

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH

Eco-conscious Indians tell us about the difficulties of leading a green lifestyle and starting a green business in Bangkok.

Let's face it: we're far from the most environmentally conscious people. And living in Bangkok doesn't make it any easier for the rare eco-minded few to lead the lifestyle they want. But we found a few among us who not only go the extra mile to be good to the planet in their day-to-day activities, they are also committed to making others more informed and providing easier access to greener living. They share with us their experience of becoming green and the struggles of running green businesses.



The Green Resource

Finding it difficult to continue her green lifestyle in Bangkok, **Saloni Bajaj** launched **theurbangreenscene.com** three years ago when she moved back from Sydney. The website not only acts as a sort of consumer protection, decoding various eco certifications, it provides a directory of local green enterprises. Saloni also offers workshops for businesses and individuals on how to make their homes and offices more Earth-friendly. Here, she talks about her transition from Sydney to Bangkok and educating people about the environment. —AMITHA AMRANAND

How did you become interested in the environment?

It started when I lived in Sydney. I lived opposite a centre called the Watershed Sustainability Centre. I started volunteering there, and they ask volunteers to teach the community how to become greener.

What was it like moving back to Thailand?

I was shell-shocked. I thought, *How do I start?* Sometimes it's hard to be green where you can't find green communities or green options. The reason that I started the Urban Green Scene website is so that if someone moves to Bangkok like me and is already green, they can straight away start being green again.

What are the things that you do here to make your life green?

I buy and eat organic vegetables or try as much as I can. But the biggest problem here is waste management. I sell my bottles. Some of the staff members in my building make money from recycling, so you just leave that to happen organically, but you have to make a mechanism whereby they don't have to separate waste themselves.

How difficult is it to educate people about eco-living?

Here, it's more like, if I see something, I squirm; I decide whether or not to open my big mouth. I think the younger people now are becoming more aware. For me, it's not about forcing change; it's about having a resource for people who want to change.

When you started becoming green, what did you find difficult at first?

It's more expensive. That's the first thing that hits you, but if you think about the world, being green is not only being better for your own body, it's having an impact on everything else. It's about making choices for yourself but still enjoying life.

What did you find to be surprisingly easy?

Once I knew how to find organic foods, it's now easy to get them. Initially nothing was easy. It took me months to collect the names of the people who manufacture organic products within Thailand. But now there's a growing awareness if you look [online]. There're new groups popping up.

What are Indians' attitudes toward eco-living?

The older generation sometimes does things without knowing that they're green. I don't mean our parents' generation because they grew up [comfortable]. But my grandparents and great grandparents were immigrants. They didn't have much, so even now they make choices that are greener. Now in this consumerist world, it's hard to make people change. It's not easy to be green especially for people who run large families. But if you make small increments, you can gradually change.

Learn more at theurbangreenscene.com

ECO TIPS: Waste Management

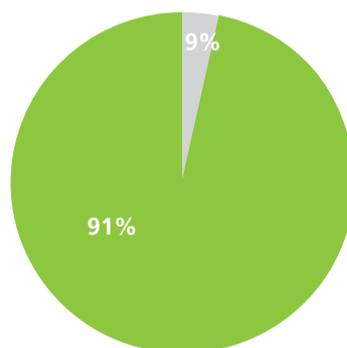
SEPARATE YOUR TRASH Some people, like garbage collectors, make money from recyclable materials you throw out. Supermarkets now carry garbage bags in different colours for organic, recyclable, and toxic wastes, which you can buy in the same package.

GIVE IT AWAY If you live in a *moo baan* that permits entry to recyclable garbage collectors, you can sell them anything, from bottles to wood to newspapers. These people sell your garbage to the recycling plants. You make money. They make money. It's a win-win situation.

MIND YOUR KITCHEN SCRAPS If you live in a condo, you can still compost your organic waste on your balcony. All you need is two plastic containers, soil, dead leaves, and kitchen waste.

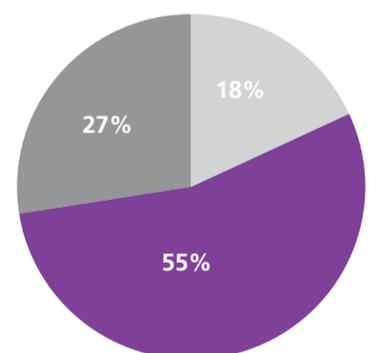
BE ECO WITH ELECTRONICS Don't throw them away! You can sell your personal electronics behind Pantip Plaza, where there are people waiting to buy your old electronics to recycle or reuse the parts. As for broken appliances, give or sell them to your repairman.

