

Greening the planet, one backyard at a time

Nestled in Clayton, in a south-eastern pocket of Melbourne, a typical suburban home inhabited by three everyday tenants was the scene for some big ideas. Dan Palmer, Adrian Wedd and Cat Moore transformed their quarter-acre backyard into a permaculture paradise. The food they grew provided them with roughly 75 per cent of their total needs – an impressive figure given they started their garden a mere two years ago, and more reason why an urban backyard garden is becoming an increasingly popular part of living sustainably.

Using permaculture design principles, which aim to mimic natural ecosystems in organic farming, the trio nurtured a produce garden that featured a worm farm, compost heap, chook tractor and ducks for pest control, to name a few of its components. While food production was at its peak in the summer months, Dan, Adrian and Cat learned to adapt their garden to all seasons by using a variety of plants and techniques.

What was the inspiration behind sacrificing a good deal of what was originally lawn on their rental property? Palmer explains: ‘We thought it ecologically irresponsible to maintain large areas of purely cosmetic lawn while relying on supermarkets, and hence environmentally destructive industrial agriculture, to meet our food needs.’

This sentiment seems to be growing as other city dwellers start to think more seriously about sustainable agriculture, and what they can do to help. Urban area under horticulture is increasing significantly each year around the world as it becomes clear that better food can easily be produced on small plots, more cheaply, and with less overall impact on both the environment and the body when compared to much of today’s commercially grown and transported produce.

Food freight, particularly by air and road for the ‘off-season’ produce now available in most modern supermarkets, can result in high embodied-fuel and emissions levels, and therefore environmental costs, in groceries. In the United States, for example, it has been calculated that the food for a typical meal travels about 2100 km, but if that meal contains off-season fruits or vegetables, the total distance is many times higher.¹ This, of



A view of the tenants’ permaculture layout, including the chook ‘tractor’ (right), beds of mixed vegetables (background) and heavily laden fruit trees. Adam Dempsey

course, also applies to organic produce that needs to be transported.

But as part of a general commitment to living sustainably, which might include recycling household refuse, reducing energy and water use, and driving a car less often, home or local horticulture set-ups can appreciably reduce environmental impacts, as well as conveying other benefits such as exercise and improved well-being. And this explains why backyard produce is returning to popularity – people feel they are doing something demonstrably positive for both the Earth and themselves.

Despite the Clayton tenants’ enthusiasm for this same cause, however, the organic

road hasn’t been an easy one. In April, they were sent a ‘Breach of Duty Notice’ from their agency, expressing concerns about the extensive changes made to the garden without the landlord’s specific permission.

The letter suggested that possible ‘damage or loss’ had been caused. The tenants, though, had the best of intentions and asked that their landlord consider how fertile the topsoil had become since the garden had been designed. Despite the fact that many people are still new to the benefits of backyard permaculture, the tenants were optimistic about the improvement and functionality they were creating.

‘We understood the position of our landlord, who was naturally concerned that future tenants may be harder to find

¹ Source: the Australian Conservation Foundation, www.acfonline.org.au

given the large garden, which does require some ongoing maintenance,' Palmer said.

'Then there is our position, which is that given the state of the planet and the emerging energy crisis, it is imperative for people to be growing more of their own food at home. Had we really caused a loss or damage? Or in improving the topsoil and the self-sufficiency of the property, is there a very real sense in which we added value?'

This situation sparked debate amongst other permaculture enthusiasts, drumming up support for what the three tenants were accomplishing. They even got kudos from

For other renters who'd like to start their own organic urban garden, their tenancy agreements, too, might be a major deterrent. So what can be done? One option is to join a community garden, the likes of which seem to be sprouting up all over city areas.

The reasons for their popularity are clear. Ben Neil, CEO of Cultivating Community, a Melbourne-based organisation that promotes community gardens in public housing estates, cites the following as some major factors: the need to be connected with the community, the importance of organic produce and 'food

there is currently'. An increase in the number of plots available would also help to decrease the long waiting lists associated with joining a community garden project.

Belonging to a community garden is certainly a hot topic, and one that is not limited to Melbourne. Adelaide resident Andrew Rettig also spends time at a local garden, as well as several hours in his own backyard. Living 4 km south of the city centre, Rettig and three housemates are following their own permaculture principles. They are also renting, and they are working with their landlord on the value they are adding to the property.

Rettig and his mates are dedicated to 'best practice, safe, low-budget solutions to everyday issues of consumption and waste management'. This includes purchasing environmentally friendly cleaning products, but also making their own by soaking citrus peel in vinegar, for example.

'We do lots of stuff that we hope helps us to tread a little more lightly on the Earth, and to enjoy it all a whole lot more,' Rettig notes.

They've been working the quarter-acre of land on the property since September 2005. And while not yet fully self-sufficient (except in greens and flowers), Rettig points out that this was never his intention.

'It doesn't really make sense to us to spend lots of time producing food that requires more space than we have.'

And when you can pick excess fruit from trees in the neighbourhood, as Rettig often does, this is probably less of a concern.

Although the garden is more of a hidden treasure in the community, it has still made an impact. The nationally recognised Food Forest company's Permaculture Design Course stopped by to give students further advice on how permaculture can work in an urban environment.

For those considering embarking on their own permaculture expedition, Rettig has this advice: 'read a lot of permaculture-oriented books, visit many different gardens for ideas and inspiration, get involved in community gardens, get active and just do it, but be always observing and being mindful. Workshops are always good to get the creative processes underway.'

● Tracey Millen

More information:

About permaculture: www.holmgren.org.au
City Farms and Community Gardens Network: www.communitygarden.org.au/news/natnews.html
The Food Forest: www.foodforest.com.au



There was an all-year harvest from the suburban Clayton garden. Adam Dempsey

David Holmgren, the Australian co-originator of the permaculture concept, with Bill Mollison, back in the 1970s.

Despite the support, however, the trio is moving on, but not giving up on their principles. They returned the garden to its original state after an agreement was made with their landlord, but Dan is currently on a permaculture pilgrimage in Hervey Bay, and Adrian and Cat are preparing to move to a property in Gippsland, where they will develop an acre of garden in return for free rent.

So, while their urban garden didn't work out in Melbourne, there are still people and places that welcome the added value permaculture can bring to their properties.

politics', the desire of migrants to grow food from their countries that is not available in Australia, and social interaction for people living alone.

Cultivating Community is part of the National Network of Community Gardens. It currently manages 19 gardens with 750 individual plots averaging 9–10 m². According to Neil, the benefits of belonging to a community garden, in addition to the social aspect, include 'improved mental health, improved physical health through exercise, improved diet through an increase in fresh vegetable intake and an appreciation of other cultures and their cuisines'.

Neil also says more community gardens are needed, and that 'Melbourne could cope with twice the amount of gardens