

RECLAIMING THE URBAN COMMONS

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RECLAIMING THE URBAN COMMONS

The past, present and future of food
growing in Australian towns and cities

Edited by Nick Rose and Andrea Gaynor



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This anthology is dedicated to the memory of Glenda Lindsay (1954–2017), gardener, singer, friend to many, active optimist, lover of the Earth and all her beings, organiser, connector, encourager, cook, delight to the eyes and the spirit and partner of Adrian.



'Everything you do makes a difference for, whether you know it or not, other people gain confidence when you do something that you believe in.'

Glenda Lindsay

Urban agriculture is about people. Commoning is all about relationships. Glenda Lindsay, one of the guiding stars of urban agriculture in Melbourne, completely understood this. She connected people and inspired them to work together to make our everyday lives brighter and more beautiful. The planter boxes in Yarra streets and back lanes with their herbs, tomatoes and kale growing happily, cafés with plants on the pavement and guerrilla gardens, like

Tramstop 22, all exist thanks to her and the committees she helped establish. She shared her garden, Luscious Lane, led a Mexican Wave while singing at a Council meeting, created Compost Mates and a food swap. Numerous groups that are transforming our food system were started or supported by her.

She understood that inspiring people with gardening, food and song is the reweaving of connections between life, land, community and our inner selves. Her friendships went wide and deep, encompassing people from all over Australia as well as Africa and India. Wherever she went she gathered those who love the Earth and are working on healing. If you weren't like that when you met her, you certainly were soon after.

Glenda would be delighted with this book and all the hopeful and generous work it celebrates. No doubt she would appear, resplendent in mermaid earrings, dressed in fabric covered in fruits and vegetables, wearing a beanie in the shape of a strawberry and carrying a thermos flask of herbal tea and a plate of delicious mini-muffins to provide both celebration and enthusiastic support.

May this book spread confidence to many people to make steps they believe in to re-common us together in meaningful and restorative relationships.

Fran Murrell, Fitzroy, June 2018

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Nick Rose and Andrea Gaynor, Melbourne/Perth, July 2018

Recovering and Honouring Aboriginal Food Systems in Twenty-first-century Australia

Bruce Pascoe

Australia is a colonised country with a colonial mind. The first Europeans were steadfast in their refusal to use the food offered by this country, the domesticated food products of Aboriginal Australians. It was a point of colonial pride not to go native, not to have anything to do with the products of Australia. Thus, we stuck to suet pudding, potatoes, mutton, grapes, wheat, barley and so on. We hungered for the English homeland and insisted on eating roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on Christmas day, mutton and peas, pork with apple sauce. All of those foods require nutrients and moisture levels that Australia cannot provide, so we introduced superphosphate from the phosphate barons of the Pacific Islands; we plundered the waters of this dry continent, seemingly intent on destroying those finite reserves. Rivers where early settlers barged cheese and milk and vegetables hundreds of kilometres inland are no longer navigable by canoe, such is our mistreatment of those sacred waters. Applying English ploughing techniques to the light and friable Australian soils has caused metres of topsoil to blow into the rivers and seas. We've abused this continent because of our refusal to fully understand the land's needs. Now is the time for us to look carefully at this continent, turn respectfully to Mother Earth, apologise for our abuse and consider how we might live within the means of our soil and climate and treat Australia as if it were itself and not somewhere else. Let's grow Australian plants and

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develop a truly Australian cuisine. And not just the condiments of mountain pepper and bush tomato, but the staples as well, the grains and tubers, most of which are perennial and drought tolerant and thus kind to the soil and less demanding of our precious water. Our environment will thank us and so will our tastebuds and bellies.

