

Gardening to the rescue

JODIE LEA MARTIRE GOES BEHIND THE BOOM IN COMMUNITY AND GUERRILLA GARDENING IN BRISBANE DURING COVID AND LEARNS HOW GARDENING OF ALL KINDS BECAME A REFUGE FROM THE HEALTH CRISIS.

It all started when garden centres ran out of seedlings. The Black Summer bushfires, then COVID-19, and suddenly growing food and community gardening were high on people's lockdown agenda. What were Brisbane's activist gardeners to do? Easy – set up community seedling hubs in West End and Highgate Hill.

Josie Fraser, Luke Reade and Gem Wells each potted seeds they'd saved or bought, popping them on shelving outside their fences, and told everyone on their new Facebook group. Gem set up a system of propagating seeds and still puts new pots out each week. Snow peas and chillies are always popular, and Gem really enjoys chatting with neighbours who drop off Vietnamese mint or collect new plants to have “a living thing to talk to”.

Luke's seedling hub also gives him community connection, otherwise his neighbours “would just be people who park in my car spot”. More importantly, it helps drive systemic change in a food industry dominated by the supermarket model. For Luke, the hub lets him promote native foods as staples, provide community food education, and build local food resilience through online networks, such as local permablitz groups, ShareWaste and the Gardening Nerds on Crack Facebook group.

Opposite: Volunteers Lizanne Obersky and Hamish Fairbrother at Jane Street Community Garden, which has been going for 18 years.



PHOTO: JANE STREET COMMUNITY GARDEN



Above: Gem Wells and her community seedling hub.



Left: Josie Fraser has planted out her fenceline and verge with natives and edibles.



Right: Luke Reade and Kalycia Singleton harvesting leafy greens in the Jane Street Community Garden.

MYCELIUM

All the food projects in the Gabba Ward attracted the attention of filmmakers Christine Schindler and Nathan Gibson. With support from Councillor Jonathan Sri, Christine and Nathan spent several months in 2020 visiting the Brisbane projects to create the 12min film *Mycelium: An Urban Food Uprising*, which they are currently entering into film festivals. Visit: myceliumthefilm.com for more details, including how to host a screening.

owners (rather than government or council). Using social media and the founders' own networks, the garden on each new site was built within a day and planted out with heirloom seeds and seedlings over the next week. There have been a few complaints, but most community members are highly enthusiastic.

Around a dozen gardeners were getting their hands dirty when I visited the Dutton Park garden, which was in fine form considering its crops had been watered and harvested by volunteers for an entire summer. Even partially cleared for the next season's crops, I counted at least 20 vegies, herbs, flowers and support crops such as pigeon pea and comfrey – plus the small shared bed outside the netting, where kids and dog walkers can share in the spoils.

The key difference between Growing Forward and other community gardens lies in who benefits from the produce. Instead of the harvest going to the gardeners themselves, founder Hope Foley says: "The original purpose was to support food security for marginalised groups in times of crisis. COVID was just the catalyst." Accordingly, the Kangaroo Point produce is funnelled through Multicultural Australia to asylum seekers and refugees, while Dutton Park supports a free cafe at the Social Space in nearby Moorooka, which services many refugee and ex-detainee families.

Josie's hub is just one part of her community gardening. Her verge and fence line are planted out with natives and edibles for the neighbourhood, and Josie loves that her two daughters understand where food comes from. They can see the value of abundance: "to give it away, to be generous, to share and care for the community".

While Josie's currently putting out lemongrass, kale and the last cucumbers, Josie also receives meals from a neighbour who appreciates her verge-garden chillies.

Another new group, Growing Forward Brisbane (Meanjin), got underway in Brisbane's first lockdown, establishing three urban farms in the inner suburbs of Kangaroo Point, Dutton Park and West End. The four original members worked to get the farms going, getting some support from Jonathan Sri, Greens councillor for the Gabba Ward, and asking permission from Yuggera traditional



Jane Street Garden

The Jane Street Community Garden has been a West End institution for about 18 years. “Locals just love the fact that this garden exists,” says coordinator Melissa Smrecnik.

