

NEWS

Meet, veg and a serve of peace

Conditions are just right for community gardens to bloom all over again, writes Rachel Leihan.

Community gardens are making a comeback as people turn to shared plots to help relieve environmental and economic pressures.

There are about 180 community gardens in Australia, mostly established on public land and managed by local residents who cultivate an eclectic mix of fruit, vegetables, herbs and flowers, and keep creatures such as chickens, ducks and bees.

First established in Victoria in the 1970s, many of these gardens have suffered fluctuating participation over the years. But they're back in vogue as the desire to minimise carbon emissions, plus the impact of rising food prices and the economic slowdown, encourage city dwellers to grow more of their own food.

The desire to reconnect with communities and strike a healthy work-life balance are other strong motives for participation.

Matt Cuthbert has helped establish Busselton Community Garden in Western Australia over the past 18 months. It occupies a half-hectare and includes a communal orchard of stone fruit and citrus trees, a children's playground, windmill and chicken coop. There are 65 individual plots leased to members for \$50 a year (\$25 concession). A further 15 will soon be created.

Cuthbert says growing garden produce, no matter how small an amount, gives people a greater sense of food security.

"Certainly I do think there is this feeling because of the global economic crisis that being in charge of and responsible for growing some of your own food is increasingly important," he says. "The other thing – and I think this is a big one – is knowing where your food comes from and getting it locally. People are realising the distance food has to travel contributes to the carbon

output of their food, so if it can be grown locally, or in the best case if they can grow it themselves, that is becoming more and more attractive to people."
But Cuthbert says the community aspect of the garden is



Dig it... the gardens are attracting and feeding more members.

just as big a drawcard for members, who include "everyone from low socio-economic backgrounds right through to people who are quite well off".

The garden also accommodates those on work-for-the-dole placements or doing community service, and has a strong educational focus. Some schools have vegetable plots, and courses are held on topics such as environmental awareness, worm farms, and soil fertility.

Brisbane City Council plans to develop 15 community gardens over four years, the first two by the end of June, under a push to make Brisbane a carbon-neutral city by 2026.

Environment, Parks and Sustainability Committee chairman Peter Matic says the initiative has received an unexpectedly high level of support. Around 30 groups have already registered interest.

"The majority of people that have approached us have really done it for environmental and sustainable reasons," Matic says. "The economic benefit is an add-on to what they want to achieve."

But can getting your hands dirty in a home-grown veggie patch make much difference to the weekly grocery bill?
"It can if you're a good

gardener," says the president of Veg Out community garden in Melbourne's St Kilda. Rob Taylor.

He reckons about 40 broccoli and 30 cauliflower were harvested from his plot during winter. Tomatoes and salad leaves are sprouting like weeds around the 145 individual plots.

There's also a communal area fertile with fruit trees and a small menagerie of chickens, rabbits, guinea pigs, budgies and quail. The garden is run on organic principles and has a strong community focus.

Ten plots are held by community groups, including Sacred Heart Mission, and the remainder by individuals. Individual plot-holders pay \$8 a square metre (\$5 concession) annually.

"Or it's free if you're broke," Taylor says.

Demand to join the garden is strong and there's a waiting list for individual plots. The only group that doesn't "come in screaming for plots" are those aged 14 to 20, "otherwise people are signing up all the time", Taylor says.

For retired engineer Greg Heffernan, tilling the soil at Sydney's Rozelle helps supplement his diet. His cucumbers and rhubarb are flourishing and he

regularly exchanges produce with fellow gardeners.
"I don't think any of the members have ever bought silverbeet or spinach," he says. "And a few months ago we had so many cauliflowers we were feeding them to the chooks."

The 28-year-old garden, Sydney's oldest, is in a state of flux. It was established alongside, and under a verbal agreement with a state hospital (now defunct) in Callan Park – land the NSW government hoped to sell for redevelopment.

The land will instead be managed by the local council, which has yet to reveal its development plans for the site. Garden organisers are fielding calls every week from potential new recruits after years of struggling with just a handful of members.

"They can't keep up with demand for individual plots and are turning people away while the garden awaits its fate. Heffernan says it will be a huge loss if a formal lease is not secured for the garden, which provides an oasis of tranquillity in the hectic city.
"It's a very peaceful place," Heffernan says. "That sort of tranquil place is becoming few and far between."

IN BRIEF

Car sales accelerate 1.8pc

More than 77,000 new cars were sold last month, an increase of 1.8 per cent, following five consecutive months of declines. Despite the rise, which was more modest than industry figures showing a 3 per cent increase in December, the trend of new vehicle sales remains weak and is down almost 16 per cent from a year earlier. TD Securities senior strategist Joshua Williamson said the industry was likely to face continuing weak sales as businesses and households reduced discretionary spending. **Adrian Rollins**

Ravensthorpe relief

West Australian Premier Colin Barnett is considering buying homes and land from Ravensthorpe residents affected by BHP Billiton's decision to close its nickel mine, which resulted in 1800 job cuts. Mr Barnett, who flew to Ravensthorpe on Thursday, said he would consider a number of options. The state opposition urged the government to fast-track expenditure on infrastructure projects and for some elements of the Royalties for Regions program to be scrapped in favour of funding ventures to boost local economies. **Julie-anne Sprague**

Hotels call for action

The hotel sector is calling for a second economic stimulus package to be driven by consumer spending. Australian Hotels Association national chief executive Bill Healey said any economic stimulus must increase spending in employment-related industries and reduce operators' costs. "By not spending, that could cost employees or their friends a job," he said. **Lisa Allen**

Cadillac plan parked

GM Holden has decided to delay indefinitely the introduction to Australia of the US Cadillac car brand. **AAP**

Power price rises defended

Power retailer Queensland Electricity has defended price rises of up to 24 per cent, saying it had held off on the rise since Engelex increased its charges in July 2008. The private company is also blaming the economic climate for its decision to slash all customer discounts and increase kilowatts/hour energy rates by 13.6 per cent. **AAP**

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