



Cultivating the Seeds of Organic Charity

Turning waste into opportunity

By Jeffrey Warner

Amid the lush grounds of the luxurious, Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi wellness retreat, the sprouting seeds of something exceptional are supplying wholesome nourishment that is extending far beyond the intricately carved teakwood villas, suites and top-notch wellness facilities comprising this ancient Lanna Kingdom-style refuge from the modern world.

Diane Curtis, director of sales and marketing for this resort, said “Most people have no idea about our Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) project.” They may not even care. However, “Perhaps others will see that there is this luxurious, five-star resort which looks very glamorous, yet we have rice fields, a 3,000 square meter organic vegetable garden, an ongoing community charity and an education program for our colleagues.

“So, perhaps it is saying that at the same time we portray a glamorous environment, we do get down to grass roots level and get our hands dirty alongside our colleagues.”

The Dhara Dhevi (meaning, “mystical princess”) is paying forward the fruits of this organic initiative by collaborating with a local university in supporting a nearby Buddhist temple school and orphanage that is serving the needs of 800 children.

Many of the children have no parents, or come from families which cannot afford to take care of them. The children are accepted into the orphanage indiscriminately and are allowed to stay at the Don Chan Temple until they are 18 years old.

This temple school – including expansive, multi-level school buildings and on-site, humble accommodation – operates solely on donations and is staffed primarily by monks.

The daily cost of providing the children with lunch is about 7,500 baht; 52,500 baht per week. Therefore, the Mandarin Oriental’s August 2012 contribution of 261kg of organic vegetables and culinary herbs – over 3000 kg in-total throughout the garden project’s first year – served as a significant contribution to the temple school’s humanitarian initiatives.

The Mandarin Oriental is additionally assisting the temple with diminishing its needs list by using the funds raised from the selling of organic vegetables to resort colleagues, as well as with donations from the hotel’s predominantly affluent clientele. The construction of one of the school’s building wings was financed by one of Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi’s regular guests, for example.

“We’re bringing the children something they need,” said Curtis. “And hopefully, because the temple runs on donations, we are contributing to the



health of these children because they have organically grown vegetables on a regular basis.

“This is a 360-degree project,” she added. “It is for us, but it also benefits the local community. All large corporate businesses should give back to the community in which they operate. And the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group has a strong commitment to sustainable, community involvement and responsible waste management. This is what this is about for us.”

Bringing these sentiments home, although Khun Paitoon (“Chui”) possesses a college degree in landscaping and is the Dhara Dhevi’s head gardener, he lived part of his parentless, childhood years in a temple orphanage similar to that of Don Chan. Needless to say, working this vegetable garden’s fertile soil and donating its bounty weekly to the orphanage pulls on his heart-strings.

“I feel very happy that I can help here,” said Khun Chui, while somewhat shyly looking down and

away, as though contemplating a memory “This is a very good idea to help these children.”

This now smoothly operating organic garden project – evolving to include partial college scholarships and internship programs for selected students at the temple school, as well as becoming a model for academic research and design plans for initiatives such as Thailand’s “Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden” – ironically began with a significant problem.

Curtis said the volume of organic rubbish collected daily throughout the resort’s 60-acre (247,000 sq. m.) property, from tree trimmings to food scraps from the kitchens, “literally turns into a mountain in a very short period of time.

“Gardeners come with trolleys full. Every day, another mountain; another mountain. So, once a year, we would have such a huge mountain that we had to do something with it.”

They couldn’t burn it. Dumping the rubbish somewhere else “removes it from our backyard, but quite frankly isn’t dealing with the problem of the organic waste.”

Solution? Gouge out large holes in the back of the resort’s property and bury it.

“This wasn’t really an environmentally responsible way to deal with our organic waste,” said Curtis. “As a senior management team, we said, ‘This isn’t good. We should be doing something better than this.’”

Combining the resources of this management team, they envisioned the transformation of an unused plot of “scrappy” land – comprised of everything but “nice jungle with big, beautiful trees” – into this organic garden project. “And why not turn our organic waste into compost to feed the garden?”

Eighteen months later, it literally feels like the garden belongs there.

“Yes, it does,” said Curtis. “And because wellness is such an important part of our resort experience; many people come here for wellness; this project is really just an extension of that.”

This garden has become the epicenter of the Dhara Dhevi’s fast growing CSR program. Ten percent of the vegetables grown supply the resort’s six restaurants. The remainder goes to support the Don Chan temple school.