Overview

Nick Rose and Andrea Gaynor

When we first proposed this anthology, *Reclaiming the Urban Commons: The past, present and future of food growing in Australian towns and cities*, we did so with a number of aims in mind. First, building on the legacy of Andrea's ground-breaking research published as *Harvest of the Suburbs* in 2006, we wanted to continue the ongoing work of uncovering and revealing little-known or long-forgotten histories of urban and peri-urban food production in Australia. Secondly, we wanted to provide space for some of the country's leading innovators and practitioners of urban agriculture to share their stories of what they are doing, how they are doing it and why. And thirdly, by synthesising leading case studies and lessons of the past and present of urban food growing in Australia, we wanted to stimulate what we and many others believe are necessary reflections on our current predicament. These reflections are not an idle intellectual exercise. On the contrary, they are an attempt to grapple with matters that go to the heart of how – and whether – we continue to inhabit this land in the coming decades of this century and beyond.

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As all the contributors to this anthology explicitly or implicitly recognise, we are in the midst of a great shift, a fundamental transformation in our relations with the Earth and with each other. This shift has many dimensions, however, it fundamentally poses humanity with this challenge, to paraphrase Thomas Berry:

*How can humanity transition from a period of devastation of the Earth and its multitude of lifeforms – including ourselves – to a period when we can be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner?*¹

What we believe this collection shows is that the response to that existential and evolutionary question must be grounded in a transformed relationship to the land and to each other. As argued by Bruce Pascoe in the foreword, and as demonstrated by the stories narrated in these pages, this transformation begins with a deeper knowledge of and connection to our food. Such knowledge, when translated into daily practices and ways of being and inhabiting this country, has the potential to ultimately bring about the paradigm shift required to live well in this place and to live at peace with ourselves and one another.

At a time of increasing fear, division and xenophobia, the urgent and too-long-delayed task of truth-telling, recovery of historical memory, healing and reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians can provide a beacon of hope towards the future. The path lit by that beacon shows life-sustaining practices of care, respect and responsibility to the land, as well as delight in the diverse array of delicious produce that it bestows upon us.

This is the future that is already emerging, glimpses of which are captured in the stories that follow in these pages. A few years ago, humanity passed the critical tipping point of becoming for the first time a truly urban species. Australia is grappling with a trajectory of increasing urbanisation in what is already one of the world's most urbanised countries. The question of how to design, build and live well in our cities and towns has never been more critical. To this we must add that the country's major public health challenges are now explicitly linked to poor diet, and the dynamic of seemingly endless urban sprawl coupled with the loss of farmer viability poses

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a direct and serious challenge to current and future food security in a context of global political instability and non-linear climate change. Therefore, the challenge of how we both *live and eat well* in our urbanised present and near future is one that demands our urgent attention and prioritisation.

This is the challenge that all the contributors to this anthology have addressed. Following on from the vital and succinct reminder and injunction from Bruce Pascoe, Professor Katherine Gibson sets the scene in her introductory chapter, which explores the meaning and practices of *commoning* and in particular the idea of food as an urban commons. As she suggests, *commoning* is best understood as a verb, embodying a constellation of practices reflective of particular values and social relations. It is these practices and values that are then articulated in the following chapters.

Part 1 contains four chapters, each of which reflects the wealth of diversity that exists in current practices of urban and peri-urban edible gardening and agriculture in a selection of locations in Melbourne and Victoria. In chapter 1, Somali-born author and speaker Mariam Issa shares her story of building R.A.W. (Resilient Aspiring Women), a community of women in Melbourne's southern suburbs, offering the profound insight that our strength comes from acknowledging the vulnerability within all of us once we recognise our fundamental interdependence and interconnection. Gabriella Gomersall-Hubbard (chapter 2) narrates Lina and Tony Siciliano's wonderful three-decade (re-)creation of a little piece of Calabria in East Keilor, replete with olive groves, vineyards, heritage chickens and a flourishing market garden. Olivia Dun and her co-authors in chapter 3 describe the uplifting collaboration that has seen local food community advocates in Mildura work with members of the Burundian community to transform small vacant urban plots into the inspiring Food Next Door project, which has created access to healthy and culturally important food as well as much-needed livelihood opportunities. Finally, in chapter 4, Peta Christensen shares the moving story of Cultivating Community: how the cultural needs and demands of diverse migrant communities living in social housing in inner-Melbourne municipalities were met by the creation of dozens of allotment gardens, with the support of the Victorian Office of Housing.

