

Lutfun Hussain



Name:
Lutfun Hussain

Position/occupation:
Project Coordinator,
Coriander Club,
Spitalfields City Farm.

Residence:
Tower Hamlets.

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Lutfun arrived in London from Bangladesh in 1969 and in 1999 became involved in the work of Spitalfields City Farm. To garden and grow your own vegetables is an important part of Bengali culture and the farm provides a space in which to cultivate traditional Bengali vegetables as a community.

Sustainability experience

Tower Hamlets has a large Bengali population and word of Lutfun’s success in growing traditional vegetables quickly encouraged other Bengali women to come to the farm. In response Lutfun set up the Coriander Club in 2000, which not only provides the opportunity for women to grow organic vegetables for their family, but Lutfun and the team at the farm provide healthy cooking classes. The borough has a high incidence of dietary illness and the cooking classes look at ways in which to cook in a more healthy way using traditional ingredients, while twice-weekly gardening sessions help to keep the group’s members fit and active. “The Club provides local Bangladeshi women with a space in which to exercise, socialise and grow traditional Bengali vegetables, and what they learn and grow; they take home to their dinner tables.”

The cooking class and gardening are also important in helping members feel less isolated; many of the women can feel homesick and scared but feel safe in the club, speaking Bangla, socialising and laughing together. “The Coriander Club is a small project but working with such a diverse group of people and seeing the positive benefits that working on the farm brings them, is incredibly rewarding. Seeing the happy face of a child who has grown even a single marigold is something that money can’t buy.”

Lutfun is the lynchpin of the Coriander Club – in the last year she has continued to work tirelessly to promote ethnic diversity, cultural exchange, inclusion, organic horticulture and healthy living in our society. The ladies of the Coriander Club are also members of the Women’s Environment Network; catering at some of their events. The expertise of the Coriander Club has even been called on by Kew Gardens and members have advised about the cultural significance of several South Asian plants through their Plant Cultures Project. The Club also participated in the Museum of London’s Plant Culture scheme that encourages members to share stories, recipes and anecdotes about 25 south Asian plants including chilli, turmeric, sandalwood and coriander.

“I’m proud of the way that the Coriander Club has developed” says Lutfun. “Children often come to the farm but now parents also come, asking advice about growing Bengali vegetables in their garden or in their window box. Seeing people enjoy vegetables they have grown and contributing to the local community and improving the links between different ethnic groups is very fulfilling.”

The Coriander Club is one project at Spitalfields City Farm where the overriding aim of all activities is to teach people where food comes from, provide skills training – such as animal care and horticulture, and provide a space for developing sustainable and healthy approaches to living. The farm has over 60 regular volunteers and has visits from over 30 local school children a week. In particular the farm provides opportunities for disadvantaged people to develop life skills, and different programmes target the long-term unemployed, ex-offenders, young people with learning difficulties, and those with mental health issues.

The farm is also building close links with local organisations and over the last year has partnered with St Johns Primary School, providing curriculum support by teaching numeracy and literacy skills in the context of the farm. Lutfun and the team are keen to see the farm develop as an education hub, a place for learning and the exchange of ideas. “Sustainability is a core cultural issue. Links with nature and the environment are very important to me and sustainability is also about people learning from each other – young and old alike.”