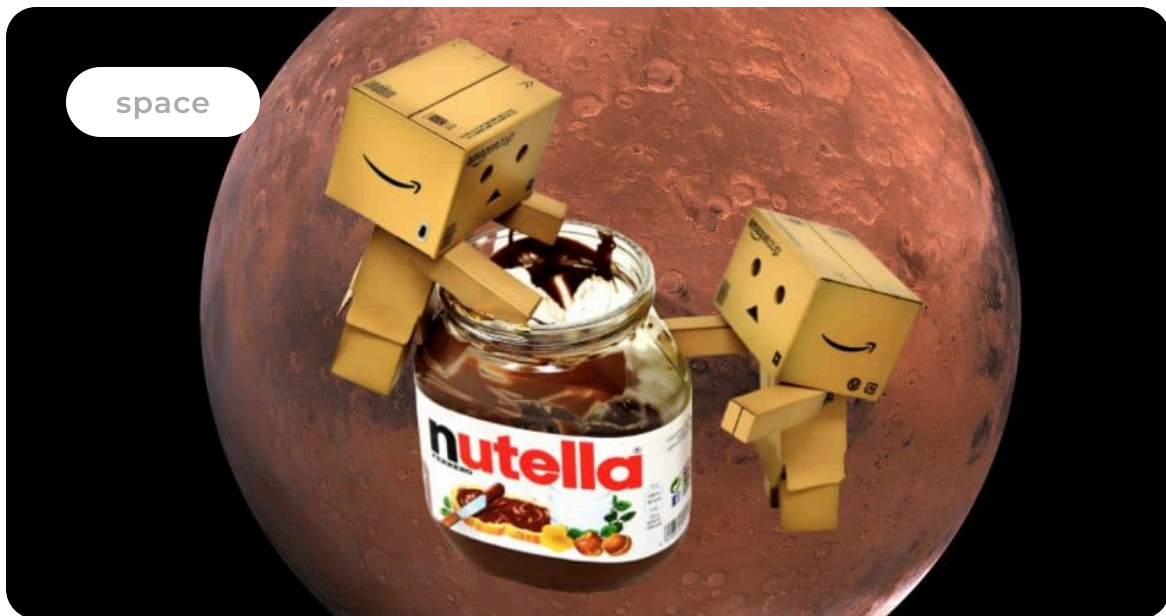




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 5th February 2022

The Nutella Incident



Today is **World Nutella Day**, which seems like an excellent opportunity to explore the time that a spoonful of chocolate





hazelnut spread nearly caused an interplanetary incident.



The HI-SEAS habitat – photo by Sian Proctor

It's 2013, and six people are living on Mars – or at least as close as you get at the moment. They're isolated in the HI-SEAS analog habitat in Hawaii, cut off from life on Earth for four months. Their NASA-funded mission is to explore the 'Risks associated with an inadequate food system.' The problem is that, during long-duration space missions (such as a mission to Mars), astronauts will inevitably get tired of eating rehydrated meals. So then they will eat less, lose weight, miss out on essential nutrients and potentially compromise the mission.

One possible solution is to allow astronauts to cook using shelf-stable (long-life) ingredients. But that means the crew needs



extra cooking equipment and spends time preparing meals and cleaning up. So does the psychological benefit of better feed outweigh the resource costs?



Hi-SEAS Mission 1 Patch

That was what the crew of the first HI-SEAS mission were researching, comparing pre-packaged instant meals with ones they cooked themselves. The study tracked the crew's satisfaction with their meals, alongside their use of power, water, food and other supplies.

For principal investigator Dr Kim Binsted, the project's goal was to work out the most efficient grocery list for Mars in terms of cost,



mass, taste and nutrition. By the end of four months, the researchers would have a good grasp of which food items were essential and which ones should stay on Earth.

The Mission 1 Crew was Simon Engler, Dr Sian Proctor, Kate Greene, Dr Oleg Abramov, Dr Yajaira Sierra-Sastre, Angelo Vermeulen (mission commander).

[This was the mission during which Dr Sian Proctor ran a recipe contest and broadcast her [Meals for Mars cooking series](#) on YouTube, and which ultimately led to the publication of her [Meals on Mars cookbook](#).]

After 80 days in the habitat, Vermeulen [listed](#) his essentials as spices, herbs and hot sauce, Nutella, peanut butter, and margarine. (He also made a point of saying that high fibre foods were essential to offset a general lack of fibre in the processed foods.) Vermeulen wasn't the only crew member to value the Nutella. As he [said](#), 'It's something we craved. We had a limited supply, so we had to ration it.'

When you're confined in a small space with a limited number of people for any length of time, small niggles can lead to tension. And the Nutella rationing proved to be a flashpoint:

'Binsted heard from everyone about the "Nutella incident," in which a crew member arrogantly finished



off the group's monthly ration, reasoning that the team was scheduled to open a new bin the next day.'

