

Successes and opportunities for horticultural initiatives amongst migrant workers and Singaporeans: Learnings from three projects

text and images by
Bjorn Low
Adeline Chang

“

These efforts showed a recognition at all levels of the importance of and interlink between food security, access to nature, and mental well-being – and of their effects on workforce productivity.

Introduction

Singapore is a highly developed economy that taps heavily on foreign workers in certain industries such as the construction, manufacturing, and services sectors. Numbers in the foreign workforce stood at 1,305,800 in June 2022 (Government of Singapore, 2022a), with many originating from countries such as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and China (Government of Singapore, 2022b).

Nationally, the issue of food security has been high on the public agenda in recent years, moving further into the limelight following the disruption of global food supply chains during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The Singaporean government had in 2019 set a target of locally and sustainably producing 30% of residents' nutritional needs by 2030, and from 2020 onwards focused by necessity on diversifying food sources and addressing logistical challenges to ensure that Singapore's population continued to have access to food supplies (Wong, 2022). Along similar lines, a study on Bangladeshi Workers in Singapore has highlighted the lack of access to quality food for the population (Dutta, 2015).

The pandemic and the ensuing restrictions placed under stress both access to food as well as mental wellbeing and saw the emergence of grassroots trends as well as governmental efforts to mitigate this. The strictest movement restriction was during the circuit breaker (April to June 2020). Even then, residents during this period could leave their homes for solo outdoor exercise and nature activities (Government of Singapore, 2021). Concurrently, local interest in growing edible plants at home grew steeply (Chew, 2020), more hobbyists started growing ornamental plants to support their own emotional health (Lee, 2020), and the National Parks Board launched a "Gardening with Edibles" program, which saw free seed packets being distributed to interested households to encourage edible home gardening (National Parks Board, 2020). These efforts showed a recognition at all levels of the importance of and interlink between food security, access to nature, and mental well-being – and of their effects on workforce productivity.