

Food garden provides sustenance and jobs in rural community

Community food gardens are often started to provide fresh vegetables to underprivileged people living in rural areas, but in many cases, these small-scale farms also offer employment in places where jobs are hard to come by.

Duduzile Chakwe (55) started the Vusisizwe Community Food Garden in Mtwalume, near Hibberdene in KwaZulu-Natal, in 1993 and with support from Shoprite has been able to sustain the livelihoods of 28 other women.

One of the ladies who started working in the food garden two years ago is 32 year old Nombuso Njilo. "In our rural areas, there are just no jobs. I tried very hard for many years and I couldn't find work, so I decided to start working in the Vusisizwe garden," says Nombuso, adding, "In this way, I help the community, I provide for my three children and I earn a living."

On a 0.5-hectare plot of land, the women grow cabbage, spinach, beetroot, carrots and onions, which they sell to community members and shops in the area. They also donate crops to poor families and two soup kitchens.

The team working at the Vusisizwe Community Food Garden would like to grow additional crops, but they lack the farming expertise needed to expand. Shoprite stepped in and, following an in-depth assessment of the garden, offered support in the form of gardening tools, compost, mulch, seedlings, fencing for the entire garden and most importantly training.

"We didn't know about permaculture and companion planting. We learnt a lot during the workshops, even those who have been working in the garden for many years learnt new things," says Nombuso.

Permaculture methods are used to make gardens sustainable as these practices involve reducing waste by utilising everything produced in the garden. Companion planting involves growing plants that are beneficial to each other in close proximity to enhance growth and to ward off pests.

Luckily, the Vusisizwe garden is located near a dam, so water availability isn't a problem. "With our new tools and seedlings, we are hoping to grow enough vegetables so that we can sell at the markets in Durban," says Nombuso.

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CAPTION: The Vusisizwe garden in Mtwalume, KZN, provides employment for and fresh vegetables to its founder, Duduzile Chakwe (far left), and 28 other women.