

# Edible Garden City: Community-Centred Urban Farming

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Images by Edible Garden City

**E**stablished in 2012, Edible Garden City started out as a small setup with a start-up capital of S\$10,000 and four employees (including co-founders Bjorn Low and Robert Pearce), with the mission of showing people the simple pleasures of farming and growing their own food.

Today, it has blossomed into a champion for urban farming and social responsibility in the private sector of Singapore.

Now with 28 employees, Edible Garden City aims to improve food security in cities, create a new model of urban farming that minimises resource consumption and waste while fostering social cohesion and providing inclusive employment opportunities, and raise awareness of all these issues in the general public through education and active participation in events, festivals and conferences.

Apart from edible gardens designed and built for restaurants, hotels, schools and private clients, Edible Garden City's farms make use of underutilised spaces on the rooftops of buildings, such as Wheelock Place and Raffles City, and under viaducts.

"This is a win-win outcome for building managers who want to maintain lush green spaces for tenants, staff and visitors while supporting homegrown firms in doing good, and can even provide employees with amenities to grow their own food in land-scarce Singapore," said co-founder Bjorn Low. Its recent rooftop project at the Singapore Power (SP) building in Kallang is an employee-run urban farm in which SP staff are given allotments to grow, harvest and sell fresh produce.

To date, Edible Garden City has held two container farm popups under the West Coast Viaduct, in an initiative supported by the Singapore Land Authority. This event saw urban farmers Darren Ho and Christopher Leow giving talks and organising hands-on activities for the public to learn more about indoor growing of microgreens, mushroom production that utilises food waste, and urban farming in under-utilised spaces in Singapore.

Such outreach efforts play a crucial role alongside education in furthering Edible Garden City's mission. According to Head of Education Tham Siang Yu, "Our children of today are the creators of tomorrow. We need to teach them about not just farming but also global agriculture issues so that they can understand and appreciate where their food comes from and never take it for granted." To that end, Edible Garden City develops and teaches farming curriculums that spark a sense of social responsibility, entrepreneurship, and appreciation of nature in students in schools such as Montfort Secondary, Canossian Primary School, and Pathlight, which is a school for high-functioning students with autism.

Extending beyond education, Edible Garden City also offers job opportunities to individuals interested in any aspect of urban farming, regardless of their circumstances. As an inclusive employer and recipient of the 4<sup>th</sup> Enabling Employers' Award, its efforts to train and employ ex-convicts, the elderly, and people with intellectual disabilities has not gone unrecognised.



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Working closely with the Autism Resource Centre and the Down Syndrome Association of Singapore (through the non-profit volunteer matching organisation Employment for People with Intellectual Disabilities), Edible Garden City has integrated employees with autism and down syndrome into its indoor growing and mushroom production team at Citizen Farm, its largest and most ambitious urban farming project to date.

Citizen Farm is a closed-loop, zero waste urban farm that is the first of its kind in the region. Launched in June 2017, its 86,100 sqft facility at Jalan Penjara is capable of producing enough fish, vegetables, mushrooms, herbs and fruits to feed 500 people. It houses several growing systems, such as aquaponics and insect farming, and also functions as a startup incubator to enable small local outfits to have a foothold in the urban farming industry. Bringing everything together allows Citizen Farm and its partners to reap co-branding benefits, facilitate knowledge transfer, and create a community of farmers and volunteers that work, play and learn side by side.

Community has always been the heart and soul of agriculture, a tradition that ensured the survival of our ancestors and played a key role in the development of civilisations for thousands of years. Despite (or perhaps, because of) our urban lifestyles and landscapes, city-dwellers can benefit tremendously from farming – the *raison d'être* of Edible Garden City. To that end, Edible Garden City takes on many community garden projects islandwide.


One particularly poignant example is the Ah Gong Community Garden in York Hill Estate, one of

Singapore's oldest and poorest neighbourhoods. The residents of its single-room flats are mostly elderly males who come from various cultural backgrounds. Case workers reported a high level of depression and social isolation in the neighbourhood and contacted us to build a community garden to lift their spirits and foster social cohesion.

"You could see a total transformation happening with that community garden," Bjorn recounted in a speech. "At the start, we had residents who were very reticent, who always stayed silent but would still come to the garden every day to water the plants. Slowly, but surely, those same residents would start to talk to the plants, talk to the other residents, and just a month later, we found them smiling and chatting and laughing with others in the garden. These community gardens truly give a new lease of life to people."

Edible Garden City's most recent community project, a collaboration with Salvation Army's Prison Support Services, involves the teaching of farming skills to inmates and their families. Gardening, farming, horticulture therapy and being in touch with nature have proven rehabilitative effects on prisoners, and such programmes in countries like Canada, Norway and the United States have resulted in lower rates of recidivism.

Community is a central feature in its next steps. It hopes to work with the relevant agencies to redefine community centres and empty spaces to bring commercially viable urban farms into the heart of communities, where neighbours can work together to produce food as well as engage groups such as the elderly and people with disabilities in the enterprise.

Edible Garden City started out in the business of crop growing, to bring farming to Singapore's city dwellers and reintroduce the love of nature in our city. Its work has made significant contributions: supplying chefs and bartenders in the F&B industry with the freshest locally-grown produce as well as introducing uncommon native edibles that can be used in innovative new farm-to-table creations while at the same time reducing food miles and increasing our food resilience as an island nation; teaching and creating job opportunities for anyone willing to learn the ropes of urban farming, regardless of one's background and circumstances; and building community gardens that transform lives. In the process, it has itself grown in size and ambition and continues to strive towards a more sustainable, more socially responsible and more food-resilient future for all. 

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