Furthermore, the resort’s clients can become involved with this project via activities from community outreach to cooking classes. And occasionally, small groups of orphans visit the garden and partake in activities such as picnics and Kids Club activities coupled with harvesting vegetables that are taken back to the Don Chan temple kitchen.

Soon, this land plot will be further landscaped in such way that its vegetable growing potential will be optimized.

These efforts will include the cultivation of medicinal plants and herbs which will be turned into health restoring products for both the Don Chan temple children and resort guests.

“This is actually what we are about,” said Curtis. “Guests come to the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi to escape their city environments and stressful, corporate lives; such environments, lifestyles and unhealthy eating habits can cause imbalance.”

She addressed the fact that Mandarin Oriental’s clients are prepared to invest the time and money to come there and become well.

“Now, more than ever, we can truly say that we can provide this for them,” said Curtis. “Our Dheva Spa and Wellness Centre is not only a uniquely beautiful example of traditional architecture, we are blessed to have the services of a variety of wellness specialists who provide tailor-made programs that suit the needs of each individual guest.

“So, from having a waste problem, this has now become a very positive thing,” she added. “We are environmentally responsible...As a management team, we get huge satisfaction out of doing the right thing. At the same time, we make a significant contribution to the Don Chan temple school.”



There’s much more to this story than problem solving and charity offerings of organic goodness.

“It’s about the education of our own colleagues as well,” said Curtis. “I am sure that our colleagues, including our senior management team, had no need to think about organic gardening or the recycling of organic waste before we started this project. Now, we all do.

“As we involve our Mandarin Oriental colleagues in this project, they too, get caught up in it,” she added. “And this is the dream, isn’t it? That they understand the difference between organic and non-organic; recycling as opposed to discarding waste irresponsibly. It won’t convert everyone.”

This garden project has been an extensive learning process from the beginning.

“There is quite a lot of humor involved with this as well,” said Curtis, referencing a handful of tomato seeds that were planted early on in the project. “We didn’t realize these tiny seeds were going to turn into 250 kilos of tomatoes that needed to be picked in one week, or spoiled. We had tomatoes coming out of our ears (laughing). Even the children at the temple can’t eat that many. They’d turn red!

“We are learning as we grow, to be honest,” she later added.

To assist with the overall gardening process, Khun Pongsak was hired to work in this garden after earning a degree in agriculture from the local, Maejo University.

The Mandarin Oriental has established an agreement with this university in mutual efforts toward identifying everything from the crops most suited to Chiang Mai’s climate and soil, to further developing the environmentally friendly transformation of organic waste into both compost and an earthworm farm.

Curtis said that both Khun Chui and Khun Pongsak, with their academic backgrounds and enthusiasm, are assets and play a key role in the further development and success of this garden project.





Praise aside, what drives Pongsak to do this line of work and remain dedicated to the Mandarin Oriental's garden project? Simply put: "People are eating too many chemicals."

Not one stem of the vegetables grown in this garden is genetically modified, and no chemicals are used. Rather, scientifically engineered mixes of compost, fertilizer including nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium – coupled with much "passion" from whom Curtis deems as "very enthusiastic amateurs" – is making this project flourish.

They are also keeping it simple and pure. With exception of a few lettuce "hybrids" and some "farang (foreign)" culinary herbs, no attempts are being made to grow anything exotic in this garden. Rather, this project is focusing on cultivating produce that grows naturally and seasonally in Northern Thailand.

So, you will find no pumpkins the size of a small car growing there. And Curtis promises that "There are no monster cabbages that have had some nasty hormones sprayed on them.

"This is how they grow naturally," she added. "Yes. We have a few insects occasionally, but this is how things grow in real life."

The Mandarin Oriental's garden project team picks life for people, every day. And Curtis says that "This is all operated from our hearts. It's grass roots.

"We're not trying to make this complicated," adding that they want to refine their efforts by practice. "I hope this just keeps growing organically. I hope it stays simple, that our staff can feel involved so they can understand on a basic level."

Speaking of the basics, human beings are continuing with the construction of concrete jungles. Yet, what grows from the spirit, the earth, perhaps always prevails in drawing people to their real home – nature. And this vegetable garden is functioning as an example of this.

"We hope so," said Curtis.

"We want when people come to (the Mandarin Oriental) from whatever stressful life they've had out there the whole year, that they can relax. And if we can create this when they come through that gate, they are already on their way to wellness..."