

Keep your lawn lush this summer



- The Lycée França students working with the Agriculture Boxes

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- By Shahana Raza, Special to The weekend tabloid!
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Beneficial for the environment and good for the soul, gardening is a fun and rewarding exercise. But not every enthusiastic gardener has a green thumb. So whether it is vegetables, flowering plants or shrubs, the first step to having a productive garden is to know what grows well in this region.

“In this city, despite the weather, you can still grow shrubs, oleanders and bougainvilleas. Periwinkles and Portulacas will also flourish. Through summer we have the ‘gulmohar tree’ or flame of the forest. I’ve seen people grow vegetables such as okra, eggplant, baby corn, pumpkin, squash and even broccoli here,” says Deena Motiwala, a septuagenarian who has 43 years of experience as an award-winning gardener, and who is also the founder of Dubai Gardening Group. She fervently believes the harsh summer months in Dubai are no impediment to having a lush garden.

Along with planting right seeds in the right season, it is crucial to learn a thing or two about plant compatibility — which vegetables and greens grow best together, as plants that require the same amount of water and nutrients can easily be potted in the same soil.

“It is always best to grow fruits and vegetables that are seasonal and easy to produce in the country where you reside. This reduces the impact on resources,” says Gundeep Singh, founder & CEO of The Change Initiative, a one-stop shop that provides sustainable solutions for most household products, including the Agriculture Box, an ideal gardening solution for home-grown organic produce. Gundeep believes cucumbers, tomatoes, aubergines, chillies, marrow and herbs such as mint, basil, parsley and coriander grow best in this climate.

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Arnaud Fabre, owner and founder of Agriculture Box, says, “From October to May, you can grow tomatoes. They grow great with basil, borage, parsley and rocket leaves. During the summer months all herbs and rocket leaves grow well. In fact rocket leaves grow every 14 days.”

Jo Marengo distributes Bokashi bins in the UAE. Bokashi is Japanese for “fermented organic matter” which is made by injecting bran with beneficial bacteria to pickle food waste instead of letting it rot. It organically converts discarded fruits, vegetables, fish, dairy and even bones into a liquid which can be used as plant food and compost.

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“When plants are given the right nutrients and the soil is well nourished, there is absolutely no need for chemical fertilisers or insecticides. My garden has not seen either for more than three years now,” says Jo. That’s because for the past four years she has been using a Bokashi bin to help recycle her kitchen waste into organic fertiliser.

Jo is always on the lookout for innovative solutions to make her greens grow best. Fed up with trying to save her gated vegetable patch from three hungry tortoises and her sons’ regular football sessions, Jo began planting veggies at hip level by using an Agriculture Box. The results were amazing. “After just three weeks I had edible rocket leaves grown from seeds. I transplanted my gooseberry bush and the basil plants which are now flourishing, so I am going to need to make a batch of homemade pesto,” says Jo who is also happy at the thought of standing and gardening.

“The Agriculture Box is a stress-free gardening solution for your backyard; it is durable against the strong sun and humidity encountered during the summer months in the UAE. It provides a gardening solution for those who do not have gardens and those who have been unable to tend to their gardens on hands and knees,” says Gundeep.

Equipped with a detachable roof, the box can be used in any outdoor area and comes assembled with potting soil and an in-built irrigation system.

With the aim of introducing gardening as a subject, The Lycée França International Georges Pompidou School in Sharjah procured two Agriculture Boxes in May this year. Apart from the thrill of planting seeds, the exercise proved to be highly motivating for students, as it allowed them to be involved in something outside their usual school routine.

“[The students] felt responsible for the cultivated plot of ground and for the crops resulting from their work,” says Guillaume Dominiak, French teacher and coordinator of the Agriculture Box project at LFIGP. “You could see expressions of amazement and happiness on their faces when the few tomatoes we had, changed colour on reaching maturity. We can say all their senses were excited: colour, odour, taste and touch.”

“The Agriculture Box is a great multidisciplinary learning tool, since school gardening touches on biology, soil-microbiology, botany, geology, nutrition, even economy, as many schools resell their produce during market day to parents,” says Arnaud.

But the best green to grow during hot-humid weather is grass. “During summer, lawns have maximum growth. Sow the seeds, add urea and fertiliser, then just water it down,” says Deena. She however cautions garden owners to clean lawn mowers after each use (especially a second hand piece) as grass weevils may get transferred from machine to turf and destroy the thick spread swiftly.

So should one use pesticides?

Apart from the fact that pesticides in the UAE are difficult to obtain and come with Arabic instructions, using pesticides is tricky as it depends on factors such as how to use it, when to use it and even the wind direction. Deena feels it is wiser not to use them, as most are harmful. According to her, if a plant is infested with insects, it's best to get rid of it.

Deena Motiwala's green tips for summer

- Buy good potting soil. It should be soft to touch but not dry and flaky.
- Water plants daily. Feed them with Foliage Feeding Liquid as well as NPK granules (a general purpose fertiliser) by scattering it in the mud once a month.
- Don't overwater plants. It can kill them. Every plant has different water requirements depending on its size and location.
- Rake dead leaves and twigs regularly to prevent slugs, snails and other insects to thrive.
- Do not grow your vegetable patch or cactus under a tree or beneath foliage. It is difficult to keep cleaning out dead leaves.
- Spray and wash plants every two to three days to keep them healthy.
- Move potted shrubs such as roses as well as herbs to shaded areas or erect a shade over them.

Through experimentation Deena has found a way to keep her indoor plants moist. She has improvised a bandage method. Before leaving the city, wrap one end of a long cloth bandage around the mud within planters and dip the other end in a bucket of ample water. This method helps keep plants moist for up to a week, depending on the size of the bucket and as long as they are not placed under direct sunlight or near glass window panes.

To join the Dubai Gardening Group, call Deena Motiwala at 04-3445999.

The Agriculture Box

Standing 2m long, 1m wide and 50cm high, the Agriculture Box comes equipped with a detachable roof as well as an adjustable stand available in three sizes, 5cm, 10cm and 30cm.

Advantages over a regular vegetable garden

- Ergonomic design: Allows for gardening at hip level. Ideal for avid gardeners who detest getting down and dirty, have weak knees or a bad back.
- Safe soil: A water-proofing system inside the box provides safe and arid soil by prohibiting the transfer of volatile organic compounds (organic chemicals that have a high vapour pressure at ordinary, room-temperature conditions).
- Good soil: The box comes equipped with soil made up of a carefully selected mix of top soil, bio compost and organic fertilisers which help facilitate plant growth in dry climates. Soil depletion rate is of 5cm every three years.
- Saving water: Equipped with the European irrigation system made of ultraviolet treated membranes that help save up to 80 per cent of water, compared to conventional gardening. The Agriculture Box can be customised and fitted with a timer to water plants automatically during holidays. The timer can be run either with the help of batteries or by installing small solar panels. Arnaud Fabre uses this method on a farm in Ajman where the boxes also come equipped with a water drainage recollection system.

For more information call Arnaud Fabre on 052-8751318 or write to agriculturebox@gmail.com

Bokashi Bin

For more information call Jo Marengo 050-6569525 or write to jo@bokashidubai.com

Available at The Change Initiative. Call 800-TCI (824) or write to info@tci-mail.com

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