

A gift from the Greeks – the rise and rise of designer Sophia Kokosalaki **C6**



Tomorrow's Life

Tin Shui Wai, a tale of two neighbourhoods **Screen**

Some like it hot – a guide to Sichuan favourites **Food**



FASHION TRAVEL TIME OUT DIVERSIONS ON AIR

Life

www.scmp.com

SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2008

C



Emily Chu (far left), Maria Chu (centre) with their mother, Fung Yau-kwan, at their vegetable patch in Tai Kok Tsui. Photo: Felix Wong

Full of beans

Community gardening offers city dwellers a refreshing taste of country living, writes **Katie Lau**

Oblivious to the drilling from nearby garages and the constant hum of traffic, Kenvia Wong Kam-wah and his family are busily harvesting vegetables from a plot near Man Cheong Street in Tai Kok Tsui. It's part of a string of community gardens across the city that are catering to Hongkongers' yearning to get closer to nature and exercise their green thumbs.

"We love nature, but we are too busy to garden in a countryside plot. That's why we love it here; it's so close. It's part of our life now," says Wong, who owns a marketing firm.

His home is just a 10-minute walk away, so he pops by to work on his patch as often as he can, sometimes up to five times a week.

Their previous experience was limited to potted plants, but Wong and his wife, Leung Tor-mui, have found it more rewarding to grow vegetables.

"In the case of potted plants, we just bought what we fancied and looked after them. But with vegetables, you can see them grow from seed and eat them later. It gives you a sense of accomplishment," says Leung. "They make wonderful gifts for relatives and friends, too."

The community garden scheme,

which uses temporarily vacant government land, began four years ago under a Leisure and Cultural Services Department drive to promote greater awareness of greening activities. For HK\$400, gardeners can rent a 1.5-square metre patch for a maximum of four months and attend a basic gardening course covering topics such as hoeing, transplanting seedlings and applying compost. Participants are randomly drawn from the list of applicants.

There are now 18 community gardens, one in each district in the city. Scattered from Wan Chai to Sham Shui Po and Sha Tin, the plots cover a total of 19,134 square metres. About 20,000 people have taken part in the programme, from 400 in the first year to 7,800 last year. Most prefer to plant vegetables such as lettuces, tomatoes, radishes and beans.

The scheme is more popular than most greening activities for good reason, says Violet Sun Chan Kit-fong, a senior leisure manager at the LCSD. "Tree-planting is just a one-day event and it takes a long time for a sapling to show any significant growth. But with vegetables, you

can get pretty striking results in a month," she says.

Although gardening novices, Maria Chu Wai-fun and her sister's families have done well in their first venture in the Man Cheong Street plot.

"It's easier than we thought," says the accounts clerk. "The biggest problem is the pests and I use organic pesticide – simply water mixed with chilli and garlic."

Most participants prefer organic methods. "It makes little sense not to go organic when you have the rare opportunity to grow your own vegetables. You want the best for yourselves,"

says Chu, whose meticulously tended patch is packed with more than 10 varieties, including mint, celery, carrots and cabbage.

Her favourite are green peas, which have been especially prolific. "Growing peas is very cost-effective. In a short time you can pick more peas than you can eat," she says.

Instead of resorting to chemical fertilisers, her family uses bone, peanut and fish meal and find the quality of the produce is superior to anything they can buy in the markets.

"It's different. You can't get fresher, crisper and juicier vegetables than these," says Chu, who commutes twice weekly from

her Quarry Bay home. "You also learn to cherish food more. I eat everything I grow."

Their little plot also provides a good way to spend quality time and to unwind. "It's impossible to tend it on my own so I bring my two sons to help with the chores and we have a great time," she says.

"I also forget about my work and my boss when I tend the garden. It's a very effective stress buster. It's also a great way to socialise and exercise."

Wong finds vegetable growing to be a useful allegory for discussing life with his children, Jocelyn, 12, and Hugo, six.

"I ask my kids why some plants grow faster, some slower. You have to water your plants every day so they can be bigger and stronger. It's the same with life. You have to keep working on yourself or you're out one day. You have to stand on your own feet if you want to survive in this society," he says.

Simon Chau Siu-cheong, chairman of Produce Green Foundation, welcomes the community garden scheme, but says four months is too brief to cultivate a sense of belonging.

"Community gardens have been popular in the west for many years and it's a great way to generate community spirit and cohesion," he says.

"Gardening is a therapeutic activity that makes people feel

When I tend my garden, it's a very effective stress buster. It's also a great way to socialise and exercise

Maria Chu, accounts clerk

better about themselves, especially the elderly."

Five years ago, Chau founded the Community Garden for the Elderly, which occupies a 17,000-sq ft site in Tsuen Wan. Partly funded by the Elderly Commission, it's the city's first organic community garden scheme and rents out plots to people over 60. But the unlimited tenancy means there's a waiting list of more than 50 people.

About 30 people volunteer at the organic garden, providing advice to novices and tending to the grounds. Fan Cheung-chun, a retired Chinese medicine practitioner, is among the regulars. Although it's a fair distance from his home in Tuen Mun, the 74-year-old helps out whenever he can and he's never been happier.

