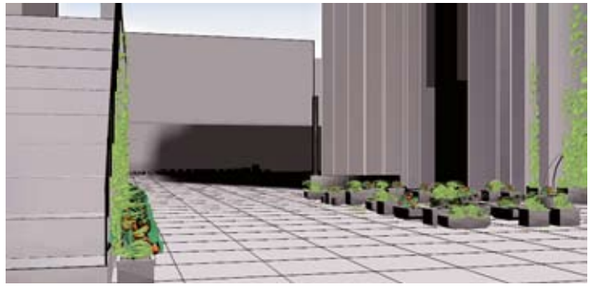
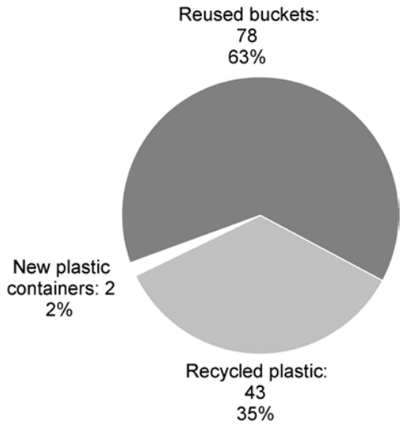
Agriculture-based landscape in urban areas, especially in underprivileged countries, can reduce our reliance on other sources of food. One of the motives of the Edible Campus initiative has been to inculcate productive planting for increasing food production and community involvement in urban greening.

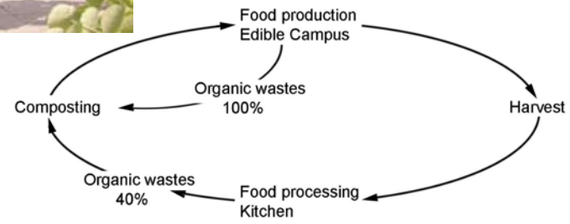
Under-utilised and bare areas are being transformed into productive and attractive spaces.

TEXT: AMITA SARWAL
PHOTOGRAPHS AND VISUALS: COURTESY VARUN THAUTAM AND VIKRAM BHATT

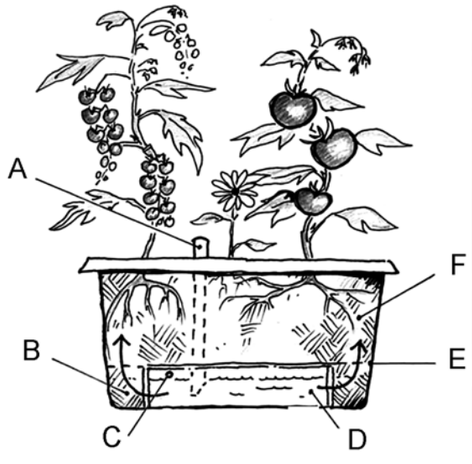
REAP WHAT YOU SOW –
Edible Campus!







A. Filling tube
B. Submerged soil
C. Overflow
D. Soil mixture
E. False bottom
F. Water reservoir



Green peppers.

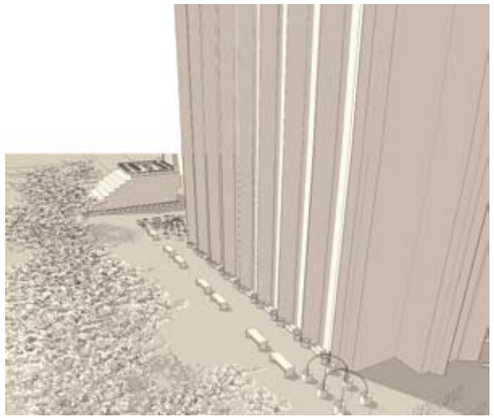
Gourd squash.

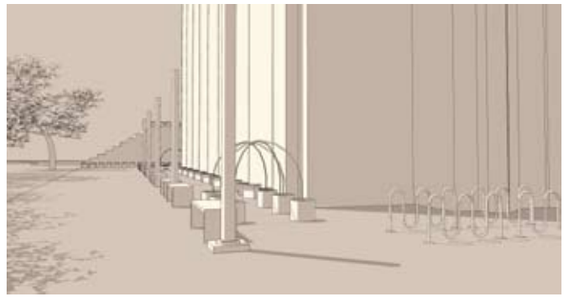
Vertical growing: greenery over concrete walls. Last year the yield from the Edible Campus (EC) surpassed one tonne.

A chance meeting with Vikram Bhatt at a relative's home in Montreal led to my 'unearthing' the distinctive and revolutionary work he and his team are involved in. The Professor of Architecture at McGill University seems deeply committed to his current cause, the Edible Campus, which he believes if emulated globally, can help reduce food miles and make us partially non-reliant upon other sources of food. This project is a follow-up to the Minimum Cost Housing Group (MCHG) of which Bhatt is at the helm.

