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Blooming spirits

JUST OUTSIDE A NATIONAL PARK IN NORTHERN NSW, TARA, ALEX AND FAMILY PRODUCE CERTIFIED ORGANIC TEA TREE OIL AND CUT FLOWERS, AND LOVE THEIR INCREASINGLY SELF-RELIANT LIFE. SIMON WEBSTER VISITS.



This page: Organic cut flowers that have been grown sustainably and seasonally, without harmful pesticides.
Opposite: Olive Gap Farm has 15 acres of tea trees.

Clockwise: (from left to right) Nina, Tess, Alex and Cedar, Olive, Tara and April; the family have cattle on the tea tree farm; Tara's flowers are all heirloom blooms; the flowers and tea tree are certified organic.



Tara Luca is apologetic about the fact that her flower garden isn't more colourful. "People always think it's going to be so full of flowers here," she says. "But it's not, because most of the flowers get picked when they're in bud."

There may be a lack of blooms, but this is a backyard that's full of life. The 28 garden beds (each roughly five metres by one metre) in which Tara grows her certified organic flowers are dotted with herbs and vegies, with fruit trees interspersed throughout.

It is a permaculture-inspired mixed garden that's a far cry from the row upon row of tulips or gerberas that might spring to mind when you think of conventional flower production.

Here, in a quiet corner of a 500-acre community co-operative in northern NSW, bordered by national park and Indigenous protected land, Tara is part of the blossoming slow-flower movement.

"I love flowers," she says. "But I started learning how bad they are for the environment and stopped buying them."

The only solution was to start growing them: sustainably and seasonally, without the harmful pesticides that are such a big part of large-scale flower production.

Four years on, Tara is selling cut flowers at farmers' markets and through florists, as well as catering for weddings and other events.

Tara has taken the slow-flower idea and upped it a notch, by making her garden certified organic.

"I feel good about giving people a guarantee that we are growing flowers in the most sustainable way possible," she says.

Community spirit

Tara, 39, lives with her partner Alex O'Reilly, 37, and their three daughters – Olive, 13, April, 11, and Cedar, 8 – on about an acre of land that is their share of a community co-operative that's home to more than 30 people.

As well as keeping chickens and ducks for eggs and occasionally meat, they have owned pigs, and have cattle and goats on their nearby tea tree farm.

"We go through stages of being very self-reliant, but it often depends on what projects we have going on in our lives," Tara says.

"I love to preserve and have recently just got back into it after a bit of a break. We grow and preserve our own olives, zucchini, beans, and tomatoes, dehydrate fruits, make pesto, sourdough, sprouts, and yoghurt, and pretty much make as much from scratch as we can."

Alex grew up here, enjoying a childhood made up of "long days swimming in the dam, big bush walks exploring the local area, looking after animals, helping in and eating from the garden, and lots of work on the property".

Living with other people meant having a whole lot of influential 'Aunty and Uncle' figures, many of whom had deep environmental knowledge and who influenced his thoughts, Alex says. "As a kid this was



Above: Tara grows roses, dahlias, Queen Anne's lace, yarrow, lavender, scabiosa, sea holly, lillies, sweet peas and lots of native foliages.

The future

Whereas Arthur used to only sell tea tree oil in wholesale quantities, Olive Gap has begun selling its tea tree oil in small, consumer-friendly bottles. More tea tree plantings are in the pipeline, as well as diversification into other native oils.


The farm is going to need some bigger equipment, but Alex reckons they will stick with the wood-fired approach. "We think wood is the most environmentally friendly way for us," he says.

"The back half of the farm is forest so we've got a sustainable source of firewood."

Tara is learning to love flower arranging as she gets more orders to provide flowers for events. "As a muso, I'm creative, and floristry is really creative," she says. "It's design. And I find it really satisfying to go through the full cycle, starting with planting the seed."

Down on the tea tree farm, some beds are under green manure in preparation for native flower production, while others are being improved for that market garden Alex and Tara have always promised themselves they will run.

Alex says: "As you get older you start working out what you enjoy doing in life. We both love growing stuff."

Of course, everything will be certified organic. "I've been gardening organically my whole life but I've learnt so much respect for certified organics since we went through the process," Alex says. "It's about so much more than being spray-free. It's about everything you put into the soil and everything you take out. It's the only way we would do things." 



Terrific tea tree

Tea tree has been valued for its medicinal qualities for thousands of years: the Bundjalung people of Northern NSW used it to treat everything from colds to wounds. Today, many people swear by its antibacterial and antifungal properties, and apply it to minor cuts to prevent infection, as well as using it to combat acne, dandruff, lice, fungal nail infections and athlete's foot.

Tara Luca says you can also use tea tree oil to:

- ★ Purify air by adding a few drops to an air diffuser.
- ★ Make a multipurpose cleaner by adding 10 drops of tea tree oil to 2 cups of hot water and a ½ cup of vinegar.
- ★ Remove mould by adding 1 teaspoon of tea tree oil to 1 cup of water in a spray bottle. Spot-treat mould; leave a few minutes and wipe away.
- ★ Make a fabric softener by adding 15 drops to 6 cups of vinegar and 1 cup of baking soda.
- ★ Remove stickers from jars and permanent marker from plastic seedling tags.
- ★ Remove chewing gum from wherever it doesn't belong.

Please note: different tea tree products and dilutions are recommended for different conditions, and some people can have an adverse reaction to tea tree oil. Consult a medical expert for advice. Tea tree oil is poisonous when ingested and should not be swallowed.