HOMEGROWN

EXPLORING ISSUES AROUND URBAN FOOD PRODUCTION

TEXT LOUISEHILDEBRAND PHOTO GRAPHY DAVID ROSS

SECURITY ISSUES

MORE THAN HALF THE WORLD'S
POPULATION LIVE IN DENSE URBAN
AREAS. THESE INCREASINGLY
UNHEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS POSEA
REAL THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY AND
QUALITY. IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW
WHAT YOU'RE PUTTING IN YOUR
MOUTH AND HOW PLANTING A FOOD
GARDEN USING THE PRINCIPLES OF
PERMACULTURE IS THEWAY OF THE
ELITURE.

A QUICK DISCLAIMER: I AM NOT AN ENVIRONMENTAL journalist, a vegetarian, a hippie, an "eco warrior" or an activist. I do believe that there is something wrong with the way that the food we eat is manufactured, consumed and discarded.

Rising food prices, concern about mass food production methods and ingredients, and a growing unease about the health risks associated with poor nutrition are just a few reasons to consider planting your own food garden.

Nobody needs to be lectured on the health, social and economic threat of food insecurity and the poor nutrition that often results. Not meaning to sound alarmist, but these are real issues that affect everyone. If you have a small piece of land (roughly the size of door), a balcony that can house six or more bigpots, or a vertical wall that gets sunlight, there's really no good reason not to grow your own food.

To best explain permaculture, it's useful to think of it as a philosophy or an ethical approach, and the practice of applying its principles to the best land use design. By mimicking naturally-occurring eco-systems, using self-perpetuating, multi-use plants that are planted seasonally, you could feed your family fruit, vegetables, nuts and herbs throughout the year. In layman's terms, permaculture looks at growing indigenous plants, seasonally, organically and in a way that utilises the additional benefits of each plant for the benefit of the other

plants. An example of this would be companion planting (by planting nasturtium next to lettuce, caterpillars are more likely to eat the nasturtium and leave the lettuce alone), the extension of which is called a guild.

A guild is a group of complementary plant species that use the same resources and utilise each other's natural root and canopy attributes. A typical example of a guild is as follows: by planting maize, squash and beans together, the squash covers and protects the ground above which the maize grows and simultaneously acts as a trell is for the beans to wind around. So obvious and yet so clever.

Planting your own food garden is a small step and, granted, not one that's going to provide an instant solution to world poverty. By breaking your own cycle of mass consumerism and opting for a healthier, cheaper in the long run and ethically-sound urban food solution, you have the choice to opt out of genetically-modified food that was grown by a farmer whose land is being choked by mono-crops. So why wouldn't you?

The ultimate goal is to have a garden that requires very little mainten ance or intervention (the plants all work together on drainage, repelling insects, retaining shade and soil nutrients) and provide food on a sustainable basis. Any garden can be converted into a food-growing space, all you need is rich soil, five to eight hours of sun a day, time and love.

Is your investment guy just not that into you?

