

Farming Edition!

By Health & Beauty coordinator Claudienne Peterson

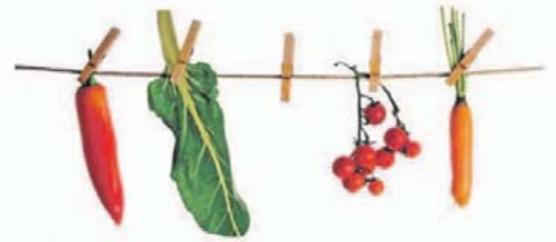


KEEP CALM AND GROW YOUR OWN

It started with the crazy pricing of pomegranate a few years back. "How could this be?" I thought to myself, since I had grown up with a pomegranate bush in my grandma's neighbour's yard in Philipsburg - the fence was just green wire and the bush was right next to it, its leaves sticking out into Grandma's yard. Grandma and her neighbours on Cannegieter Street were close. I remember how everybody had stuff growing in their yard - various herbs, fruits and vegetables that they could eat. I also remember them sharing what they had with one another. All those houses and neighbours with their gardens are gone now.

Is it because it's become a popular sought-after super fruit in the larger countries? Where are we shipping them from? Wait! Why are we importing produce that can very well grow here? (I know it sounds simple and stupid to some, but I need to ask these questions here for the benefit of all of us.) That's the question! I am in no way trying to offend any supermarket/grocery stores out there; you all make our lives more convenient.

Personally, my goal is to impress upon everyone living here how important it is to do some gardening and to support farming. Everyone needs to know how important this type of knowledge is and that



some basics at least could be a valuable part of the school curriculum. This edition doesn't end here, many of you as the Health & Beauty team will do its best to bring more awareness and will provide readers with tips as well as interviews as a segment of every edition! I am asking you out there to know how to feed yourself healthy, pesticide- and hormone-free foods; fresh foods. When did this type of food become a luxury??

But I am not an expert, just a writer. I need to hear from you experts; as many of you as I am able to interview! Where do we start? I received some great advice just this past weekend from a green thumb: start by growing your favourite fruits/vegetables; start with one or two (that can grow in this climate of course). We hope you enjoy this edition and that you are encouraged to "grow your own."

Back to today: At the supermarket, I thought, "Why is this tropical fruit that grows here so expensive?"

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~Sxm is a top place for Organic food production~

By Claudienne Peterson

ic food production." St. Maarteners have so much to be proud of, but when I heard the above statement, I couldn't be more proud. St. Maarteners love food, we love to eat, it's a large part of our culture, Caribbean culture. Hey! We even sing about food, but let me focus here on an interview with Denisio Wyatte from St. Peters Community Garden and Spaceless Gardens, who is of the opinion that St. Maarten can be dubbed one of the top places in the Caribbean for organic farming. Read more to find out why!

As I entered the farm, rows of onion and garlic chives greeted me, as well as seasoning peppers and a few other veggies that I wasn't quite sure of. I spent my time there trying to absorb all the bits of information that Wyatte was sharing with me. They grow four kinds of basil; I smelled and tasted three kinds. Cinnamon basil is "da bomb" by the way!

St. Peters Community Garden is an initiative that started last November. "It was more of a research and development project to find out what fertilizers and pesticides work best in an organic fashion here." It's not super easy like one may think. Since November last year, they have only been utilizing rainwater. "We use 500 gallons of water a day." That's whether it's dry season or not, which it had been for many weeks until about two weeks ago (the time of this interview/visit).

Spaceless Gardens is not just a farm, the heads are focused on ecotourism and "developing new concepts to sustain our food security; in the next few months, we will be doing some interesting stuff," said Wyatte, referring to their Skill Enhancement Program that is funded by UNESCO.

Skill enhancement program

For this program, four men who are currently unemployed will be compensated while learning various skills, such as masonry and farming. "With this program, we are hopefully inspiring

others to be compensated while giving us a hand. This is a program that ends off with a community market." Wyatte wants to improve the lives of the first four-five guys with the program, and he hopes that one or two of them will "stick with us and the program."

Embracing old methods with new

Wyatte works the farm with his father and uncle. His father is "very old school" so they don't always agree on implementing new technologies for farming, but as long as Wyatte can show his father that certain things can be done faster without tampering with the food being organic, then he lets him go ahead, while still doing things his old-school way.

I personally felt very strongly that it was important to do a farming/agriculture/gardening edition of Health & Beauty for many reasons, but Wyatte really put it into perspective for me when he explained, "Agriculture is about our traditional family setting, this is something we have lost; there is no time to instil/embed into our kids as they are left to watch TV and nobody is home. Family structure, values and traditions are very important. Because of the struggle, we have a real "selfish" mentality, whereas there was more unity before; we all worked harder, together."

There is a lot that Wyatte wants to do for the community, he sees all the various aspects intertwined with each other. Not too long ago, a friend back in the Netherlands urged him to start his own publishing company so he could empower Caribbean artists and entrepreneurs, to expose the small artists.

Wyatte answers my questions below:

What is Spaceless Gardens?

Spaceless Gardens specializes in edible landscaping and agricultural development. We also started out as a research and development centre to see what's possible and what's not.

Who are your typical clients?

Most of them are members of the surrounding community, but really we get all kinds of people

purchasing our goods; it basically fluctuates.

What does Spaceless Gardens produce?

In the past six months, we have produced over 500 kilos of food. We grow a lot of different things such as broccoli, chives, jalapeno pepper, lettuce, cabbage, passion fruit, seasoned peppers, hot peppers, callaloo and pumpkin. We have been a bit dormant for the past two months because of the weather/time of year (hurricane season).

In your experience, what grows well here on St. Maarten?

A lot of things grow well here; seasoned peppers, hot peppers, chives, callaloo.

Is the soil on St. Maarten good and fertile enough to grow our own crops?

Our soil is great. The fact that it hasn't been touched over the past 65 years means that St. Maarten can be dubbed one of the top organic soil terrains around here in the Caribbean - a top place for organic production in the Caribbean.

Wyatte talks about community

"Gradually changing small things in our community can inspire more changes in other Sint Maarten communities." Also from a community perspective, it's important to "provide food cheaper to my community so we are trying to encourage organic and healthy living." Looking to the near future, Wyatte explains: "We would like to get the project to the point where we can influence; where people can come out and purchase, not just fruits, herbs and vegetables, but also seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, and learn about these things. "UNESCO and the Prins Bernhard Cultural Funds are positive initiatives that I can confirm are supporting us; people are watching us and giving us the opportunity to prove ourselves, we recognize that."

Towards the end of my tour of the farm, I tasted regular spinach as well as the richer, heartier Chinese spinach, the flower of which is edible and tasty, explained Wyatte. His father also



Check out the Spinach!



Check out the cabbage



Denisio Wyatte holding Chinese Spinach

Sugar Lettuce

pointed out a "paracetamol plant" - it apparently helps relieve pain in the body, especially headaches. I've never heard of such a plant, but I definitely will look it up when I find out the official name. Like a kid in a candy store, I also felt like buying a pot of everything there. I did come away with some Caribbean cherries and a bag of mangoes which I am very grateful for. I look forward to visiting again!

No matter what happens, we know Wyatte will continue to preach health awareness and consciousness, and that agriculture sustains everything!

St. Peters Community Garden Research and Development Center. Strawberry Road #16 (past Hillside Christian School). Call 553-6300 for more information.