

Canberra Organic



2023 AGM roundup

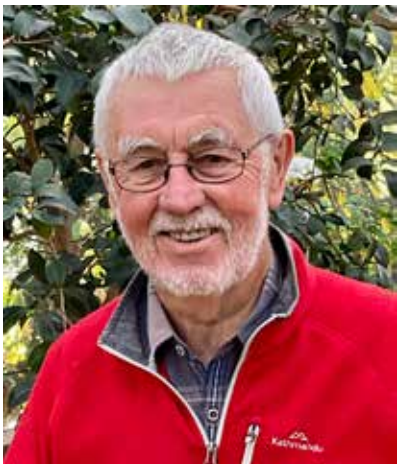
Sparking joy in your garden

The garden of St Erth

The value of ginger

The quarterly publication of the Canberra Organic Growers Society Inc.

COGS respectfully acknowledges the traditional owners, the Ngunnawal people, and other Indigenous people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region, as the custodians of the land on which we grow, and pay our respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.



Welcome to the winter number of *Canberra Organic*, an issue packed as usual with interesting and informative articles from around the COGS gardens and further afield.

Reflecting on the growing season just past, many gardeners will likely agree that it presented challenges due to the unusual weather. The wet, cold spring, followed by a summer with only intermittent spells of hot, sunny weather, meant that many crops just didn't get a real go on. The solanums – tomato, capsicum, eggplant – in particular were lethargic ... well, mine were. Even in mid April, there were tomato bushes rich with green fruit that would never ripen. Very frustrating, but I guess that we have

to face the fact that variable, and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns have become the norm in a changing global climate. Adaptability and resilience might be the key attributes we gardeners need in the years ahead.

A worrying consequence of delayed summer harvesting might be later planting of the winter brassicas, giving them less time to harden up before the heavy frosts arrive. Extra protection might be needed. I had space to get my broccoli in early and it's doing well, having begun to head up in early April. I am indeed proud of the head of broccoli (see photo) 17 cm across and weighing in at 590 g that I harvested on Anzac Day (no connection!). There were, however, two downsides to my early planting: relentless attack by the Cabbage White Butterfly (CWB) and a heavy infestation of cabbage aphids. Fortunately, CWB is relatively easy to control using Dipel organic insecticide. The cabbage aphids I successfully dispatched clean away by spraying with a strong solution of pure soap. Another downside is, of course, that we might have eaten all our broccoli before winter has even started!

Under the headline 'Capital Growth', COGS got a big wrap in the March/

April issue of the ABC's *Organic Gardener* magazine. You can read it at your local library branch. The long article on COGS has many gems, including Immediate Past President Andy's 'Top 5 Tips' for establishing a successful community garden, a must-read for any group so contemplating. COGS gardens and gardeners have also featured several times in the pages of the *Canberra*



Times over the past few months.

This is my first issue as editor of *Canberra Organic* and I have to say that I was delighted to score the job. I've been a member of COGS for I can't remember how many years and my plot and friends at the Kambah Community Garden are a big thing for me, as is promoting the many benefits of gardening and growing your own food.

Read on!

Ed Highley

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FRONT COVER: Job well done: members of the keen team at Charnwood Community Garden rest on their laurels on completion of new raised garden beds (story on page 8). Photo: Peter White

A warm welcome to the winter 2023 issue. This is my first article as President. Firstly, I would like to pay tribute to former President, Andy Hrast, for his steady stewardship during the past few difficult years. This, together with his work for COGS over a long period, was rewarded with a Life Membership. See more on our new Life Members, Andy Hrast and Terry Williams, in this edition. I would also like to thank former Editor, Rebecca Travers, for her work in delivering a high-quality magazine for our members.

A little bit about me to start with. I grew up in Canberra, after emigrating from England in the 1970s. Being an ex-Pom, the allotment style gardens of COGS are very familiar to me. I retired from a career in the Commonwealth Public Service in 2020. Since then I have sought to give back to the community in which I live and have worked. My first volunteer role was to become the Convenor of COGS' Holder garden in September 2020. My wife has been gardening at Holder for 10 years – she grows an amazing array of fruit and vegetables. She is great at preserving and pickling our produce, while I, as the main household cook, turn the rest of it into meals. I am also our chief compost maker.

