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Get vegetables, fresh and for free

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Chennai: On Monday morning, V Shanmugavalli of Kundrathur wanted a few tomatoes. But instead of going to a nearby market she went to the vermi compost yard in the area and got them, for free. "It's not money but the freshness of the vegetables that draws me to the kitchen garden in the compost yard a few days a week," she said.

For several home-makers like her, the novel initiative of the Kundrathur town panchayat and Hand-In-Hand (HIH) — a pioneer in solid waste management in Kancheepuram district — is a boon.

It is at the yard in Kundrathur, one of 17 run by HIH in the district, that concepts like organic farming and kitchen gardens are experimented with. Along with 22 staff members, formed into a self-help group, C Ravikumar, G Franchis and M Muniappan of HIH maintain the yard and the kitchen garden.

The available open land, within the one-acre vermi compost yard located along the Kundrathur-Sommaglam Main Road, was infested with poisonous snakes and there were dense bushes. The bushes and wild grass were cleared and cultivation of brinjal, tomato, ladies finger, banana, sunflower and a few greens began. "Our aim is not to sell vegetables and fruits. We want to experiment with organic farming in compost yards. On that front, this yard can be a model," Shiva T Krishnamoorthy, project leader, HIH, told TOI.

The manure produced through waste collected from the 2,800 households in nine wards is used to cultivate vegetables and fruits and is also sold. On an average, nearly 40 tonnes of waste is generated every month. About 40% of this forms the organic wastes that are converted into manure through vermi-culture. From March, an additional 1,700 households will be covered.

HIH has also been training homeowners and local bodies on how to make best use of their land. The combined efforts of the residents, the local body concerned and HIH resulted in Karapakkam and Mudichur panchayats winning the coveted Nirmal Puraskar Award for 2008 for sanitation and garbage-free villages.