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A rallying cry for all Malaysians to grow their own vegetables

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AS the "Grow vegetables" campaign becomes a rallying cry, we now hear people say they are at the very least "thinking" of buying the hydroponics set.

Others want to start a vegetable patch in their backyard as images of the Green Revolution return.

Such an interest in agriculture, with some possible false starts notwithstanding - like brinjal and chilli seeds refusing to germinate - has sent optimism rising.

Said Deputy Agriculture Minister Tengku Datuk Mahmud Tengku Mansor at a recent meeting with food producers:

"Just imagine if one million households produce the equivalent of RM2 of vegetables a day. The savings would be massive."

Quite a lot, obviously. Although this may not entirely substitute the food import bill.

Abdul Kadir Hadi, the Agriculture Ministry's director of planning and evaluation, said the campaign was more about reducing the daily household spending.

It is also obvious that should many households produce vegetables, prices will be kept down.

This brings us to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's explanation that the belt-tightening measures were not about not spending, as this would put traders in a spot.

The Prime Minister said the ringgit's depreciation only hurts when it comes to imported products.

As for vegetables, while some of the imports could not be grown locally - the success rate for onion, shallots, and garlic (1996 import bill RM269 million) had been low as it required semi-arid conditions - others have been successfully cultivated in the country.

Abdul Kadir rattled off a few - low-land tomatoes (the highland variety is grown in Cameron Highlands and exported to Japan); cauliflower and broccoli.

In Bachuk, Kelantan, tobacco growers turn to the humble cabbage during the off-season.

Agriculture officers said they were glad the current enthusiasm for vegetables had brought to the public's attention advances in Malaysian agriculture, including the production of temperate vegetables.

With vegetables imported in 1996 totalling RM769 million, the challenge is decidedly about growing them here.

When you buy cauliflower next - RM6 a kg - look at the boxes they came in. It has Western Australia printed in bold letters.

To put this into perspective, last year, the country spent almost RM52 million to import cauliflower and broccoli.

The Agriculture Department has successfully grown both cauliflower and broccoli, and all its cash crop production centres have been directed to produce them, thus setting the tune for the campaign.

But the agriculture authorities can't be expected to produce all our needs.

The best bet is the might of commercial production, now aided by the expansion of the Fund For Food Scheme by RM100 million to RM700 million.

"One major development is the setting up of agro industrial parks nationwide. Suitable land in all the States have been identified for the

purpose," said Abdul Kadir.

The agro parks are plots which are rented out to companies to grow any crop of their choice.

Still, food production is more complex than it seems.

The policy has always been that food should be imported as producing them here costs more.

Asked whether there has since been a policy reversal, Tengku Mahmood said for now, the emphasis was to produce them locally.

Despite the reality about commercial food production, the casual growers surely have a role to play.

However, it is said that those who appear to be doing better economically do not show much interest.

Experience has shown that those living at labourer's quarters, for instance, were more receptive to growing vegetables.

But this should not remain the case for long.

Smart-suited executives can, of course, squeeze in some agriculture into their frenzied routines.

If they are not motivated by savings on sawi, chillies, brinjals and lady's fingers, they may want to take on a bigger challenge.

They can always try to grow the likes of tomatoes, and even cauliflowers to test their true mettle.

For these are imports which have been successfully cultivated here.

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