As Holder Convenor, I attended COGS Executive meetings. In early 2021, Andy Hrast asked me to become the Treasurer, a role I performed up until our AGM in March 2023.

I am also a volunteer, a community transport driver for Capital Region Community Services and Chair of SEE Change, a local environmental charity and grassroots sustainability organisation.

I am a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and bring a strong focus on governance to the role of President. The aims of COGS in our Constitution will guide my approach. I have a few initial thoughts and welcome your ideas on what you want and value.



Photo: Mike Gisick

The aims of COGS are to:

(a) provide information on community gardening and demonstrate organic growing techniques for COGS' members and the wider public

I will seek to improve the information we provide, firstly to our members, but also the wider community. I am keen to attract younger members – the next generation of organic growers. A first step (which will take time) is to refresh our website, including updating our planting guides. Our new Information Officer, Mike Gisick, has already used his skills to make short videos for our social media platforms.

(b) provide access to, administer, and support the development of community gardens operated under organic principles

I am keen to grow COGS' footprint. I strongly believe we need more community gardens across Canberra for the health and environmental benefits they bring. We have actively pursued the development of more gardens and will continue to do so. We will continue to invest in the infrastructure at our existing gardens and seek to ensure individual gardens are well run by local members with the support of the Executive Committee. I would like to attend garden committee

meetings and events at all our gardens over the next year. I recently attended Kambah's monthly meeting and witnessed an engaged and welcoming garden community.

(c) work with likeminded organisations to increase the sustainability of food production in the ACT.

COGS has a history of working with a range of organisations and charities. I hope to continue this tradition and to expand the organisations we work with. For example, a recent working bee at the Holder garden linked up with the SEE Change Roving Regenerators program. Together we helped clean up an overgrown plot of one of our members who needed some support. As part of this event Holder garden also hosted a compost talk by Brook Clinton from Capital Scraps. A short video from the day is on our Facebook page.

On the day I became President I was delighted to be invited by the Convenor of Dickson Garden, John Robertson, to attend the 100th birthday celebration of one of our keen COGS gardeners, Veronica Dunphy. She is a testament to the benefits of organic gardening and, in her words, staying grounded!

Enjoy the magazine.
Neil Williams

Canberra Organic is the quarterly publication of the Canberra Organic Growers Society Inc.

It celebrates organic gardening, local produce, sustainability and information exchange in the Canberra region.

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The Canberra Organic Growers Society is a non-profit organisation providing a forum for organic growers to exchange information and supporting the adoption of organic growing methods in the community.

COGS encourages the use of natural methods to improve our soils, promote sustainability and produce fresh, nutritious food.

For information about COGS and organic gardening, visit the COGS website

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Secretary:	Jyl Thompson
Treasurer:	Nick Sifniotis
Membership Secretary:	Bev McConnell
Garden Coordinator:	Jo McMillan
Information Officer:	Mike Gisick
Magazine Editor:	Ed Highley
General Members:	Richard Buker Narelle McLean Teresa Rose Peter Weddell

community gardens

COGS operates 12 community gardens in the Canberra region, with the support of the ACT Government. The convenors and contact email addresses are listed below.

Betty Cornhill	Peter Rouse — cornhill_convenor@cogs.asn.au
Charnwood	Teresa Rose — charnwood_convenor@cogs.asn.au
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Kaleen	Fiona Dawes — kaleen_convenor@cogs.asn.au
Kambah	Barbara Jesiolowski & Allan Sharp — kambah_convenor@cogs.asn.au
Mitchell	Debbie-Jo Dutton & Oliver Busset — mitchell_convenor@cogs.asn.au
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O'Connor	Deborah Hamilton — occonnor_convenor@cogs.asn.au

COGS: membership strong; demand for plots high

Membership of COGS at the end of March was 536, including 370 plot holders. There are 66 members on waiting lists for plots across the 12 COGS gardens. There may be more people interested in a plot at one of our gardens but who have not yet become members.