'Extended research in shelter for the poor taught us that there is nothing basic about "basic housing" – it is an inaccurate and misleading term. Architects and planners are only now beginning to understand the housing requirements of the urban poor. Further, by actually observing how the poor organise their living environments, we learnt that productive planting is an integral part of many informal settlements. The purpose for this could be multifold: religious and ceremonial, decorative, or the most critical one – use the produce to provide what we can term "food security". This was the initiation of (and inspiration behind) the Edible Campus,' reveals Bhatt.

Motivation came when two Montreal-based NGOs – one involved in urban greening and another that uses food as a vehicle to break social and age barriers, approached MCHG in 2006. This was a unique opportunity to turn productive planting into a model community-university partnership. The





MCHG team had gained experience working on a global pilot project in Asia, Africa, Asia and Latin-America.

'The City of Montreal became our laboratory. And what a laboratory it has been since!' recalls Bhatt. Now in its fifth year, the annual Edible Campus project which started with about 130 containers has more than doubled in terms of number of containers and also includes areas of raised beds and permanent planting. Last year the yield from the Edible Campus (EC) surpassed one tonne.

Has the prototype gone beyond Montreal? 'Yes', says Bhatt. 'A colleague from the UK has used the Edible Campus idea to start a similar activity at his university. Another university in Toronto has also started the same programme. In the winter of 2009 I had lectured at my alma mater, CEPT University, Ahmedabad. Interest was shown by some students there, but I am not aware of the outcome, if any.'

Bhatt elaborates, 'The City of Montreal runs one of the largest community gardening programmes in North America, serving close to 7,000 urban farmers. Community gardens can be found in most neighbourhoods, often located in high-density boroughs on vacant municipal land. The city first identifies a plot of land large enough to accommodate a group of garden allotments, and barricades it. Next, it builds small, about 3 mt x 6 mt, planter boxes arranged in a grid layout. The boxes are filled with earth. Water taps are also provided, as are small storage cabins to hold garden tools and gardening materials. These are supplied by the city and loaned to the gardeners against a small fee.

The community gardens also serve as places for social interactions, where neighbours meet in open spaces and share a hobby in a culturally diverse context.

MCHG projects in India:

The Minimum Cost Housing Group (MCHG) of the McGill University School of Architecture was set up in the early 1970s as a research unit with an international orientation that focuses attention on the human settlement problems of the poor.

'Poverty,' says Bhatt, 'is associated with developing nations and exists in both the southern and northern hemispheres. Our research and field projects have been conducted in underprivileged countries such as Argentina, China, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Uganda, and also in some wealthy, developed countries. In addition, MCHG staff has worked as consultants to the World Bank, the United Nations Environmental Program, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Bunco de Mexico, and the Housing and Urban Development Corporation in New Delhi, among others.'

In 1992, MCHG concluded an eight-year collaboration with the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation in India. This was the CIDA-supported 'Human Settlements Training' project which focused on the formulation of appropriate housing standards for new housing developments in India. The project was recognised with the prestigious Progressive Architecture Award, in 1991.

Community of urban gardeners creating an edible campus.

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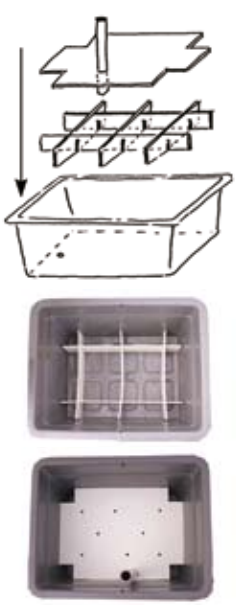

'Interestingly, these community gardens also serve as places for social interactions, where neighbours meet in open spaces and share a hobby in a culturally diverse context. Montreal's cosmopolitan population contributes an amazing variety of plants and vegetables and varied agricultural practices,' elaborates Bhatt.

'Making the Edible Campus' project at McGill University won the 2008 National Urban Design Award of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Canadian Institute of Planners, and Canadian Society of Landscape Architects. The Edible Campus was also recognised by the City of Montreal as one of the ten most significant sustainable projects during 2010.

While urban agriculture is still not recognised as an integral part of urban planning and design, it also raises some questions. Can or should this sector compete with traditional agriculture? If not, does it have a special social, economic or developmental role? What are the motivations of urban gardeners? What can the city do to promote urban gardens?

Some questions related to economics also arise: How much money do users invest and for what purposes: plants, seeds, plant food, fertilizer, and tools? On an average, how much produce do people get from their plots?

'We intend to introduce a greenhouse as a part of the Edible Campus to expand our growing cycle. This will help stretch the growing season into the shoulder seasons – Spring and Fall,' concludes Bhatt.

Meanwhile, year by year, the Edible Campus continues to grow into a success story of its own making.