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# ON THE WINGS of a dragonfly

Earth Gardener and permie farmer, **Rachel Altenbacher** of the mid-north coast NSW, settles briefly to flit from one eco-delight to another.

**T**HERE are memories that stay in your heart forever and a visit to Olive Gap Organic Farm had my soul singing all kinds of songs. I was welcomed with open arms by Tara, Alex and their three vibrant daughters: Olive, April and Cedar. As part of the girls' homeschooling, we felted alpaca wool I brought along, attended music and drama lessons, and explored the off-grid farm capturing our adventures with wilderness photography. At Olive Gap the method of extracting tea tree oil is

done by a traditional wood fired steam distillation process dating back to the 1920s.

Firstly the whole tea tree bush is harvested into a mobile distillation bin which is then attached to the boiler and a lid is lowered on top. Steam flows through the bin and draws oil out of the leaves then cools in a condenser. In the separator oil floats to the top, then makes its way out the upper pipe while the heavier liquid flows out the lower pipe. The bin is disconnected

and the remnants spread back onto the field, closing the nutrient loop. Tea tree has natural antiseptic and insecticidal properties and is one of the oldest medicinal plants. I have also invested in tea tree plants with a pretty pink flower to keep my bees busy.

Tara shared knowledge of micro-greens and we tried the delicious sunflower shoots grown in the shade house. I left with a sense of wonder and a handbag full of exotic seeds. The most alluring was Sweet Annie which features



Off-grid organic tea tree oil extraction at Olive Gap farm.



Olive, April and Cedar learning wilderness photography with Rachel while showing her around their organic tea tree farm.



Dried foliage from the Sweet Annie shrub was used as an odour absorbent in the Victoria era.

as foliage in floral bouquets she designs to sell at markets and in the Victorian era it was used to absorb odours.

I had a perfect spot in mind to sow my new seeds where rainbow corn was previously growing. This area dense with fallen mulberry leaves is full of microbes breaking down organic matter. Wild cosmos and comfrey line the outskirts and banana husks have been layered to retain moisture. I planned to place corn stalks on the edge of the patch to follow Nature's natural order and use the remains of my strawbale gardens as mulch.

Returning home I was confronted by the truth of a solution being embarrassingly simple when I assumed blocked water pipes would require complete dismantling — but in fact all that was needed was a new tap washer! A kind offer from Chris to look into the problem was solved immediately while speaking about the blue butterfly pea that he and his wife are growing for a



Using natural resources around the garden is in tune with Rachel's vision for a low impact lifestyle.

product called My Blue Tea.

My eyes lit up when he showed photos of dried flowers used to make a blue colouring in cake icing and blue sourdough. Health benefits are remarkable: it improves immunity and blood circulation, assists with anxiety and asthma. Putting a sample pack to test for afternoon tea surprisingly I found it had no definite flavour.

While visiting Taree secret markets, Matt from Organics MattR handed me a couple of Hessian bags and said: "See what you can do with these Rachel". Wow that captivated my attention! I started collecting coffee and potato sacks to reduce industrial waste and up-cycled them into cushions.

The following weekend I attended a fabric Destash and ran into my dear friend Henry which surely was an act of fate. Years ago we bonded over a mutual



Rachel at the LEAF festival with fellow EG contributor, Claire Bickle, and Khory Hancock — The Environmental Cowboy.



*“You can take the girl out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the girl.”*

Rachel at Ground Control Coffee collecting Hessian bags to be repurposed and funds raised by the café for the bags are donated to sustainable charities.

fascination with Native American Indian culture. He spoke of a solitary life as a monk, his service to mankind as well as his dedication to teaching.

During the hustle 'n bustle of the market stall Henry demonstrated the necessity to centre ourselves by being still and focusing our breath and attention back to present moment. The saying, “You can take the girl out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the girl,” is as true now as it ever was! My property is more than a place to practise permaculture. This land spoke to me the first time I stepped foot onto it over a decade ago and I continue to hear the call towards a more enlightened existence.

The Environmental Cowboy (Khory Hancock) is a man I had the honour of meeting in person at an eco action event. His extensive research has helped me understand in simple scientific terms the actual crisis impacting our planet. Listening to him speak in front of an audience highlighted his ability to empower

awareness for progressive change. Seaweed farming and regenerative agriculture were strategies mentioned and he emphasised the importance of supporting those practising holistic methods in a unified movement towards sustainability.

Khory’s words resonated with my vision of creating a low impact lifestyle and preparing my land to cope with extreme weather conditions. I have been trialling lab lab beans and cow peas for cover crops as well as Tromboncino zucchini and large leaf pumpkins in bare grazing areas. Imagine the joy of finding the grass revived and filling wheelbarrows full of produce as a bonus!

I was also privileged to cross paths with Claire Bickle from ‘Gardening for the GoodLife’ and listened to her presentations on the benefits of backyard chickens and herbs. Costa Georgiadis spoke about encouraging others through leading by example rather than shaming eco ignorance. I had a compelling conversation with Tom Farmer from Sow Great on agronomy and his passion

for education and providing ongoing gardening support services.

Hot Potato Band energised us all with their songs about avocados and positive vibrations that got us up out of our seats. Back on the Mid north coast I witnessed the recording of an astonishing musical symphony that had been converted from the micro-voltage energy in leaves via an electronic device at a self-sufficient farm.

There is no going back: once you have had a taste of a life out of co-dependent controlling role play, you appreciate that isolation becomes a sanctuary of authenticity — setting boundaries for respect and privacy.

Interdependence is reached when resources that we are unable to provide for ourselves are coincidentally made available through our networks. The promise of “getting what I want” to be happy no longer has a hold — I see the continual search for it as a trap. Happiness is fleeting. One instance it will be sitting on the wings of a dragonfly the next it’s gone with the wind . . .