

Spiral gardens: food, empowerment, and resilience for women farmers in Kenya

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Nancy Ng'Endo, from Ngema in Kenya, stands next to her spiral garden, which she built after participating in a year-long training program hosted by SeedChange and our local partner organization, Seed Savers Network Kenya.

What are spiral gardens?

Spiral gardens are a powerful and eco-friendly growing technique used around the world to grow a high density of crops in a small space, with minimal water loss.

Each spiral garden is like a mini, bio-intensive farm. Circular garden beds are stacked on top of each other, with each tier a bit smaller than the one underneath it.

The most drought-tolerant crops get planted in the top layers, and water trickles down to the lower layers where farmers plant their thirstiest crops.

Thanks to their unusual shape, spiral gardens are an efficient way to grow vast quantities of food, with very little land and water.



Kales and spinach planted in one of the spiral gardens belonging to Beatrice Wangui, a participant in SeedChange's training program at Langalanga-Nakuru County, Kenya 2022.

An agroecological solution for women farmers

Spiral gardens might sound simple, but for women farmers who struggle with access to land, resources, training, and decision-making power over the family's farm, they're not. They're a powerful path to empowerment.

That's because spiral gardens:

- Can fit up to 110 crops in very little space
- Can be built on top of poor-quality land
- Are affordable to build with recycled resources women have on hand
- Start producing within 2 months
- Yield up to 1000 kg of food per garden, year-round.

In Kenya, SeedChange worked with local partner [Seed Savers Network Kenya](#) to help them deliver a year-long training program for women farmers.

Early on, participants get help to quickly build their own spiral gardens. Then, the program provides ongoing support for a year to help them learn or improve all the agroecological farming skills they need to grow successful harvests, year-round. That includes learning how to produce their own seeds, and learning safe, organic practices to manage soil fertility and pests that won't put their health or the planet at risk.

It's a rapid and accessible solution that gives women a path to food security, greater income, and climate resilience for themselves and their community. This training program started as part of SeedChange's [Rural Women Cultivating Change program](#), made possible by the financial support of Global Affairs Canada.

How to build a spiral garden?

In the training program, women farmers first learn how to create the outer rims of their future spiral garden using recycled paper, discarded plastic canvas, or other locally-available materials. They then fill each layer with earth, sand, and high-quality organic compost, which they can make from resources easily available to them, like kitchen scraps, animal manure and plant materials.

Building on what they learned in their training, some women even started adding old clothing to the centre of each layer, to recycle worn fabric and increase the garden's ability to retain moisture!

Once the spiral garden structure is in place, women plant seeds for their most drought-resistant crops in their garden's upper layers, leaving space and moisture for their thirstier crops on the lower ones.

With ongoing care, high-quality local seeds, and a regular addition of small quantities of water, spiral gardens can grow up to 1000 kg of vegetables per year.

Highly-nutritious and locally popular leafy greens like spinach, kale and local varieties of cabbage grow especially well. And in Kenya, where studies show that the majority of local vegetables are contaminated with unsafe levels of pesticides, vegetables grown organically in spiral gardens fetch a good price for the women who grow them.

Food sovereignty starts by empowering women

Even in the face of climate change and a global food crisis, women farmers aren't powerless. They are resourceful, knowledgeable, and innovative.

Spiral gardens give women farmers a solution to ongoing climate change and increasing water scarcity. But first, they have to learn about them.

At a community scale, when we combine spiral garden training with SeedChange's other activities that help women rebuild local seed security and defend their rights, we create the conditions for women to become leaders towards real food sovereignty.