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## Learning is an Art while Farming is a Science

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*“One of my neighbours said to me the other day “I am illiterate and you are educated and yet we both are farmers so what is the difference?” I replied that I listen to my land’s needs and hence am open to innovation, while you want your land to listen to you.”*

**Sahab Gul, Farmer, village Kanro Gumbadkay, Talash Valley, District Lower Dir**

Today’s farming has gone through a revolution. The techniques have changed. The yield I harvested from vertical tomato farming, one could not even imagine in the past. I am a graduate and practice farming – a generally perceived illiterate’s job! I also keep a shop. About 2-3 years ago when my interaction started with the LPH I had 4-5 Jarebs<sup>1</sup> of Land and I used to cultivate vegetables such as tomatoes and onion. As my land holding was small so there was always the urge to grow more from little land. Something however changed my tendency. I along with a few other farmers went to an exposure visit to Swabi, Akora Khattak and Mardan at just a few hours’ drive from Talash. There we saw farmers growing tomatoes using vertical farming technique on small land holdings.

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<sup>1</sup> One Jareb is equivalent to 4 Kanals, 2,420 sq. yards or 2,023.428 sq meters

The tomatoes we saw were unbelievable, the height of the plant, number of tomatoes per plant and size of each tomato was all amazing. The farmers told us that this technique requires less space and gives more produce. I decided that very moment to replicate the same on my land. In Mardan there was a farmer named Israeel. He had 25 Jarebs land and was earning about PKR 7,000,000 from tomatoes only. He also had grape orchards so we brought that variety from him and cultivated it here in the same manner as he guided us. I was also interested in onion so I joined the other farmers in another exposure visit to Buner. The farmers were growing certified onion seed for Magnas Khal Seed Company. Another exposure visit took us to Gujranwala to check out drip irrigation system.

I expressed my interest to the LPH staff on vertical tomato farming and they guided me to the Agriculture Extension Department. It was the first time ever that I had contacted an agriculture officer. He guided me on the suitable variety for vertical tomato farming and the input required. So it was near the month of March that I planted tomato in field and erected the supporting structures for the vertical farming. I was told that this variety gives fruit till November. While in horizontal technique I would plant tomatoes in June and the fruit was attained from August till November. The tomato vertical farming was wonderful, the yield was high and the quality was very good. I managed to take 5-6 pickings of the tomato yield which I had never achieved from the horizontal technique. The LPH also helped us explore more markets in Peshawar, Mardan and Rawalpindi. The local market of Batkhela offers good rates for the vegetables. We also take the produce to Peshawar market where it is readily sold.

The tomato vertical farming also creates more employment opportunities, I used to have 2 workers to assist me in farming but now I have 4-5 workers which I can easily afford as my income has improved. Another interesting aspect about vertical farming is that in the year 2014 there was a bad hailstorm. At that time most of my tomatoes were cultivated on horizontal technique while a small plot was on vertical. I observed that the damages in the vertical plot were less when compared to the horizontal ones. The hails had directly hit the fruits on the horizontal plot while in vertical plots the net provided protection cover and also support to the tomatoes. Now the agriculture officers also frequently visit our village and give us advice for improving farming practices and this is a mutual relationship as we also go to their offices for the advice when needed. They refer us to the input suppliers from where we can get quality inputs. Before we used to go to an input dealer and asked supplies without determining if it was even required or not. In my father's farming days, poverty was high and there was no access to proper inputs. Even now, my neighbouring farmers add fertilizer one year and the next year again without consulting the experts. I disagree to that and give the land what is really needed. I am open to innovation and am ready to practice new techniques of farming. This year, as you can see in my tomato farm, the crop yield is good. It is August and to date I got 5 pickings of the season and it is still going to give me more!

