

## Mothers' urban farm thrives in QC

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Their family income depleted by the lockdown, a group of mothers in Barangay Botocan, Quezon City, has transformed a lot that once served as a garbage dump into an urban food farm, which now provides them with their daily needs. Their main produce, a native variety of spinach known as “talinum,” may soon find a wider market and become a major earner with the help of the local government.



The entrance to Barangay Botocan in Diliman, Quezon City, offers snippets of a typical scene in a suburban community: a few steps from the welcome arch, a busy marketplace where meats, fruits and vegetables as well as dry goods are displayed; people coming and going on the main road paved with concrete.

But 12 minutes away, past narrow alleys lined by houses standing side by side, the dirt road begins where the concrete stops. And a hidden garden of—at a glance— “malunggay,” “kangkong” and “siling labuyo” materializes.

The Villa Berde Food Forest Farm is nurtured by an all-woman group—13 mothers and eight street sweepers—who are known in their barangay as the “momshies.”

### Food needs

When the COVID-19 lockdown forced people to stay put in their communities, the momshies began to clear and turn the vacant 1,000-square-meter lot that used to look like a dump into a community farm.

“We talked to the [power distribution company] that owns the land to let us cultivate it and grow plants there,” recalls the barangay captain, Rosalyn Ballad.

Permission was given, on the condition that no structure, not even a “bahay kubo” (nipa hut), would be built on the lot.

The **Quezon City Food Security Task Force** and the **Public Employment Service Office (Peso)** provided the women with seeds, farming materials and training. “All the supplies came from them; we were in charge of the labor,” Ballad says.

In just a few months, the momshies were able to transform the empty lot into an urban garden of green vegetables and ornamental plants.

Due to the loss of jobs and incomes caused by the pandemic, the Botocan women turned to Villa Berde for food when their funds fell short of meeting their families' needs.

Juvy Bado, president of the group, says she and the other women harvest the crop they grew themselves instead of buying from the market. Other barangay residents may buy their produce at a cheap price—for example, a handful (“isang tali”) of sweet potato tops for P10.

All the proceeds from the sale of the vegetables are saved so their group will have ready funds for seedlings and fertilizer.

“I have cooked bean soup, ‘pakbet’ and ‘lumpiang shanghai’ from these vegetables,” Bado says. “We’re also exploring other recipes and hopefully, we can market them one day.”

‘Talinum’

The ever-present ingredient in any meal of the momshies, and also the primary produce of their urban garden, is “talinum,” or the Philippine spinach.

“Talinum is high in protein so it’s good for those who have high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes,” Bado says.

The women also barter the spinach for other vegetables or ornamental plants in other barangays.

When they shall have sufficiently developed talinum in Villa Berde, the women, with the help of the barangay officials and Peso, plan to market it to a larger population.

Says Peso chief Rogelio “Batoy” Reyes: “We’re developing a social enterprise from the stories of the Botocan women, how they survived the pandemic, and introduced talinum to a wider [market]. We hope to [brand] Botocan as the community farm that grows talinum.”

Lorigen Mumar, one of the village officers monitoring the farm’s progress, credits the hard work of the momshies for the initiative’s success. “We’re thankful that they persevere [to maintain] the garden. It’s their eagerness and enthusiasm to build and take care of this farm [that makes it work],” she says.

According to Rowena de Guzman, one of the leaders of the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) Edible Landscaping Project, social cohesion develops when women participate in urban farming.

Sense of community

“There is empowerment,” De Guzman says when told of the Botocan initiative. “When they start taking care of the garden, it changes the notion that women are just staying home just because they don’t have jobs.”

But aside from dealing with food insecurity and livelihood sources, VillaBerdehelps the-women develop a sense of community aswellasskillsinurbanagriculture.

The momshies maintain the farm in alternating schedules, depending on their availability after they’re done with household chores.

“We help each other here when other moms are busy. Whoever has free time volunteers to water the plants or clean the surroundings. We are neighbors, so it’s easy,” says Melanie Mayote, a Botocan resident for the past 26 years.

Elsie Catam-isán, an on-call washerwoman who lost her clients due to quarantine restrictions, has devoted her attention to the group’s activities in the past months. “It’s hard-whenyou’re just at home doing nothing, so helping look after this garden became one of my pastimes,” she says.

Catam-isán says she grew up in a rural area but did not know how to grow vegetables until the momshies began their urban garden. "I watched my father farm [back in the day], but I never learned how to do it myself until Villa Berde," she says.

For Edelwina Bumacod, who came to Botocan last February with her family to visit her in-laws and got stranded because of the lockdown, the food farm has become an avenue to show the children's artistic side.

The kids used leftover paint from her husband's work to design empty water bottles for use as spots for the plants. "Those are artworks of the children, done with the help of their mothers," Bumacod says of the colorful pots displayed at the opening of Villa Berde.

Agronomist and retired UPLB professor Ted Mendoza says the good thing in urban agriculture is that when the women decide to grow high-value vegetables and crops, they can earn more.

"There's no difference between growing ornamental crops and cultivating vegetables in terms of skills. After they have provided food for their families, they can make it an income source," he says.

In his journal article "Achieving Farm Multifunctionality through a Small-Scale Biodiverse, Integrated and Organic (BIO) Method of Farming," Mendoza wrote that small-scale farming could lead to the improvement of ecosystems in response to the problem of climate change, and also to the "production of healthy foods at the least costs."

Land security a factor

But Edible Landscaping Project research staff member Remuel Torres warns: "When conducting urban agriculture initiatives, land security is a factor to be considered."

"If they (the community) will eventually lose the land, their motivation to continue what they started might also falter," De Guzman adds.

In the long run, the vision of the Botocan women is to leave a legacy. "The urban farm is for the benefit not only of the barangay but also everyone in the community," Ballad says, adding that they hope to get more support from the city government for their project.