Demand for plots is highest on the city's North Side and in Gungahlin gardens (Dickson, O'Connor, Crace, Mitchell) where there are around 30 members in total on wait lists. Of these 38 applied for plots in 2022.

As a result of the continued long waiting lists for plots in COGS gardens, the Committee has been actively pursuing the ACT Government to provide land and infrastructure to meet the pressing need for more garden sites.

Convenors and garden committees seek to actively manage their waiting lists and, where possible, free up space; e.g. by splitting-up existing large plots when someone leaves a garden. Members on a waiting list are encouraged to maintain contact with their local convenor(s) to see where you are on a list and expected waiting times. You may also wish to become involved at the garden, including attending working bees and providing assistance where needed.

2023 AGM roundup

For latecomers to the 2023 Annual General Meeting of COGS, held at the Kambah Community Garden on Sunday 19 March, there was standing room only on what proved to be a very hot day.

Andy Hrast, in his last AGM as President, having served three terms in the office, thanked COGS many members and volunteers who had made his time a pleasure and the society a continuing success.

Among the main points of his report to the meeting were the following:

- The Cook, Kambah, Oaks Estate and O'Connor gardens had hosted successful open days during the year, attracting many visitors and spreading the word on the benefits of organic gardening.
- The exceptionally wet year presented many challenges for COGS gardeners.
- COGS membership was stable at about 500 members. There were 370 plots across the 12 community

gardens and demand for plots remained high.

- Given the demand for plots, COGS has made a strong case to government to establish community gardens in association with new urban and suburban development.
- The developers of Ginninderry and Denman Prospect have approached COGS seeking advice on establishment of community gardens, with the possibility of their coming under COGS wing.
- COGS record-keeping is steadily being improved by digitising past records, including putting up on the website past issues of *Canberra Organic*.
- COGS is growing in strength as a presence on social media, now having 4,000 Facebook followers. The website is popular too, in particular its planting guide, which has over 2,000 visitors in some weeks.

- COGS is in a strong financial position with a cash reserve of almost \$160,000. This strength enabled implementation during the year of some major capital projects at COGS gardens – see box on Treasurer's report.

Members present at the AGM elected former Treasurer Neil Williams as President, and Nick Sifniotis as the new Treasurer. Other new faces on the committee are Ed Highley as Editor of *Canberra Organic*, Mike Gisick as Information Officer, and Richard Buker. Former Information Officer Cathy Morison, who stepped down from the committee, becomes the dedicated Web Manager.

The full list of committee members and garden convenors is on page 4 of this issue.

A closing highlight of the meeting was the admission of Andy Hrast and Terry Williams to Honorary Life Membership of COGS in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the society.

Ed.

Summary of the Treasurer's report to the 2023 AGM

Treasurer Neil Williams presented the society's financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2022.

The bottom line for the year was a modest net loss of \$5,461, only about 3 per cent of total net assets of \$166,275. The loss was primarily due to the significant reduction in membership fees and the large investment in infrastructure, partly cushioned by a fall in water costs due to the abnormally wet year. Net assets have, nevertheless, been on a rising trend over the past 5 years.

Key capital investments were undertaken at the Betty Cornhill, Charnwood, Kambah, Oaks Estate and O'Connor community gardens during the year, the largest by far being the installation of new fencing

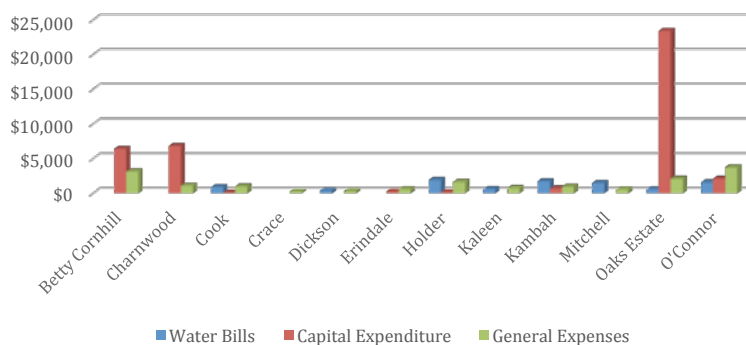
at the Oaks Estate at a cost of \$23,432. See graph below.

