



Empower

Encourage

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Making a Difference

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Jon Walsh

Urban farming & sustainability

'Making a Difference' articles

.....shine a spotlight on and spread the word about individuals who are making a difference and leaving their mark in the community, business world and the environment.

10-SECOND BRIEFING

Jon Walsh...

- Urban farming and sustainability consultant and instructor
- Taught over 500 people how to grow healthy food in Tokyo
- Aiming to help eliminate city food shortages
- Working to train 2,000 students and 500 business people in urban farming and sustainability skills, and launch teaching programs at 25 more schools and 50 businesses.

Turning Tokyo Green, One Garden at a Time

How did the darkest day in recent Japanese history spur a foreigner with no gardening skills to launch an urban farming business that has taught over 500 people how to grow healthy food in one of the world's largest mega cities?

Michael Taylor investigates.....

During his day job, Tokyo-based sustainability consultant **Jon Walsh** is busy editing translated manuals for Japanese companies. When he's not doing that, he is focusing his energies on helping turn one of the biggest cities in the world into a healthy, green oasis.

Say what? "I teach people how to grow healthy food without chemicals in the city," the New Zealander says when asked what he is doing that is changing lives and making a difference. "This has some important benefits, including showing people how to eat healthier food, reducing usage of poisonous agricultural chemicals, helping people become more self-sufficient, and protecting the environment."

Since he first put spade into dirt in Japan in 2012, Jon has taught [food growing](#) and [sustainability](#) skills to over 500 students, teachers, parents, PTA

members and business people, and grown thousands of tomatoes and cucumbers, hundreds of lettuces and large quantities of other no-spray vegetables and herbs in Tokyo, Japan. And he's just getting started.

What makes Jon stand out?

He believes he may be the only native English speaking professional urban farming and sustainability consultant and instructor in Tokyo, possibly all of Japan. "I think I have found an extreme niche market," says the Kiwi.

Jolted by day of disaster

How did Jon, formerly an IT specialist and long-term professional writer and editor, get involved in urban farming? "Six years ago, I had no interest – or experience – in growing food," he says. "All that suddenly changed when the Tohoku earthquake/tsunami disaster hit



“If a quake that size hit Tokyo and lots of roads get blocked and food stores are destroyed, where would we get food from?”

in March 2011 and killed around 20,000 people. That shock hit about two weeks after a deadly quake hit the city of Christchurch in my native New Zealand. These two quakes had a huge effect on me and made me think: If a quake that size hit Tokyo and lots of roads get blocked and food stores are destroyed, where would we get food from? I had no answer, which was pretty scary. Many people who have emergency supplies would run out within days and these supplies would quite quickly become a pile of empty cans, boxes and bottles. We can't eat these. I wondered, then what?"

By the end of the first summer, Jon had grown over 1,000 tomatoes – on two square meters – and over 200 cucumbers – also on two square meters, as well as 40 lettuces and lots of other vegetables and herbs. “It was fantastic!” he recalls. “I was blown away and had no idea that this tiny little plot could produce so much food. As my family couldn't eat it all, I had to give a lot of the food away and I found I had changed from being a regular consumer into a food producer in one season. I do this most years now.”

Jon then made contact with the founder of Tokyo International School, described what he had done and grown, and was subsequently asked to teach urban farming lessons to their students. “At that point I had no experience teaching anything to anyone, but was really enjoying growing food and had nothing to lose, so I accepted the challenge. That was 2012. There has been a lot of progress since and it has been great fun and hugely satisfying to teach kids how to grow their own food. They are always really excited to see their seeds sprout and plants grow. Kids can go to Disneyland and enjoy fake magic, or they can sow some seeds and see real magic.”

Core services

- Personal & business sustainability resources, training and consulting
- [Urban farming](#) and [sustainability](#) training, demonstrations, seminars and [lectures](#)
- Garden design, [consulting](#), installation and maintenance.

In the media

- [Japan Times](#)
- [Metropolis magazine](#)
- [Tokyo American Club](#)

Jon quickly realized that food sources had to be local, not in some distant warehouse or being trucked in from a farm. In addition, these food sources also had to be sustained, and sustainable. “It was then that I decided to focus on food and creating a more sustainable, self-sufficient lifestyle,” he says. “‘Grow locally’ is far more than just a slogan – it could well be a lifesaver. So, I put some seeds onto some soil in a pot and a plant grew. That was pretty cool! I started growing flowers, vegetables and herbs in planter boxes and pots behind my family's house, and began renting a 3 x 5 meter plot in a nearby community garden.”



