

Qala Tala – Start Green: Thabo Olivier

We, Pieter and Gela van Heerden, and our garden worker, Perus Ntseno, visited Thabo Olivier on a cold winter morning in June 2014, at his home in Bayswater, Bloemfontein.



Since Thabo's birth, his mother who taught Sotho at a secondary school in Bloemfontein, spoke only Sotho to him and his father; his "mother tongue" is thus Sesotho. Thabo is passionate about reducing poverty and ensuring food security. As a member of the Mangaung Metro Town Council, he combines his talents, passions, innovativeness and persuasiveness very effectively to ensure that as many as possible **sustainable food gardens** are established all over the Free State. *His motto is that he will assist and give advice, but he will never establish a food garden for anybody, because "a man will not easily take care of another man's child" ("will not easily raise a child whom he has not begot").*

Thabo's whole yard is a demonstration of what can be done on a very small area with minimal costs to produce a very high yield of vegetables. Last year he had the highest yield of vegetables per square meter in South Africa by growing his vegetables in (on) three tiers. The frames for these tiers are made from second hand tar poles covered with low density shadow net. This can be replicated on any plot in the township or squatter camp. Most of the material he uses can be picked up at any dump site.



The **soil** on his plot is very clayish as can be seen from the cracks in the wall of his house, therefore all his plants are grown in containers (mainly old tyres stacked on top of each other and large plastic bottles hanging from frames) filled with mainly compost and a smaller part of soil from his garden or wherever he can get soil of good quality.

He grows his veggies totally **organic**; he uses home-made compost and diluted chicken manure as **fertiliser**. The only **insecticide** is also home made from his own garden, namely habanero chillies, garlic, onions and very little dish washing liquid sprayed on the affected plants. The light density shadow nets help to create a hothouse effect and minimise frost damage. The light rays reflected from old CDs swinging on strings control the birds.



He utilises **rain water** harvested from the roof of his house and stored in Jojo tanks.



All **grey water** from his household is stored in pits at the back door. The grey water has to be utilised within three days before it gets smelly.

Electricity from solar panels on the roof drives the water pump. The water is pumped via plastic pipes from where it drips to the top tier of plants from where it drains to the middle and bottom tiers creating a continuous flow of irrigation as can be seen on the photos.



Thabo's main aim is not to sow only in the soil, but mainly to sow in people's lives. He is assisting people of all races and ages in the establishment of several vegetable gardens and helped them to get contract to deliver their excess of veggies to Spar who gladly concluded the contracts because they know that the vegetables are produced totally organically. The youngest producer is a 13-year old boy from Hillside View. His example is influencing all the neighbouring children / children in his community to grow their own vegetables also, because they can see that this youngster is earning his own pocket money (cell phone, airtime, etc.).



The front garden (left) is under the supervision of Mokete Hlalele, a trainee.

The back garden is the responsibility of Lucky Hlalele, another trainee.

(Lucky is living in Botshabelo and he will liaise with Petrus Ntseno, our gardener, to implement Qala Tala in their

neighbourhood.) Both trainees will be deployed to townships in the rest of the Free State in the near future to roll the Qala Tala principles out.



Thabo made this **seedling "incubator"** from things that he picked up at the dump site: an old bed which he covered with mesh and bubble wrap (see photo). The bubble wrap create a humid hothouse with mild temperature, while no bird or insect can damage the seed or seedlings.



When we visited at the end of June, the following **winter veggies** were grown: broad beans, spinach / Swiss chard, peas, radishes, lettuce, carrots, beetroot, kale, Chinese cabbage and cauliflower on the bottom tier and peas on the middle tier.



Last year the densely planted **summer crop** consisted of:

Maize (two crops), spinach, Habenero and a mixture of other chillies, different kinds of tomatoes (moneymaker, rodade, bite-size, cocktail and golden nugget), and different kinds of pumpkin (flat white boer, Halloween, butternut, queensland blue, hybrid, golden hubbard and green hubbard on the bottom tier;

Runner-beans, gems, zucchini and patty-pans were planted in the plastic containers at shoulder height on the middle tier;

and pumpkins, butternuts, gems and runner beans planted on the bottom and middle tier, were hanging from the trellis at roof level on the top tier.



Thabo also build a **very cheap "green" house** of 74 square for under R15 000 as a demonstration in his back yard, mainly from second hand material. The walls consist of cast off tyres and three different kinds of mortar. The cement mortar mixture and the clay mortar mixture both cracked just as much as his house because of the swelling clay on his plot. Only the mortar made of a mixture of horse droppings and clay did not crack. He advised that the tyres facing the sun should be painted white to keep the house cool in summer. The window frames and panes are also second hand. Only the bolts, nuts, nails and corrugated roof sheets were new. It is quite decoratively insulated with empty wine bottles.

Our overall and lasting impression when the three of us left was (and still is) that we are going to implement the same principles as Thabo and that by setting the example in our respective communities get more people to grow their own vegetables in a cost effective and sustainable way.