MASALA ASKS: How green are you?



At home, I...

- have the AC on full blast and take long, hot showers even in the summer.
- use energy-saving bulbs and appliances, keep the AC use to the minimum.
- use energy-saving bulbs and appliances, keep a compost bin and grow herbs and veggies on the balcony.



How do you manage transportation in your family?

- We each have a car and drive everywhere.
- We take the BTS and the MRT when we feel like it.
- We carpool and take the public transport as much as we can.

Sunshine on Sukhumvit

Active since March of 2012, **Sunshine Market** is a little-known health food shop run by **Prem Srichawla** and her nieces **Natasha** and **Mandy Srichawla**. The store not only carries food items, but also eco-friendly skincare and baby products, 70 percent of which are certified organic. There is also a bakery with goodies made of mainly gluten-free and certified-organic ingredients. Although most of the items in the store are imported, Sunshine Market hosts a farmers market for a group of local farmers, Raktham, which practises organic and rotational farming. The family has plans to open a cafe serving organic coffee and tea in the near future. —*REENA KARIM*

Tell us how it all began.

Prem We thought that Thailand needed a health food store. I had been into this area of health and finding good food for about 15 years. We screen everything that comes in. We research it before ordering.

How did you find your suppliers?

Prem It was the most difficult thing, especially for the bakery. We went out hunting; we went to pharmacies, Chinese medicine shops, Lemon Farm, and the organic fair as well. And of course, online. And many of them even walked through the door.

What are the difficulties of running this kind of business?

Prem Many. Government [officials] don't know about these things. Some of them know, but they don't want you to think they know. The biggest hurdle here is that they make everything look difficult, and they make everything difficult for you.

Natasha To get the products passed by the FDA, we had to go to the health department, all the time pitching, finding someone who knows someone, and things like that.

How has your experience been?

Prem I kind of expected it to be slow. I have seen a lot of difference from the start to now. I want this to be a place you come and shop first before you go to the supermarket. Our prices are the same as the supermarket.

Natasha When we first opened, I did not think that

I had to be at the store all day, but there has to be someone here to help customers pick the right things. You have to know your products very well. At first I didn't know all of the products very well, but I realised that I have to educate myself in order to help others.

Who are some of your customers?

Natasha Earlier, there were many Indians, about 50 percent, and the rest were expats and Thais. Now the pattern is less Indian and more expats and Thais.

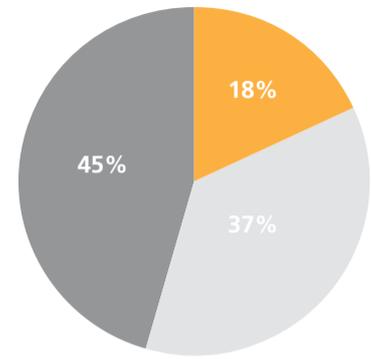
What is the Indian attitude towards eco-living?

Mandy Most of us live by convenience because we are so busy. We tend to eat on the go or have our maids cook. Our lifestyle makes us not eat at home much during the week. It's hard to change Indian people. But when you know you have to, you will change. That usually includes medical situations.

Find out more at sunshinemarket.co.th

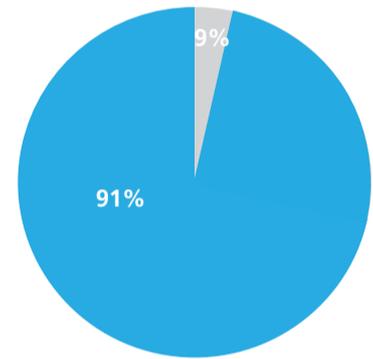


MASALA ASKS: How green are you?



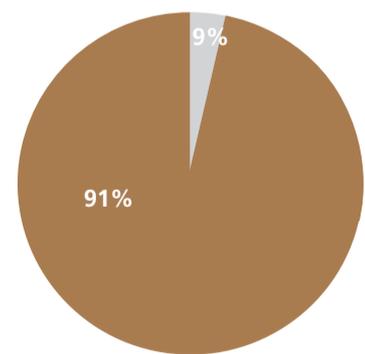
When I go shopping, I...