The treasurer sounded a warning that the Bureau of Meteorology is forecasting drier weather ahead and that he expects water bills to

rise back to 2021 levels, and possibly higher.

The full reports of President and Treasurer are on our website, together with the audited 2022 financial statements.

Expenditure by Garden 2022



Saluting our new Honorary Life Members

For their outstanding and exemplary service to the aims, ideals and members of the Canberra Organic Gardeners Society, **Andy Hrast** and **Terry Williams** were accorded Honorary Life Membership at the AGM in March.

Andy joined COGS in 1988, some 35 years ago. He first took up a plot in the original Cotter Garden before transferring to the new Betty Cornhill Garden (BCG) in 1990 when the Cotter Garden closed. He was Convenor at BCG from 2003 to 2006. Since 2011, he has been a member of the COGS Executive Committee, serving in several roles: first as a general member, then on the Executive Committee, as Secretary for 3 years, Treasurer for 4 years, before stepping up to the presidency in August 2020.

His service on the committee provided invaluable input to the management of COGS.

- As Treasurer, he helped ensure the future financial stability of the organisation during the difficult period of the drought.
- He displayed sound leadership during the pandemic, allowing the gardens to remain open, of great benefit to the mental health of many members.
- As President, Andy led a very successful Planning Workshop in February 2021, establishing a focus for COGS to ensure the wellbeing and longevity of the organisation and its members.
- Andy led the complex work to simplify and modernise the COGS Constitution which was ratified by members in October 2022.

Andy's steady and thoughtful leadership, together with his knowledge and experience has provided a foundation for the continuing development of COGS as a prime source for implementing and promoting organic growing



Terry Williams (left) and Andy Hrast, honoured by life membership of the Canberra Organic Growers Society. Photo: Mike Gisick

practices within both the COGS and the general Canberra community.

Terry has been a member of COGS for almost 20 years, serving in various leadership roles on the Executive Committee and, more recently, as one of those unassuming backstage workers who are critical to keeping the show on the road.

On the committee, Terry's skills and experience aided the development of the COGS finance system and his IT skills found good use in building our website.

Terry's most outstanding achievement was out in the world, as Convenor of the Oaks Estate Community Garden for several

years. His stewardship there included hard times when it looked like the garden could close due to hostility from parts of the local community. Terry showed great leadership and perseverance, the garden was saved and an application for crucial funding from the ACT Government was successful.

Terry continues his work for COGS behind the scenes managing broadcast emails, contributing to the mammoth task of digitising COGS records, and working closely with the editor on the printing and mailing of *Canberra Organic*.

As our new president said, "Without people like Terry, COGS would not function".

www.cogs.asn.au – visitors welcome!

Our quarterly magazine *Canberra Organic* is a rich source of wisdom to help us grow healthy and happy, and a welcome addition to our mailboxes. But why wait three months, when there are accumulated riches on our website? There, as a member, you can read every issue of *Canberra Organic* back to 1993, and more.

If someone asks you what organic gardening is all about, just direct them to the website; it's a veritable mine of information on the subject. Once their interest has been captured, it will also tell them how to join up and where and how to seek out a plot to take on a new adventure.

For new and established gardeners there's a planting guide for every month of the year and a search will reveal tips on how to get the best from just about everything you might choose to plant.

There are recipes galore to help you enjoy your crop, some of them



intriguing: how about beetroot and chocolate cake? I'm not sure about that, but in the photograph it looks enticing.

Members can keep up with what's under discussion at HQ via the minutes of the monthly executive committee meetings. Readers with an aversion to full-blown social media can tap into some of the hot topics on our Facebook page without actually going there.

Informative video presentations are a new feature our Information Officer is developing. There's one up there already. Click the Facebook icon top-right and have a look.

The riches go on and on. When you visit, you'll be impressed and enlightened, as are many the many seekers of information who spend up to an hour or more there. It's a growing asset that we're working to make even better.

Ed.

georgia's column

Getting into succulents

Georgia, honorary junior member of the Kambah Community Garden, tells of her latest gardening adventure.