Part 2 acknowledges the critically important role played by the permaculture movement in training and inspiring a whole generation of urban and peri-urban gardeners and farmers. It begins with two leading members of the vanguard of this movement, Kat Lavers and Hannah Moloney, reflecting in chapter 5 on their experiences of creating and sustaining themselves and others from bountiful home gardens in Melbourne and Hobart respectively. In chapter 6, Graham and Annemarie Brookman recount their three-decade journey of adaptive ecological learning, design and resilience in the world-renowned Food Forest at Gawler, north of Adelaide. David Holmgren, co-originator of the permaculture movement back in the mid-1970s, reflects on the cycles of interest in what he terms ‘garden farming’ and the ‘home-based non-monetary economy’ in chapter 7, with a focus on the latest and potentially most transformative cycle, which David has captured in his important new book, *RetroSuburbia*. This part concludes in chapter 8 with the story of one of Queensland’s leading exponents of permaculture, Morag Gamble, reflecting on the early days of the iconic Northey Street City Farm, embodying the principles and practices of what she terms ‘citizen designers’.

Part 3 contains five chapters on what we have termed ‘the new face of urban agriculture in Australia’. These five stories are expressions of the diversity of experimentation underway across the country, each demonstrating elements of what we regard as the core characteristics of *urban commoning*:

- sharing and collaboration,
- connection and interdependence,
- nurturing, care, respect and trust,
- celebration, joy, welcoming and hospitality,
- healing and overcoming,
- creativity, and
- diversity.

In chapter 9, Toby Whittington and Ali Sumner share their story of the creation of the Perth-based social enterprise Green World Revolution – to date, one of the very few economically viable urban farming and social enterprise operations in Australia. Steve Hoepfner (chapter 10) speaks of the friendship, camaraderie, hard work and

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passion that led to the flourishing of Wagtail Urban Farm in Adelaide. In chapter 11 we read about how one couple, Vanessa Kwiatkowski and Mat Lumalasi, decided to take action on the global issue of the dwindling number of honeybees and, in the process, created a successful urban agriculture social enterprise, Melbourne Rooftop Honey. Young Mullumbimby-based urban farmer Joel Orchard (chapter 12) shares his journey into farming as the best means by which he could express his deep environmental activism and his desire to reconnect with the earth, leading to the formation of the Future Feeders collective and with the promise of a Young Farmers Network for Australia. In chapter 13, Caroline Kemp narrates the inspiring, but also salutary, story of the re-imagining of a hitherto bland suburban streetscape in Buderim, Sunshine Coast, into a dynamic neighbourhood connected through a network of edible trees and verge plants, which she and her partner Duncan McNaught dubbed 'Urban Food Street'.

In Part 4, three chapters reflect on the past and present of urban and peri-urban agriculture in Australia. In a brief reprise of *Harvest of the Suburbs*, Andrea Gaynor (chapter 14) notes the long trajectory and desire of urban populations in Australia for diverse ways to achieve food self-provisioning, highlighting the significance of class and gender amid changing access to land, time and legal capacity for food production from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. Liz Clay (chapter 15) provides a highly personal reflection on her childhood growing up on a 60-acre family market garden in Keysborough in Melbourne's sandbelt to the southeast. It was the market gardens of the sandbelt that satisfied the growing city's demand for fruit and vegetables for 100 years, largely coming to an end in the 1970s with the rewards of housing subdivision winning out over the need for horticulture close to the city. Finally, in chapter 16, Srebrenka Kunek and John Shone link this dynamic of sprawl and the consequent devaluing of farming and farmland to the very conscious shift in economic development and, specifically, migration policy in the post-World War II decades, with a particular focus on the southern European immigration program.

In the concluding chapter, Nick Rose brings these narrative strands together, re-stating the case for the urgency of transformative practice

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and policy as well as the central role that urban agriculture in all its diverse forms must play in the articulation of the emerging story of the sustainable and flourishing future for Australia that we believe will be written as this century draws to a close.