Moving to Mars, the New Yorker, April 2015.

Except... that's not quite how it happened. In her book "*Once Upon a Time I Lived On Mars*", crew member Kate Greene remembers it differently:

'Oleg asked Sian and me – we were the most familiar with the food inventory – if there was enough Nutella for him to have a spoonful for dessert, but where Angelo didn't hear Oleg's question or our response that there was plenty of Nutella and so loudly objected – Nutella was shared food, after all – just as the glob of hazelnut spread headed toward Oleg's mouth, creating one of the most emotionally charged moments in the mission up to that point.'

Green and Proctor explained the situation to Angelo, who apologized.

'Oleg then ate the Nutella, the most bitter Nutella in the solar system, twisted the lid back on the jar, and excused himself, thus ending the conflict that inspired many of us in our mission exit interviews to mention as



significant, a conflict that was eventually reported in an article in The New Yorker as “the Nutella Incident.”

One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that it’s important to pack enough of any food items that are likely to be popular. But, of course, that’s going to vary between different crews. For this crew, it included **couscous**, **tortillas**, and **Spam**.



Oleg Abramov on EVA – photo by Angelo Vermeulen

Human nature means that there will always be conflict among the crew in this type of high-pressure environment. So one of the things that analog missions are designed to study is how teams can successfully resolve those conflicts and continue to work effectively. Which, in this case, is precisely what they did. The infamous “Nutella Incident” was really just a storm in a Nutella jar.

Want to hear more about life at HI-SEAS? Two of my Gardeners of the Galaxy podcast guests spent time in the analog habitat – [Ben Greaves](#) and [Lori Waters](#).

