



➔ Tucked away in an almost secretive and dusty corner of what feels like the middle of nowhere (although it's actually only a hop and a skip away from the city centre), the Greenheart farm shop in Dubailand is nothing short of charming. Before we even entered the actual shop we were greeted by its enticing aroma—the smell of fresh fruits and veggies that is so pungent and overpowering (in the best possible) that we wished we could just bottle up. We met Elena Kinane, the founder and owner of Greenheart Organic Farms, at the shop, where she picked us up for our tour of the actual farm. Elena wore a white midi-length dress and a sunhat that made her look like your perfect Southern Belle, and from there, we knew we were ready to embark on a real farming experience.

Growing Organically

In the middle of the desert there's a green haven where 130 different types of produce overcome the sometimes 40°C heat and adversity to grow healthily and, even more impressively, organically. Welcome to Greenheart Organic Farms, where passion and hard work have achieved the seemingly impossible.

By Thais Kelly and Yi-Hwa Hanna

Photographs by Rajesh Raghav

The History

"I started off with just a few pots on my balcony to make a decent salad," recalls Elena. After having just a quick taste of how fresh and wholesome her greens were, that turned out to be the budding start of Greenheart, when she managed to get a small plot of land at a friend's farm and began growing produce for friends and family. "Demand increased quickly and, slowly, the idea of doing this for a



living took seed and flourished. I wholeheartedly believe in healthy organic eating, an eco-friendly lifestyle and fair trade," she adds. Setting up the farm was a gradual process. First they had to be convinced that genuine organic desert farming was even possible and not just a far-fetched dream. As soon as they knew it would work, they started building the business layer by layer.

"We first launched Greenheart in 2012, but I was running another similar operation called Nazwa Organic Farm beforehand, so we knew how to grow produce and I had some experience in setting up a business of this kind," says Elena. They began growing 10 different types of vegetables and sold around 100 mixed boxes per week. This soon turned into a harvest of 5 tonnes per week with over 20 people working in the farm. The growth happened so fast that now, just four short years later, Greenheart



"I wholeheartedly believe in *healthy organic eating, an eco-friendly lifestyle, and fair-trade* [when it comes to business]"

Organic Farms is a booming success that is selective about which restaurants and other companies it chooses to work with—Elena is passionate about working with companies that share the same values as she does, with ethics, morals and the treatment of staff a huge factor for her—and it also imports organic fruit

from certified organic partner farms in Sri Lanka and Lebanon, stocking more than 500 amazing cherry-picked organic grocery items, snacks, treats, superfoods and much more. Elena is determined to ensure their organic produce stays as fairly-priced as it possibly can, so that more people can afford to buy it. Their weekly deliveries of boxes crammed with fresh, organic produce—which can be easily ordered from their website, GreenHeartUAE.com, for added convenience, have made their way into countless homes across Dubai, and once customers have tried it, they're hooked for the long run.

The Farm

After an hour's drive into Sharjah, we arrived at the farm, which is located just off Kalba

Road. It is shocking arriving at a farm that is found in the middle of the desert, surrounded by endless kilometres of sand. The farm itself is breathtaking, and it's hard to believe that all of the produce is being grown 100% organic, without the use of any pesticides or artificial fertilisers. As our visit took place in the beginning of the summer months, we expected to see very little produce growing in such unfavourable conditions, but we were pleasantly surprised to see the farm full of greenery. "In season, between December and May, we grow over 130 different types of vegetables, herbs and fruit. Between June and September it is difficult to grow outside, and only very few types of vegetables thrive," says Elena, continuing: "We always grow the staples such





as cucumbers, tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, capsicums, chillies, lettuce, eggplant, red radishes, kale, parsley, mint, and chard. Some items such as strawberries, broccoli, cabbages and cauliflower have a much shorter season."