- buy whatever I need regardless of where it's from and how it was made or grown.
- buy eco-friendly products if I happen to see them.
- bring my own shopping bag, always buy certified organic and green products, avoid any animal-based products.



Bangkok should...

- increase the number of garbage and recycling bins.
- increase green space, expand the mass transit system, build better sidewalks, and create bike lanes.
- expand the roads and build more parking lots.



Global warming is...

- a hoax.
- a problem that affects everyone, and we all should do our best to reduce our carbon footprint.
- not a pertinent issue in my life.

ECO TIPS: Cleaning & Grooming

GET CRAFTY Make your own cleaning products from stuff that you already have in the kitchen, like lime, salt, baking soda. There are an abundance of recipes online.

RETHINK YOUR TOILETRIES Cut down on the superfluous items. If you spend a lot on skincare products to begin with, why not go for only the necessary and eco-friendly ones?

DO A BIT OF RESEARCH If you ever want to know how toxic or safe your household products are, visit goodguide.com, which rates products' social, environmental, and health impacts.



The Green Musketeers

When **Radiance Wholefoods** was first started by American expat Nicole Goddresse, it was a home-based business for the members of her vegan group. But the clientele and the list of vendors gradually expanded, and when Nicole had to move to Australia this year, Thai-Indian entrepreneurs **Anchal Pathela** and **Ravina Sachdev** happily became the new owners, with help from **Sanjay**, Ravina's husband. The three musketeers, as they like to call themselves, have taken this home business online to offer a wide variety of organic and health foods along with fresh local produce and imported items. We spoke to the musketeers, and had an email chat with the former owner, about expanding the clientele and competing with supermarkets. —R.K.

Tell us about your products.

Sanjay All or most of our products are organic, health foods, and whole foods. There are some products where organics don't exist, but they are considered health foods, such as almonds. But 70–80 percent of our products are all certified through IFOAM, USDA, and EU boards. We focus on local produce because it is the freshest. But if it's not available in Thailand, then we import it. We are also one of the few who carry dairy products like organic yoghurt and hummus.

Anchal Our two main suppliers of fresh produce in Thailand are Harmony Life International and National and Premium Foods.

Ravina We also have a small section of organic detergent, herbal toothpastes, and soaps. We [work with] Bangkok Bread Boys to offer a nice selection of breads as well, but it is by order only.

How does your online business keep up with stores?

Nicole There are many supermarkets, but generally the customer service is not great, and the stock of items seems to change from one week to the next. [Radiance has] a money-back guarantee, and customers don't



have to go from Villa to Tops to Gourmet to find just one item.

How do you reach out to people?

Nicole [Radiance has] a distribution list and a newsletter each week with recipes and new products.

Anchal We [also] showcase at the green market at K Village and Bo.lan farmers markets.

Who are your customers?

Ravina Ninety percent are expats. We also have Thai and Japanese [customers].

What's the attitude among Thai-Indians toward organic food?

Ravina The younger generations are trying, but it's hard for the older generation. It takes time for Indian people to be aware.

Sanjay The price could be a deterrent especially for Indian households, as the elder members still go to the wet market to buy things.

What is the most common myth that people have about organic food?

Nicole That organic food is always more nutritious than conventionally grown produce. While organic produce can be more nutritious, what needs to be considered is how fresh the produce is. The fresher the produce, the more nutrient-dense it will be.

Learn more at radiancewholefoods.com

ECO TIPS: Eating

WASH AND PEEL If you can't buy organic produce, peel what can be peeled or wash your fruit and vegetables with salt or baking soda to remove chemicals sprayed on them.

EAT LESS MEAT Reduce your carbon footprint by eating less meat but better meat. And by better, we mean, free-range, hormone-free, organic, grass-fed meats.

SHOP LOCAL Buying organic products that have travelled around the world on gas-guzzling airplanes and trucks is not beneficial to the environment. Moreover, imported produce gets sprayed at the border to prevent germs from entering the country. Local fruit and vegetables are not only cheaper, they are fresher and taste better when in season.

PLAN FOR THE WEEK By thinking ahead about your weekly meals, you save money and reduce waste.

GET A TIFFIN Pack your lunch in a reusable container. If you don't cook, then bring a container with you whenever you order anything to go.

