Chisa grew up in Tokyo and Osaka, and lived in different cities as an adult. She lived in a condominium and led a “buy-and-throw-away lifestyle”.

“Though as a child my father took me outdoors for holidays, it wasn’t until much later in my life that I understood that we, human beings, are a part of nature and are connected to all forms of life,” says Chisa, 58.

From the early 90s, Chisa started taking nature-based tours to forests and conservation areas in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. She participated in green activities organised by NGOs. Her lifestyle gradually changed and she started buying more natural foods to support organic farmers and eventually switched to eco-friendly household products.



A university lecturer and writer, Chisa Uetsuki studied permaculture design in Australia before starting Earthgarden six years ago.

In 1998, Chisa participated in a permaculture design course in Australia, and that finally got the ball rolling for her.

“The course was really inspiring, and the experience gave me the courage to start a new life in the countryside,” says Chisa who teaches English at local universities.

Taking the organic path

For Chisa, the key concept of organic gardening is land care and going back to the basics.

“I felt I could establish a strong connection with nature through the creation and maintenance of my organic garden,” she says. She also heard a little voice urging her to “get down to the soil” after living in a city apartment for so long.

“It’s an important life skill to be able to produce food without harming the environment,” says Chisa, who still marvels at the joy of being able to eat vegetables freshly plucked from her garden.

“It also means living in harmony with nature and living with modest needs.”

But making this lifestyle change was no stroll in the park. Chisa and husband Hitoshi thought they could just sell their apartment and use the money to start a new life in the countryside. But they came up short and had to get a bank loan.

At the time, Hitoshi had quit his full-time job for two years.

“The banks didn’t think he was qualified for a loan and I didn’t seem to have much credibility either because I was just a part-time teacher then,” recalls Chisa. But the Uetsukis kept trying and, after three failed attempts, finally secured a loan.

Their next hurdle was finding a suitable piece of land.



Hitoshi Uetsuki, 59, gave up his office job in Osaka to move to the countryside. The self-taught chef is also a keen gardener

“Because of the urban sprawl, most of the countryside has lost its charm. I see pachinko parlours (gaming and slot machine shops) and karaoke bars next to the padi and vegetable fields. I also saw polluted rivers and grassland full of garbage,” she laments.

The Uetsukis trawled rural areas in the Kansai region and finally settled on Miyama-cho. This charming settlement is renowned for its efforts in preserving the rural landscapes and centuries-old farmhouses. But the Uetsukis almost threw in the towel when they found that property prices here were steep.

“Then, one day, we spotted a small plot of grassy land by a beautiful chestnut grove. I said to myself: ‘This is it’,” recalls Chisa, smiling.

She told the landowner her vision for the land and asked if he could sell it at an affordable price.

“He really helped make our dream come true,” she says.

It was an opportune phase for the Uetsukis too. Hitoshi used to be a typical “salaryman” (white-collar employee) who worked long hours and wrapped up his evenings with drinking sessions with his co-workers.

“He finally ended up in hospital because of his workaholic lifestyle,” admits Chisa. “Then I suggested an alternative life in the country.”

The couple relocated to Miyama-cho in 2002. Today, Hitoshi, 59, is manager and chef of Earthgarden Café. Guests who have sampled his cooking, including us, are often surprised to find out that he has no professional cooking background.

“He enjoys growing all kinds of plants and is a good caretaker of our garden,” Chisa adds.

Chisa likens her life today to the “edge effect”, one of permaculture’s design principles which states that when two natural ecosystems overlap, there is more energy and diversity to life (pond, forest, meadows and seas). Chisa spends two to three days a week teaching in the city and the rest of the time at Earthgarden. She gets the best out of the two worlds.

And her life philosophy is simple.

“Small, simple things can make us happy — a beautiful butterfly on a flower that you planted, the glorious rays of sunshine on an early summer morning, juicy tomatoes freshly plucked or a couple of sparrows building a nest in our garden.

“We have many beautiful things in life on this planet. If you can value these things, you don’t have to be rich or competitive to enjoy your life.”

o For more info on Earthgarden visit www.earthgarden.jp or call +81-771 77 5016. The English website will be up in September.