Jon (right) donating lettuces to Second Harvest

“The aim here is to get as many households, businesses and other organizations as possible to grow and donate food and effectively eliminate food shortages in major cities. I believe this could be done in two growing seasons – that’s 12 months.”

Aiming to eliminate city food shortages

What initiatives is Jon implementing to bring about positive change and make a difference?

“There are a few areas,” he explains. “First and foremost, I am focusing on teaching basic and advanced urban farming as well as practical [sustainability](#) and [survival skills](#). This is growing rapidly as more people learn about my services, and it is lucky that all these areas are related and support each other.

Second, I have launched a ‘[Grow For Good](#)’ CSR strategy that encourages individuals, groups and businesses in Tokyo to grow food and donate a portion of it to food banks, charities and community support organizations. This is about putting food on plates for people who need it, and has led to [donations](#) of fresh food and money to

[Second Harvest Japan](#) food bank (see image above left), and I hope will lead to more. The aim here is to get as many households, businesses and other organizations as possible to grow and donate food and effectively eliminate food shortages in major cities. I believe this could be done in two growing seasons – that’s 12 months.”

Wrapped around all that, Jon is pushing a broad [sustainability outreach strategy](#) involving teaching people at every level – private individuals, families, students, office staff and club members – getting urban farming [articles](#) published in the media (12 to date), and running [lectures](#) and seminars on urban farming and sustainability issues. He backs up all of this with an expanding catalogue of articles, how-guides and [self-learning packs](#) he has created that help people learn and pass on key food growing skills.



Vision of the future

"I see fresh, cheap, healthy local food everywhere," Jon says. Here are 6 ways cities can be transformed into food havens that can build personal and environmental health, community and self-sufficiency:

1. Convert building rooftops, underused car parks, empty building sites and other under-utilized areas within cities into gardens
2. Grow food instead of flowers, plant gardens instead of lawns, and grow food on walls and rooftops everywhere
3. Line streets with raised gardens so people can see and have access to food all around town.
4. Mobilize teams of urban farmers to build local gardens and train people how to grow their own food sustainably
5. Promote food growing programs in all schools
6. Promote town composting initiatives using organic household waste to create free soil for any residents to use to grow food.

What's the strategy?

"That is best summarized as 'Go deep, go wide,'" Jon explains. "'Go deep' means bringing about inter-generational change by equipping and exciting people to learn and pass on essential food growing skills to the next generation.

'Go wide' refers to teaching as many segments of society as possible: families, students, office staff, club members, and others. It's also about showing people how growing urban food without chemicals can help improve their health, maximize self-sufficiency, boost disaster preparedness, help protect the environment and fight climate change – simultaneously. That's a big point."

How are things going?

"Really well," Jon enthuses. "Business is taking off and for the first time, I am receiving requests from people I have never heard of to provide advice, install gardens, teach, give presentations and lecture. I post a lot of urban farming-related information

and photos on Facebook, and am becoming fairly well known for what I do. I am lucky that urban farming – in particular teaching children, which many people instinctively know is a very good thing to do – is very well received and perceived."

Are any more schools in the pipeline?

"Yes. I have recently picked up teaching projects at Montessori School of Tokyo and the British School in Tokyo, and have other schools that are interested in my services. Subsequently, I am actively looking for people who want to learn how to teach urban farming and become instructors so I can expand my reach and impact."

'Organic'?

What's the weirdest thing Jon has experienced?

"It seems very strange to be teaching basic life skills that most of our grandparents and virtually every generation before them were acutely aware of," Jon explains.



Planting future sustainability

"It appears that the latest two generations, in particular those living in cities, have not 'lost' these skills but have largely never even learnt them."

Any other strange things of note?

"The label 'organic' puzzles me," he says. "Up until only 60-70 years ago, all food was organic, except it was simply called 'food.' Since then, our food production has been altered almost beyond recognition, and now food that has been deliberately poisoned with toxic sprays is considered normal while the real food has been given a quaint label."

What are the main challenges Jon has faced in terms of expanding his activities?

"Most people in Tokyo live in buildings with balconies, and occasionally rooftop access. I think one of my main challenges is to show them how they can transform their empty balconies and rooftops into gardens."

Another challenge, Jon explains, is a natural one – the seasons.