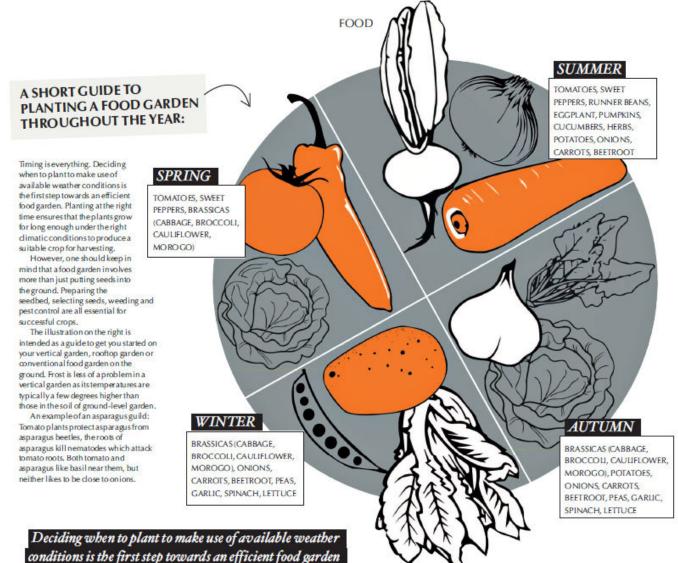
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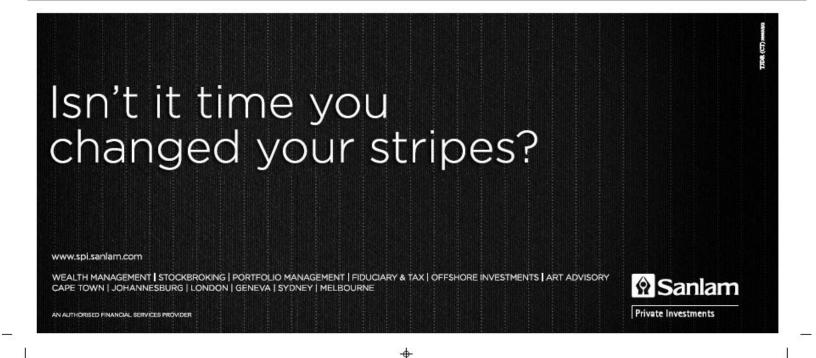
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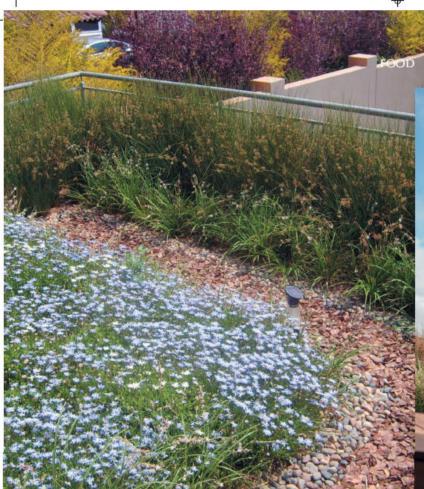
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Private Investments









Plants are sourced directly from growers around the country, and most of the herbs are grown by the Justins on their plot on Johurg's East Rand

Rooftop garden in Midrand by Vertical Landscapes and Rooftop Landscapes for a private client

ON THE WEB

Food Shed is an online marketplace for small-scale food producers. Exactly like a farmers' market find fabulous food sold direct by local producers in your area.

Supported by Woolworths, The Siyakhana Initiative for Ecological Health and Food Security offers courses to the public in urban permaculture food gardening.

www.siyabbana.org

Urban Sprout is a local green news and opinion site that has a great organic ecodirectory that focuses on organic and eco-friendly products, organisations, venues and events. www.arbaniprost.co.sa

Livingseeds is a local company that specialises in heirloom seeds. They'vegota wonderful selection of traditional food seeds and some more unusual ones like hereboontjies, Maputaland red peanuts, gooseberries and tomatilios. www.livingseeds.co. as

 $Vertical \, Landscapes \, and \, Rooftop \, Landscapes \, are \, two \, Johannesburg-based \, landscape \, engineering \, companies \, run \, by \, Justin \, and \, Justin, \, two \, aeronautical \, engineers \, who \, decided \, to \, put their \, larger-than-average \, brains to \, good \, use.$

Justin Sam, 31, and Justin Witten, 32, met as colleagues at Denel Aviation. After a few years working on military helicopters they left the local industry, feeling it was limited, and each ventured out on their own, while remaining friends. "Both our fathers are business owners who only have their standard six," says Sam. It's clear from the variety of different businesses that both Justins pursued after Denel, that their entrepreneurial drive is strong.

"I started two township bakeries," says Witten. From guns to cupcakes to gardens, the Justins wanted to do something that utilised their skills, and added value while still being relevant and interesting. Sam says, "I'm Asian and he's coloured and I'm glad we live in this country, time and economy where we can be ambitious and successful." So they started Vertical Landscapes and Rooftop Landscapes in 2009 and 2012 respectively.

Their unique skillset means that from the conceptual, design and engineering phase, all theway to the production and installation stages, they are totally hands on. Bringing in trained labour per project they keep their business agile and innovative.

New products they're working on currently include a portable, battery-operated, selfirrigating herb garden, double-sided planted office dividers and a light-weight rolling mat system to grow grasses on roofs that can't support heavy loads.

Plants are sourced directly from growers around the country and most of the herbs are grown by the Justins on their plot on Joburg's East Rand. The diverse range of herbs they grow would impress the most adventurous chefs: chocolate basil and stevia (the canderel plant) are not generally found on the Woolies shelf next to the rocket and chives.

Developing prototypes, engineering solutions and beautifying the urban landscape with custom-designed vertical and rooftop gardens is the ultimate vision and mission of these two bright, young minds.

Contact Justin Sam on 073 486 6288 or email just in@verticallandscapes.co.za