In October 2019, when council advised that new drainage pipes would be laid, effectively destroying the central meeting and garden area, local supporters successfully reversed the decision and showed how strong Jane Street’s ‘community lease’ was.

When I visited in March this year, a working bee was in full swing, including volunteers as young as 10. Sadly, though, the garden only had Melissa and one volunteer keeping tabs on things during the COVID shutdown, so about 20 bush turkeys moved in. With the garden on hold, Jane Street partnered with the local council to support new verge plantings and community orchards across the Gabba Ward.

The Jane Street team designed, produced and distributed 50 or so Verge Garden Starter Packs, containing two fruit trees, understorey plants, mulch and soil, which was a great success. In addition, they scouted out locations for public orchards, supplying 30–40 fruit trees such as mulberry, black sapote, citrus and avocado to parkland gardeners.

Food Connect

Brisbane’s other long-running community-based food operations noticed a major change with COVID-19. In the southern suburb of Salisbury is Food Connect, founded by ex-dairy farmer Rob Pekin in 2005 to vitalise community-supported agriculture. Food Connect sources seasonal, ecological food from within

Above: Locals love helping out at Jane Street Community Garden.

Right: Lizanne Obersky at Jane Street.

Below right: Robert Pekin and Emma Kate Rose are directors of the Food Connect Foundation.

500km of Brisbane and distributes it through home delivery and suburban hubs called ‘City Cousins’. The organisation also raised an astounding \$2 million through an equity fundraising campaign in late 2018 to buy the warehouse it had rented for 12 years; the Food Connect Shed is now home to 29 local food businesses (and I am a happy ‘careholder’).

Food Connect saw their retail food-box orders quadruple in the first few weeks of COVID, while their buyers’ clubs (wholesale groups who get a 30 per cent discount) grew 40 per cent. A year on, both numbers have stabilised midway between the old level and the COVID peak, and staff numbers have grown from 18 to 31.

“It was really, really exciting to see how people were responding and helping each other out,” says Rob, who was back driving a delivery van when all the new orders came in.

Farmers, cafe owners, restaurateurs, and new mini-buyers’ groups were meeting by accident at the Shed and trying to work out autonomous, self-organised ways to share food despite a global pandemic. Rob says the crisis “opened up so many great opportunities for small-batch makers and farmers”, as online shopping gave them more customers than ever before.



CREATING A REFUGE

Community food projects attracted more than just gardeners during the pandemic – researchers were eager to know what was happening so they could support urban agriculture in the post-COVID world. Two Australians – Pauline Marsh (University of Tasmania) and Jonathan Kingsley (Swinburne University of Technology) – are part of a group of researchers from Australia, Germany and the US who ran a survey into pandemic gardening.

Around 800 of their 3743 responses were from Australia, and it was clear most respondents were in their gardens because they simply loved gardening. “I was fascinated by how people turned to their garden as a ‘refuge’, or ‘oasis’, to create their ‘own personal Eden’,” says Pauline Marsh. She believes that people connecting with the mythology of gardens is a sign of how restorative and satisfying gardeners find their green space – and what an amazing tool it is for addressing mental health and times of crisis.

Gardeners also valued their connection with nature (which led to greater environmental awareness, even among young people), their decreased stress, and their contribution to resilient food systems. “The health, wellbeing and social-capital benefits of gardening are clear. It is a nature-based solution to many of the health and environmental problems in Australia,” Jonathan Kingsley says.

Another local survey was also inundated with participants in 2020. Community Gardens Australia, together with Sustain: The Australian Food Network and the Urban Agriculture Forum, launched a pandemic gardening survey that received 900 responses in the first week of June. Then Costa Georgiadis from ABC *Gardening Australia* got involved, and boom! It received an amazing 9140 responses by late July, including 25,000 comments where people wrote in detail about how gardening in a pandemic had affected them.