"I had nothing to do after retirement; it was such a boring life. Now I get to make friends and do something meaningful," he says. "I feel healthier, too."

Fan's fellow volunteers often consult him about their ailments, and the camaraderie between young and old is evident. Their work together has altered 23-year-old volunteer Ken Yung Kin-yu's perceptions of the elderly.

"I used to think elderly people were grumpy, morose and annoying, but they're actually a lot of fun to be with and they like to laugh. It's my favourite volunteer work," says Yung, a Sai Kung resident.

"We don't just tend to the garden. We sometimes eat out together and organise classes for tai chi, Putonghua and Chinese calligraphy. The old folks share stories about Tsuen Wan with me because many of them come from the neighbourhood. We're like one big family."

Still, how wholesome can it be when community gardens are mostly small patches scattered across the pollution-choked city? The garden enthusiasts are unfazed.

"Acid rain and fumes from traffic will affect the plants. But if the vegetables are grown organically, they'll still be superior to those grown with pesticides," says Chau.

Leung sees a greater good. "We like to think we help purify the environment by doing our bit to grow vegetables," she says.

For details about the scheme, go to lcsd.gov.hk/green/garden/



Elderly gardeners tend to their vegetables at the community garden in Tsuen Wan (above); Fan Cheung-chun (left) flanked by grandchildren Elvis and Jerry

People

Photos: Reuters/AP

Walters wins gay media award

Television journalist Barbara Walters has been honoured by the gay media watchdog group Gload for her reporting on transgender children and she says the award is among the most important she has ever received.

"You can forget all the Emmys," Walters (right) said in accepting the award for television newsmagazine journalism at the 19th annual Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Media Awards. "This means more to me."

Walters won for the story "My Secret Self: A Story of Transgender Children", which aired on ABC's 20/20 and examined the lives and struggles of young children who experienced conflicted gender



identity, feeling their true sex was the opposite of their physical one.

The award for outstanding film in limited release went to the Hebrew- and Arabic-language *The Bubble*, about a love affair between an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian man. *For the Bible Tells Me So* was named outstanding documentary. Reuters

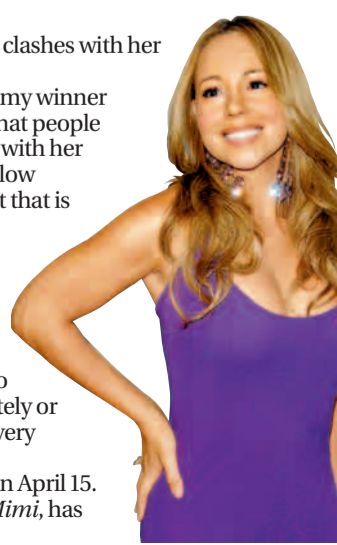
People think I'm a ditz, says Mariah

Mariah Carey knows her indisputable talent clashes with her sexed-up image as a "ditz".

"It's a dichotomy," the 37-year-old Grammy winner (right) told *Allure* magazine. "I understand that people think I am a ditz moron." She still struggles with her confidence, she says. "I've always had really low self-esteem and I still do. What's weird about that is being onstage, and the love you get, and the adoration you feel from your real fans. It's hard for a partner to compete."

Carey and Tommy Mottola, the former head of Sony Music Entertainment, divorced in 1997. She has described that relationship as controlling and says: "I had to make a decision – either lose myself completely or learn to stand up for myself. You have to be very courageous to do that."

Her new album, *EMC2*, will be released on April 15. Her previous album, *The Emancipation of Mimi*, has sold 10 million copies. AP



Spears told to pay Federline's fees

A Los Angeles court commissioner, Scott Gordon, has ordered Britney Spears to pay ex-husband Kevin Federline US\$375,000 for his legal fees in their child custody dispute.

The order was issued in response to arguments presented last week. Federline's lead lawyer Mark Vincent Kaplan was asking for nearly US\$500,000.

Spears' lawyer Stacy Phillips argued Kaplan was overbilling and Federline could pay his own legal bills. But Gordon said Spears' actions led to a great majority of the litigation and delays in the case.

Federline has full custody of the couple's two boys. AP

A Cyrus by any other name

Hannah Montana is leaving destiny behind. Miley Cyrus, whose given name is Destiny Hope Cyrus, has filed papers in Los Angeles Superior Court to change her full legal name to Miley Ray Cyrus.

The 15-year-old singer and TV star (right) is the daughter of country singer Billy Ray Cyrus. Her father writes in the filing that the request is "to make her commonly used name the same as her legal name".

Miley Cyrus has said her father gave her the nickname "Smiley Miley" as a baby because of her sunny disposition.

On the Disney Channel hit *Hannah Montana*, she lives a double life as an average teenager named Miley Stewart and a famous pop



singer Hannah Montana; the secret is known only by her dad and manager, played by Billy Ray Cyrus, and close friends.

Miley and Billy Ray Cyrus are hosting the Country Music Television ceremony at Nashville's Belmont University on April 14. AP