



Ground-Up Initiative volunteers and Surf project leader Andy Tay (inset) exercising their green fingers. PHOTOS COURTESY ANDY TAY

Surf-ing at Bottle Tree

New initiative aims to get more Singaporeans to start gardening and farming

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SOME green shoots will be sprouting soon at what was previously a 20m-by-5m concrete space at Bottle Tree Park.

The Sustainable Urban Farm (Surf) project aims to be a gardening and farming showcase for visitors like school groups. But more than that, the volunteer organisation behind this initiative hopes it will get more Singaporeans to plunge their fingers into the good earth, even within the confines of their HDB flats.

Far-reaching lessons can be gleaned from growing even a small pot of herbs, said president of the Ground-Up Initiative (GUI) Tay Lai Hock, 45. Besides enhancing Singapore's food security, community spirit will be stronger and people will be more appreciative of what they have.

Despite efforts to drum home the "reduce, reuse and recycle" message, many Singaporeans remain apathetic, Mr Tay lamented, with human beings "so distanced from the Earth today".

Indeed, farming under the hot sun was what made Surf leader Andy Tay realise that "food doesn't just magically appear".

A former headhunter with no gardening background, Mr Tay, 32, joined the GUI earlier this year and left his corporate job last month to be a sustainable entrepreneur.

What sparked his interest in holistic living was a sojourn to a yoga centre in India and a sustainable living course in Thailand.

The GUI president has an equally interesting story to tell. Formerly in IT sales and marketing, he quit in 1999 and travelled to 35 countries. After returning in 2002, he volunteered at a local farm for a year, all the while dreaming of starting an organic food movement.

The founding members of GUI got to know each other through three flood relief missions to Malaysia in 2007, and began talking about helping the community in a sustainable way. Last April, the GUI was registered as a society with the vision of "connecting people, connecting Earth".

Surf volunteers will start farming at their Bottle Tree patch in about two weeks' time, but they have already begun germinating seeds.

Giving its support is Just Green, a company that farms and retails organic products. The farm's eventual mix of plants will be 65 per cent vegetables, 25 per cent herbs and the rest, aesthetically appealing plants like the morning glory, said Mr Andy Tay. "As far as possible, we are trying to have plants that are both edible and beautiful."

GREEN THUMBS UP

The joy — and toil — of farming has caught on in at least one company here. The Four Seasons Hotel Singapore has cleared part of its manicured gardens to make way for a vegetable patch as part of its Green Thumb Project.

Eleven varieties of plants including pandan, chilli, bananas, lemongrass and turmeric have been planted on a 300-square-foot area at the back of the hotel, in a tree-lined alleyway leading from Orchard Boulevard to Cuscaden Road.

The project kicked off on Monday and the hotel hopes to grow the patch to about three times its current size.

"We wanted a fun communal project, so we thought, why not clear some land

and plant some plants that we can harvest for use in our kitchens?" said Ms Adeline Toh, Four Seasons' public relations director. The hotel's previous "green" efforts were of the recycling and water conservation kind, and its planning committee wanted to "re-energise" the initiative.

Besides growing some of its own produce, the hotel will also compost food waste from its kitchens and restaurants, to fertilise the patch.

The staff hope to harvest some of the produce in two to three months' time. For now, each division is in charge of one row of plants: The executive committee, for example, is tending to the curry plants, while the marketing team is nurturing the pandan.