Almost 20 per cent of respondents felt they wouldn’t have made it through the pandemic without their garden, while 62 per cent said their garden was “very important”. While 93 per cent of gardeners ate the food at home, 74 per cent shared with family and friends, 21 per cent swapped with others and 3 per cent donated it for emergency food relief. And importantly, 45 per cent of low-income households were able to grow one-third of their own food – so gardening was helping those who needed it most. As one Tasmanian respondent said, “There is a future when you garden.”

The report’s authors used their valuable pool of results to put together an Action Agenda to Make Australia’s Towns & Cities Edible (see sustain.org.au). After all, “Edible gardening has massive power to do great good,” as Sustain’s executive director, Dr Nick Rose said. The agenda calls for more land to be made available for edible gardening, more organisations and networks to provide information and training, and the creation of an Edible Gardening Fund to finance projects. It also highlighted the need for infrastructure, policies, governance and co-ordination to help everyone’s food garden flourish.

Northey Street still going strong

Another Brisbane tradition is the Northey Street City Farm, in Windsor on Brisbane's northside. The farm was founded on the Breakfast Creek in 1994, and has since planted out more than 1500 fruit trees, bush food plants, shrubs and ground covers on its 4ha permaculture site. It hosts a nursery, a weekly organic market, school programs, frequent workshops, and special celebrations for equinox and solstice days.

There was a huge run on vegie seedlings when COVID first hit, says Veronica Martin, Northey Street's education and support team manager. Volunteers were moved into propagation, and although the market opened throughout the tightest lockdowns, it took extra staff to keep the space COVID-safe.

"Things took off – there's no other word for it," says Michael Wardle, the adult education co-ordinator.

Northey Street was inundated by queries and its post-COVID workshops were full to the brim, no advertising needed. Michael says the workshop participants were much more determined to make changes to their lives and lifestyles, wanting to know the ins and outs of how their new skills could be applied in practise. Participants have requested courses on medicinal herbs (now that they're growing their own) and workshops are branching out into areas such as slow fashion. As Veronica says, people have used the coronavirus to "stop and think how we can move forward in a better way".

Michael and Veronica shared their top tip for new gardeners: You don't have to do it all alone! Remember, you can swap produce, skills and knowledge with your local community.

"I need to get out!"

None of these developments surprise Community Gardens Australia (CGA), which has listings for 800 or so of the country's estimated 2000 community gardens. CGA's president, Naomi Lacy, says the organisation heard from many people in the early stages of the pandemic, asking for tips or saying, "I need to get out! How do I get involved in my community garden?"


Naomi says that, with a few unhappy exceptions, "I take my hat off to the vast majority of local councils who supported community gardening", for example, by watering closed gardens. That didn't



Above: Northey Street City Farm in the early days.

help the poor gardeners who desperately wanted to harvest their crops, or those who needed them because they had no money for food.

Luckily, it was pretty easy to convince councils that it was healthier for people to be gardening than shopping in a supermarket.

And finally, Naomi praises the amazing results of the CGA/Sustain survey (see 'Creating a Refuge' on page 41), where 72 per cent of people said that gardening activities "greatly" or "significantly" enhanced their mental health and wellbeing – benefits sorely needed under COVID. "It didn't surprise any of us long-time gardeners," Naomi says. "But for a lot of people it was a wake-up call." 

RESOURCES

Here are some of the community food and garden projects mentioned and other national groups.

- Community Seedling Hubs: facebook.com/communityseedlinghubs
- Growing Forward Brisbane (Meanjin): facebook.com/GrowingForwardKurilpa
- Jane Street Community Garden: janestgarden.org.au
- Food Connect: foodconnect.com.au
- Northey Street City Farm: nscf.org.au
- Sharewaste: sharewaste.com
- Gardening Nerds on Crack: facebook.com/groups/gardeningnerdsoncrack
- Community Gardens Australia: communitygarden.org.au
- Sustain: The Australian Food Network: sustain.org.au
- Urban Agriculture Forum: uaf.org.au