Some interesting measures are taken to get the produce through the hotter months. "Most of the summer growing is done in climate-controlled grow houses. The fans switch on at intervals and due to the cold water that runs through the cooling pads, the air is cooler without being dry," Elena explains. This ingenious idea of running cold water through the walls of the grow houses make them fresh and humid: the perfect conditions for growing produce. Other vegetables like okra and eggplant are capable of growing despite the heat, which made for a beautiful sight in the outside fields. During the summer, most of the working hours take place



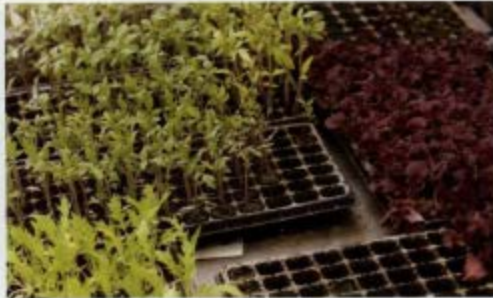
in the morning or evening, so that the workers don't suffer with the heat. Visitors are typically not permitted to visit, and currently, farm visits are on an invitation-only basis, although Elena does give loyal customers the chance to come by a couple of times a year. She's also looking into school programmes that may bring small groups of students in to teach them about the importance of not only healthy eating but also how

food is grown, but it's clear that in every aspect, this is a family-run affair that is driven by passion and dedication. To say it's impressive how they managed to overcome adversity, making farming possible in the middle of the desert—and growing at the rate they have done—would be a serious understatement.

The Animals

Perhaps one of our favourite parts of the tour through

Greenheart Organic Farms was the farm animals. From baby goats to chickens, Old McDonald would have been proud. All of the animals at the farms are grass-fed and free-range, and it is immediately evident from their glossy coats and friendly, relaxed demeanour how happy they are living there. The animals are used primarily for their manure, which is added to their farm-made compost. As a result, the compost is almost



are very well-loved. We were particularly fond of the baby goats that had just been born that week and ran happily after their over-protective mother. Elena's favourite part in doing what she does is taking care of the animals, especially the goats, and her genuine affection for them was clear—she knew all of their names.

The Future

Here, sustainability is the key word. Looking into the future, Greenheart Organic Farms wishes to become as sustainable as possible. "From the very start our aim was to produce all our own heirloom seeds at the farm. We wanted to be independent from foreign seed suppliers and wanted to focus on traditional heirlooms instead of mass-produced factory seeds," said Elena. "We knew that this was very ambitious and expected to get there in about 10 years. Now, almost five years in, we have almost reached our target." Producing their own seeds has been quite the difficult task, especially

with limited resources and the challenging climate, but they are not discouraged. "Not every heirloom variety is suitable for seed production in the desert and you have to work out how long to dry and freeze the seeds. It is all very labour intensive but I strongly believe for genuine organic farming, this is the only way forward," she says. Their sales also continue to expand, now even delivering in Abu Dhabi on top of their already existing delivery services in Dubai and their shop. The farm is also planning to soon introduce organic, grass-fed meats to their range, as well as their own range of spices and superfoods. "Of course we will continue to increase our growing spaces as our own produce will always be at the forefront of what we do. Our expansion there is limited by the amount of compost we can produce," Elena added. Whatever way they head, it's clear that with produce as delicious and nutritious as theirs, Greenheart Organic Farms will go very far—they've certainly won our hearts. ■

Going Organic

It may be a trendy topic, but there are many things that people don't actually know about organic produce. Elena answers a few FAQs:

► Why go organic?

I truly believe that eating fresh organic produce, next to managing stress and exercising moderately, is the only way to stay healthy in the long run. Genuine organic produce is full of vitamins, nutrients and antioxidants and should be toxin-free, providing it is grown as it should be. Having a diet full of organic fruit and veg is proven to help prevent all types of chronic disease and it's much more eco-friendly not to be pumping the earth full of chemicals.

► Why should you buy organic when possible?

For me some of the most obvious types of produce that must be organic are green leafy vegetables or anything raw without skin. Most conventional greens are grown with chemicals and pesticides and are full of preservatives to prolong their shelf life. But even produce with a thick skin can be dangerous. Conventional watermelons, for instance, soak up any chemicals in the soil. Some other conventional fruit such as strawberries and peaches are usually heavily sprayed and should therefore be organic, especially if they are fed to children.

► What should you watch out for in organic foods?

Not everything that is labelled organic is good for you. I have seen rows and rows full of organic products in organic stores and supermarkets that are not much better than their conventional counterparts. Always read the label before you buy. We read every label carefully before we decide whether to stock an item or not and if it contains any ingredients we wouldn't consume ourselves, it's not sold in our shop. You'd be surprised how many ingredients they sneak in that should never be there.