"Plant growth speeds up and slows down as temperatures rise and cool respectively, and in the Japanese summer, it is simply too hot for many people and a lot of plants. There's also the rainy season, regular typhoons, and an array of insects to deal with at different times, so there are windows of opportunity that we need to be aware of and work around."

Another challenge on a larger scale, especially when I approach schools and businesses, is getting the buy-in of management to actually run an urban farming program. This might involve, for example, convincing the manager of an IT company – which focuses on computers and technical issues all day – to start growing vegetables on their rooftop, something which clearly has nothing at all in common with their field of specialization."

What's Jon's workaround?

"For the first issue, I offer site consultations where I point out where people could grow what, backed up by a garden installation service and all the resource material they will need to do it themselves."

Regarding seasons, I show people what they can grow when using a Japan planting calendar, and if they have a short growing period, I'll recommend plants that grow quickly.

The last issue I think will involve demonstrating how growing food can benefit not just people's health, but also have far wider ranging benefits beyond the workplace, including helping keep our food growing environment – and our planet – sustainable for all, which is absolutely critical if we are going to have a future."

Is Jon using any new, unique or unusual techniques, strategies or ideas to get the word out about his activities?

"I use Facebook a lot to promote my activities and include lots of naturally colorful photos," he says. "Coupled with that, I also combine my professional writing and basic design skills to create all my own advertising text and brochures. I think that eye-catching color and a convincing story are important. Congruency also adds impact: I garden in my private life as well as professionally, and I present both aspects to the public."

No negatives

What have been Jon's greatest successes to date?

"First, I have just crossed the 500-student mark, which is a pretty significant milestone. The second is I gave the first [lecture](#) of my life in September 2017 at [Lakeland University Japan](#)'s campus in Tokyo. It was a full house and the feedback was amazingly positive."



Key learnings

What tips can Jon offer to people wanting to follow in his footsteps?

Do your homework – Learn how to grow food first before attempting to teach.

Get ready to make mistakes – Initially, growing food involves a lot of trial and error. You will quickly learn what methods do and do not work, and where ideal places are to grow plants. Focus on repeating what works and tweaking what doesn't.

Start – One of the keys to starting any new venture is simply to take the first step. If you have never grown anything before, just do it – sow some seeds or transplant a seedling.

Start small – with just one pot or planter box – and expand onward and upward from there. You will make mistakes and have seeds not sprout and plants not grow but don't let failure stop you from trying. With practice comes experience and with experience comes confidence. Take these events in your stride and aim to come back stronger and more confident next season.

What are Jon's future goals and objectives in the urban farming space?

He's aiming big. In 2018, he plans to:

- Train 25 more urban farming and sustainability instructors to work within Tokyo and overseas
- Train 2,000 students and 500 business people in urban farming and sustainability skills
- Launch teaching programs at 25 more schools and 50 businesses and encourage customers to [donate](#) food to [Second Harvest](#) food bank
- Ramp up food donations to 250 kgs of fresh food to food banks
- Work with 100 business leaders to develop on-site food-growing programs
- Continue spreading key urban farming and sustainability information, ideas and resources through regular and social media, [lessons](#) and [lectures](#)
- Build 100 private and rooftop gardens for Tokyo residents and businesses

Specific short-term goals include launching a [team-building program](#) involving teaching [urban farming, sustainability](#) and [disaster preparedness and survival skills](#) and breaking into the corporate/office sector and providing the above three programs to office staff to enable more people to grow healthy food in the workplace.

Any final thoughts on making a difference?

"To make a mark in this field, you have to combine a seed with the motivation and enthusiasm to sow it, and then spread that passion. That is how we can make a difference. That is how we can change the world."

| End

BUSINESS DASHBOARD



Contact

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About Business Grow

[Business Grow](#)'s urban farming service is all about growing fantastic food (and lots of it!) in the city. We teach people of all experience levels how to grow healthy, no-spray food where they live and work at a fraction of the price of store-bought organic vegetables. Students learn skills that will not only help them grow healthy no-spray food, but also help boost self-sufficiency and protect the environment.

Resources

- [Full services information pack](#)
- [Urban Food Production Kit](#)
- [Beginners Food Growing Pack](#)
- [Urban food production training](#)
- [Urban farming self-learning teacher/parent packs](#)
- [Urban farming crash course](#)
- [Urban farming concierge service](#)

Urban farming projects

- [School urban farming project – 2013](#)
- [School urban farming project – 2012](#)

