

A LESSON FROM THE ISLAND



Joeli Waqanivalu (left) at his home garden.

People encounter stress in their daily lives and they tackle it in different ways, for 22-year-old Joeli Waqanivalu residing in Law Street, Narere his way to relieve stress is Home Gardening.

A third year Marine Science student, the ambitious Naroi, Moala lad has created a haven for himself in home gardening that is not only relieving stress but also feeding his family.

Schooled at the local Yasayasa Moala College on the island, the passion for farming he grew up with never left his side.

"I was in Suva then moved to the island for secondary education where I took Agriculture Science then returned to Suva in 2017 to further my studies at the University of the South Pacific," he said.

"I never lost sight of this farming

passion when I moved to the city and made it my business to make use of the little piece of land available to put what I learnt in school to practice," he said.

Back on the far flung island most of the farmers are engaged in the coconut industry together with crops but rarely assorted vegetables.

And because crops are planted for home consumption and vegetables are rare, Joeli together with his father would plant and sell vegetables to the villagers for a dollar.

"It would be assorted vegetables with seedlings bought from Suva and it usually caters functions in the village or meals in every household on the island," he said.

"I am often advised to increase the price but would rather not

because families are also finding hardships on the island and although we are getting nutrition from the sea, a balanced meal of vegetables is also essential."

Life at the University of the South Pacific comes with struggles for a better future which will not always be a bed of roses.

"The last three years of tertiary involves concentration and the school loads were great inclusive of field trips," he said.

"Tertiary education comes with its own packages of assignments and achievements that need time and management."

"It is this kind of pressure that puts me in a situation that sobs my head up, I would be thinking of when assignments are due and exams that need day light revisions and a pass would be remarkable,"

he said.

"With all this pressure, I take serenity in the garden and it relieves my stress just being in the backyard, talking to plants and seeing them grow," said Joeli.

"I often get lost in the midst of trying to see it flourish that I forget all the hardships of life and the expectations of the University."

This backyard gardening not only relieves stress but also assists in the vegetable budget of the family.

"We have been eating from the backyard before COVID-19 hit us and also during this pandemic time that we realized of its various importance," he said.

With the prices of vegetable hiking up drastically in the market, Joeli and his family realized having a backyard is a bonus.

"It has saved us money and is healthy as we know it is organic compared to the ones sold in markets, you really do not know the types of chemicals used to help it grow."

"During this COVID-19, I am grateful that I have my family members who are here to assist us in our backyard as they are keen to keep their hands dirty," he said.

For a lad in his early twenties who has done a great initiative as a youth, he is a living testimony that peer pressure is not always a norm.

"Home gardening connects you to the land, when you plant you can also develop the idea of taking care of the environment," he said.

"Alcohol and drugs are not things that you can bet your stress in, you do not realize the damage it can do to your body and self-

esteem and peer pressure can lead you to the wrong side of things," said Joeli.

"Gardening is also a way of keeping healthy for career oriented or workaholics just as it also helps in food security," said Joeli.

A recipient of the Ministry of Agriculture's Home Gardening Online competition package, the enthusiastic individual has reaped the reward of his initiative.

"It is a great gesture that the Ministry assisted not only my family but other families that were affected by this COVID-19 in terms of employment and food," he said.

He was awarded the winner of the third week of the Home Gardening Online competition of the Ministry of Agriculture receiving a post-hole spade, a pair of gumboots, a pair of hand gloves, a knife, 30m hosepipe, watering can, and a rake.

"I did not really expect what I received and I hope that this could be a lesson to every youth that what you do from the heart will be someday rewarded and for this I would like to thank the Ministry for this recognition," he said.

In his garden are a wide variety of vegetables and herbs and has motivated him to continue his game and venture into organic supply.

"Although I took Agriculture in school and switched to Marine in tertiary, the whole reason is because I found the connection between the land and the sea and they work hand in hand in terms of conservation," he said.

"STEPPING UP RICE PRODUCTION IN FIJI"

The Ministry of Agriculture is working towards increasing rice production and improving the livelihood of farmers in the Northern division.

In ensuring Fiji gradually achieves self-sufficiency in rice production, the Prime Minister Hon. Voreqe Bainimarama handed over a rice harvester to farmers in Bua last week.

While handing over the \$60,000 worth rice harvester to the farmers of Bua, Hon. Bainimarama advised them to work together and utilize the machine to uplift the quality of lives of the Fijians in the friendly North.

"Government is dedicated to building on the progress that we've achieved together, investing in our communities from the ground up and by giving Fijians the tools they need, they can overcome any obstacle," he said.

"This new combine harvester will cut down on labour and cost of growing rice, and allow you to grow crops with higher yields without worrying about physically toiling to reap the benefits."

"By creating a more modern,

mechanized Rice Farming Industry, in Vunivau, across Bua, and all throughout Fiji — we're bringing this crop into the future, and uplifting the quality of your lives in the process," he said.

Fiji imports 80 per cent of rice from Vietnam and Thailand hence the promotion of becoming self-sufficient in rice in Fiji by the Ministry of Agriculture.

"Rice is a staple found on kitchen tables throughout the country. But all too often, that rice is grown thousands of kilometers away, imported from some far-off country," he said.

"But there's no reason that Fiji and our ideal climate for rice cultivation can't make that journey from the rice paddy to our tables much shorter," said Hon. Bainimarama.

"With our eyes set on a wholly sustainable agro-economy, rice will play an essential role in achieving this vision," he said.

"That's why Government is providing assistance on every step of the way from seed to harvest to milling to make rice farming as hassle-free and profitable as

possible."

In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture is investing in research to ensure positive tapping into Fiji's farming potential in the most impactful way possible.

Meanwhile, rice production in Bua province increased from 474 metric tonnes from the 158

hectares planted in the financial year 2018/2019 to 770 metric tonnes from 220 hectares planted in 2019/2020.

In year 2019/2020, the Northern Division produced 7,431 metric tonnes of rice which was an increase of 2886 metric tonnes from the 4,545 metric tonnes produced in 2018/2019.

In an effort to increase rice production in Bua areas, the Ministry is also registering more machines to assist farmers during off season harvesting.

In 2019, Fiji imported \$42.6m worth of rice which is equivalent to around 40,000 metric tonnes of rice.



Prime Minister Hon. Voreqe Bainimarama, Hon. Dr Mahendra Reddy, PS Agriculture Ritesh Dass, farmers and Government officials during the rice field day.



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