

meet the growers



SEEDs COMMUNAL GARDEN

Community connection is what this inner-city Melbourne oasis is all about – a place where everyone is welcome to grow, create and thrive, writes **SALLY FELDMAN**

From its home in the heart of bustling Brunswick, the community organisation Milparinka has been providing a range of support programs and services to people with a disability for more than 70 years. But it was only about seven years ago that its now-flourishing SEEDs communal garden was simply a large patch of lawn.

Jo Townsend, now SEEDs' garden manager and community connector explains: "I've been told that it came about because people would look out the window at the lawn and talk about what a garden might mean for the people at Milparinka and the greater community. That was the seed that started it."

Nurturing that seed took time, as the Milparinka and SEEDs community collaborated on the shared values and goals that form the core of how the garden and community grow. "Once we got down to creating the garden, we connected with a designer who was very specifically designing based on permaculture influences," says Jo. "We built everything on top of the existing lawn. The soil is clay and quite difficult to work with in places, so we found it preferable to start with a no-dig, layering approach." ►

CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN

Members work and harvest in the flourishing food forest that's filled with a mix of fruit trees, vegetables, herbs and flowering perennial plants; a great crew for a great day's gardening; the welcoming entryway; SEEDs garden manager, Jo Townsend.

PHOTOS AB BISHOP



That remains the garden's guiding principle today. "And it's what we value, too, because it reflects nature's way," says Jo. "Having layers that break down and provide nutrition for the garden. It's the method we teach new members who come through, as well."

Jo grew up on a fairly remote property. "We grew a lot of the produce that we ate," she says, "so I got exposure when I was little, and I guess when you're that young, it becomes ingrained." As the years passed, though, she admits she disconnected from nature and gardening a bit, and it wasn't until she had children that she realised something was missing. "It was being able to grow things, to put my hands in the soil and connect with nature, and share it with my children and others."

Significantly, while Jo was studying art therapy, she was given a placement at SEEDs. "I was able to engage people using the same principles in art therapy within the garden space," she explains. "Following my placement, I started volunteering at the garden, and eventually became employed here."

The SEEDs model is based on a communal gardening concept. "That means that the garden is grown communally; there are no individual plots anywhere," says Jo. "It's an integrated growing space. Community members all share in the harvest and are able to take it home. When we have an abundance of something, we share it among our community. Some of the places we drop off to are a local street pantry and a community fridge."

something for everyone

The SEEDs community welcomes anyone and everyone, from people with a disability, to passers-by who might wander into the garden from the street, drawn, perhaps, by the striking tree carvings that take pride of place in front of the 'community sit spot' and native bush garden.

"We were advised that we needed to remove two of our gum trees, as they were unsafe and showing signs they were unwell – something that was hard to hear," says Jo. "So one of our members suggested carving them. Brett is a local sculptor who's been involved with our community through various events. One of his favourite materials to carve is a live tree. Once you've removed the bark, it's perfectly fine to do that. We collaborated on ideas, and we gave him the creative means to work on the trees and listen to how they wanted to be formed. ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

The orchard has a variety of mature fruit trees, but the superstar is the big apricot tree, which produces a great crop that everyone looks forward to; a dome made from sunflower stalks; local sculptor Brett Igmus Davies carved this eye-catching sculpture from a live gum tree; garden crew members planting and preparing the winter crop; another quirky art touch in the orchard; planting out is a popular job for members who like to get their hands dirty.



ART IN THE GARDEN

"We have quite strong creative elements in the garden, which probably comes through from my art therapy background," says Jo. "We planted hundreds of sunflowers this year, and the only ones that came up formed a very strong circle that grew really tall, maybe seven feet. I was able to get them to interlock at the top to form a dome shape (left) that you could walk into and grow things on. Once the stalks dried out and were stripped (they remain in the ground) we used summer prunings to fill in the gaps. I found a lot of beauty in it, in that impermanence, in allowing nature to engage with it as well. It's constantly evolving. I may come in one day and someone will have added to it in their own unique way, which is part of the excitement of it – of looking for those little changes... It's such a powerful part of the garden. It's an invitation for ongoing interaction and a way for people to express their creativity... It's so reflective of our values and the importance of thinking outside the box."



PHOTOS AB BISHOP

PATCH PEOPLE



“It’s been really meaningful for us to transform them into these beautiful carvings, and not have to remove the trees completely. It’s a beautiful way to honour and preserve them, and to create them as a connection point in the bush space.”

Jo explains that many people in the community, especially those with a disability, are quite isolated, even more so because of Covid. So, creating this environment is significant in providing opportunities for people to connect over a love of growing food.

“Since the garden was created, our experience has been that when you put people together in such an intentional way, it brings greater meaning to their lives, with better stories to tell.”

There are no expectations placed on community members, and no specific time commitment required; rather, says Jo, SEEDs creates opportunities for them to connect with a welcoming space in any way that’s relevant to them.

“We also have groups that come into the garden for educational purposes, such as therapeutic horticulture students, who come as part of their community garden day,” she says. “Some have gone on to join our core garden community.”

SEEDs also connects with local business and organisations who share similar values, whether that’s through collaborating with events, sharing the space, or donating food scraps for compost. “Often, this engagement provides meaningful roles for people within our community, which have developed into other opportunities and connections.” **GA**



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The community is always
happy to welcome
new members.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

A spot at the base of a treasured tree is perfect for the community to come together and chat about their day in the garden; there’s no shortage of delicious produce, from snake and climbing beans, to beautiful pomegranates; garden member Grace sets out to water some thirsty plants; Stuart harvests some autumn berries.



WINTER FESTIVAL: SOUP FOR THE SOUL

“Pumpkins have always been our most successful crop,” says Jo. “It began during the original set up of that part of the garden, when one of our community members threw pumpkin seeds everywhere. We quickly found ourselves surrounded by pumpkin vines, and had such a big harvest that we were inspired to begin our annual Winter Soup Festival. As well as cooking and serving soup made from

our produce, there are local musicians, dancing and market stalls. The event has grown, becoming increasingly popular as a point of community connection. This year, we’re planning it for September, and recognise the importance of this connection, now more than ever. My hope is that our contributions have a restorative effect, as we collectively heal from the trauma of the past few years.”

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