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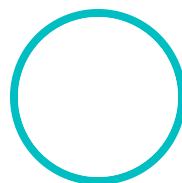
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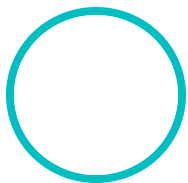
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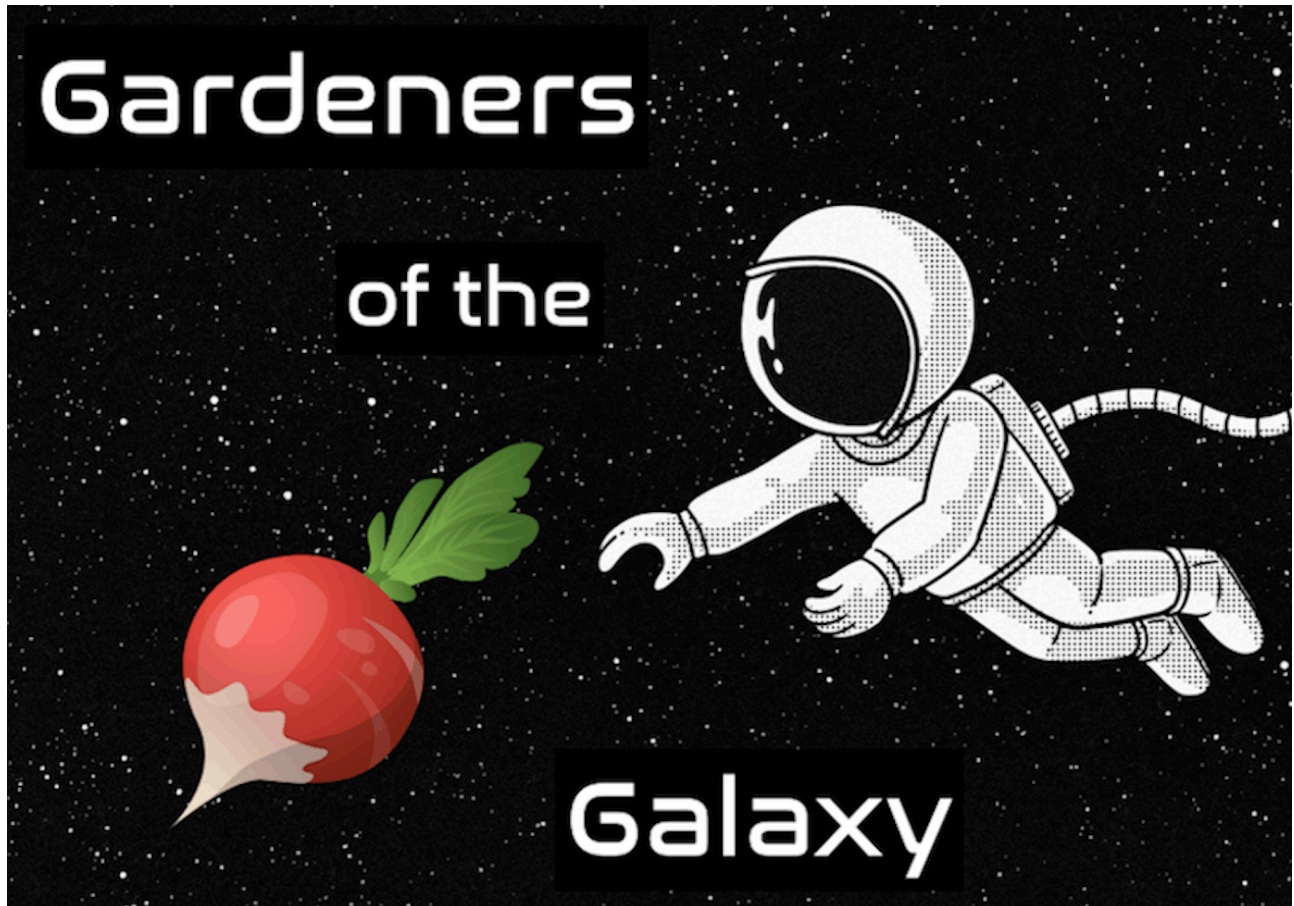
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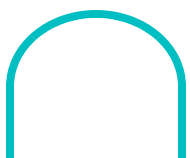
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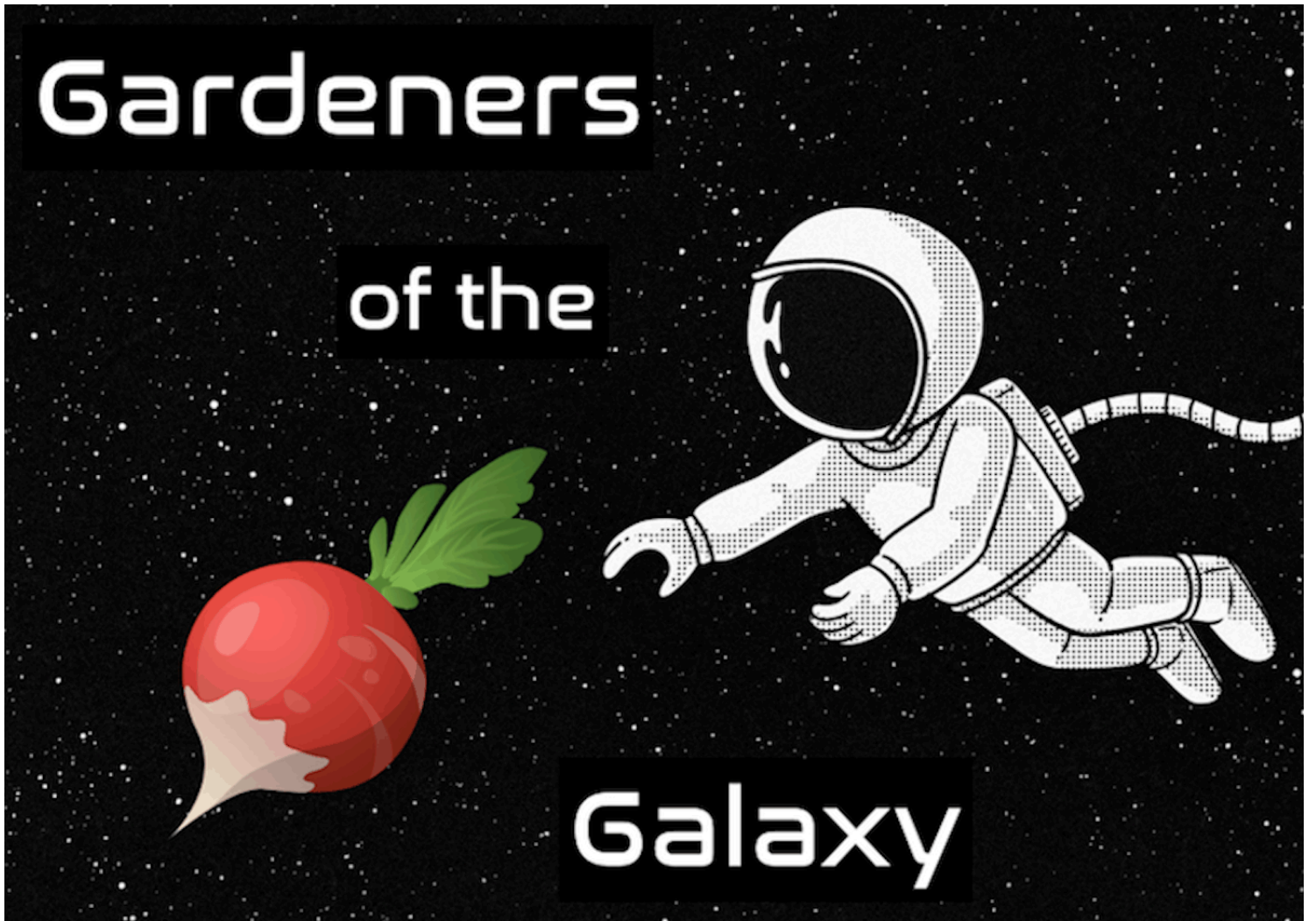
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