

Entrepreneurs take to farming organic food for health of children

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GOING NATURAL Six families take 4,000 sq m land on lease for ₹12,000 per year in Noida village, say can't feed crops growing on chemicals and pesticides to kids

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NOIDA: Concern over what their children eat — food laden with pesticides, chemicals and fertilizers — has driven six families in Noida to farming organic vegetables.

The families that consist of entrepreneurs and professionals working with multinational companies have leased out land to grow organic pulses, potato, onion, cauliflower and peas among other items.

On weekends, these families turn farmers and do everything from composting to ploughing and removing weeds from farmland. The children join them.

"My family was using organic food since a long time because farmers lately have started using excessive pesticides and chemicals. Later, I learnt that even organic food lacks nutritious value because producers follow wrong farming practices so I decided to form a group and do farming on my own," said Nandini Diesh, 43, a corporate lawyer and a trained farmer. Diesh attended a five-day farming course at an agricultural institute in Noida in 2013. She also did a three-day course at Kitchen Garden Association of India.

"I was doing small-scale farming on land available at home to get fresh vegetables. Last year I decided to take it up to grow healthy food," said Diesh.

The families were exploring different organic food options available in the market since long. When they decided to stop using organic food they did not know who to trust for healthy food. They looked for organic food items online, from local farmers and farmers but were not satisfied with the quality available.

TRAINING IN FARMING

"Nandini, who learnt farming through self study and training, came up with the idea of farming. Initially, I thought it will not happen because we did not have land. We did not have enough funds to buy agricultural land in and around Noida. Then we formed the group and took land on lease," said another group member Dinesh Sharma, 47, a software professional. Sharma devotes at



• The families consist of entrepreneurs and professionals working with multinational companies. They have leased land for farming organic food in Noida.

BURHAAN KINGHNT PHOTO

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NANDINI DIESH, corporate lawyer and a trained farmer

least one to two days every week for farming along with his family.

Craving for nutritious food bonded these six families, who started farming for the first time in October 2015. Diesh and Sharma were joined by Mahesh Tangri, a civil engineer with Jaypee Group, Vijay Bhasin, regional sourcing manager for south Asia for Newell Rubbermaid. They were all residents of Noida's Jal Vayu Vihar. They were later joined by Amit Rana, 29, an entrepreneur who stays in sector 12 and Rudra Mahapatra, 31, an IIT Delhi alumna. Mahapatra is the owner of a start-up — Hiring Partners — and a resident of Ghaziabad's Crossing Republic.

The group took 4,000 sq m land on lease on a rent of ₹12,000 per year. Local green activist Vikrant Toogand offered cheap land as he wanted the initiative to become a model for others. The group found a farmland in Greater Noida's Khedi Bhanauta village, just 25 kilometres from Noida's Jal Vayu Vihar.

Getting agricultural land on lease was difficult because of a scarcity of land in Noida due to

the housing boom. But land for farming is available in Greater Noida and Bulandshahr areas.

HURDLES ON THE WAY

"Because of power crisis, procuring water on time was a huge task. It was difficult availing water for irrigation. But the hard work paid off as we got nutritious vegetables to cook daily at home," said Mahapatra, who is determined to expand the project.

The six families have realised that most of the organic food producers use hybrid seeds to increase yield because they want to make more profit.

"We have used only desi seeds that have high immunity unlike hybrid seeds. Desi seeds contain higher level of nutrition and have 95-100% germination unlike hybrid seeds, which are not so rich in nutrition," said Diesh, who is also joint secretary of Noida's floriculture society.

The group decided to grow only seasonal crops unlike other farmers and organic food producers, who grow unseasonal pulses and vegetables that are not healthy.

"To earn money every three months, farmers are growing

unseasonal crops with the help of pesticides and chemicals. They are unaware of the fact that they are producing unhealthy food," said 51-year-old Mahesh Tangri.

The group uses cow dung, jaggery and cow urine to make a paste to keep insects away.

INSPIRING OTHERS

The six professionals want others to visit the farm and learn farming for free.

"After our success many of our friends now want to join and they say let's take a bigger piece of land. We had wanted this to be a role model so that others can do it. We are ready to train others free of cost so that interested people can get healthy food," said Diesh, who is now busy making arrangements to grow seasonal crops such as maize, lobia, peanuts, sunflower, water melon, rice and fruits like lemon, kinu, pomegranate, litchi, etc.

Although five in the group want to stick to farming using traditional tools of organic farming, but one member disagrees.

Amit Rana believes in the use of modern technology for farming to save time. "I agree with the method that we adopted at this farm for organic farming. But to plough land on our own using bulls is not practical. We should use tractors or modern tilling machines and use drip irrigation to save time," said Amit Rana.

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