I like succulents, cacti in particular. I like the way they look and feel. Many cacti are either pink or green.

I grew one from a seedling and have eight or nine cacti right now. They are easy to maintain and I water them about twice a week.

I just love the appearance of succulents and how smooth most of them are, such as pigface. I have seen some pigface which can grow in water. I have seen lots of them at the beach and I believe there is a kind of saltwater pigface.

Large succulents grow as big as my hand (anyway, that's the biggest one I have seen). They can grow in the ground or in pots, depending on the size.

When my cacti get larger I will transplant some of them into my plot in my Grandpa Ken's Kambah garden.

(For nervous gardeners, or those who don't like blood on their hands, I have not yet been pricked by any of my current cacti.)

[I wonder, Georgia, if twice a week watering might not be too much for some succulents. Ed.]

Photo: Grandpa Ken



New raised garden beds at Charnwood extend opportunities

Peter White reports that the construction crew at the Charnwood garden has been at it again, this time building raised beds for gardeners who, for one reason or another, have difficulty with ground-level work. His photos capture the enthusiastic team and the sterling outcome.

* * *

With the assistance of the ACT Government Community Gardens Grants Scheme, the local crew has built some impressive raised garden beds at the Charnwood garden in a space vacated by the adjoining Parks and Gardens works depot, which enabled our community garden to be extended.

There are four new raised garden beds, each 1.5 by 3 metres. They are built of hardwood sleepers to 1 metre high and have good access all round. A gardener can easily reach all of the plot without having to bend over or stretch too far. One of these plots would be perfect for someone who lives in a unit with no garden space. They could grow a range of herbs, lettuce, bush beans, a crop of carrots and radish — endless possibilities. I could see a Butternut Pumpkin and some rambling cucumbers, even beans, spilling over the sides.

All the plots are filled with vegie mix, have taps, hoses and some portable composting bins close by. A frame for a net could also easily be fitted over any of them.

The raised garden bed plots are being allocated to gardeners who have crook knees, dicky backs, eyesight issues, prosthetic limbs, limited mobility or other conditions which make it difficult to garden in a plot at ground level: anything that would deter a keen, new gardener from gardening in a standard COGS community garden plot. They are not, however, suitable for wheelchair-confined gardeners.

As we go to print for this magazine, there are plots available. COGS members, or someone you know who would join, can apply for, or enquire about one of these plots by contacting the Charnwood garden at charnwood_convenor@cogs.asn.au



(above) The keen team ready to go; (below) Work in progress



Happenings at O'Connor

Convenor **Deb Hamilton** provides an update on events and activities at the O'Connor Community Garden over the past year.

One of the highlights of the summer at O'Connor was the production of several enormous tomatoes, the heaviest weighing in at an astonishing 814 grams.

They were grown from seeds shared by prolific gardener, Giovanni. The tomatoes, initially named 'Giovanni's Giant' within the O'Connor garden community, are in fact called 'Giantomo', and are claimed to be the world's largest beefsteak tomato variety.



A giant tomato, variety 'Giantomo'
Photo: Alan Robertson

Communal and individual plot changes

In autumn, when some members needed to step down from tending communal plots, we took the decision to convert these areas into plots for individuals.

This has helped to meet the growing demand for garden plots with the increasing high-density living of the inner north of the city and has allowed us to welcome some new gardeners.



Food donations for the Companion House charity Photo: Graynehouse

Community outreach program

Members of O'Connor Community Garden continue to enjoy donating excess produce to benefit members of the Companion House community.

During the crop abundance of the warmer months, a weekly delivery of multiple boxes has been made, moving to a fortnightly collection and delivery in the cooler months.

Restoration and community

We have been working together to re-energise a community meeting area near our sheds. Although, in the scheme of things, getting replacement second-hand outdoor furniture might not rate as noteworthy, we are delighted to say goodbye to furniture that has reached the end of life after more than 20 years of service and bring in something fresh. After a spruce-up of our newly acquired

used furniture, we will again have, after a couple of years without one, an outdoor meeting space. Making the space has entailed yet again moving the compost bins, but now we can enjoy the garden scenery, take a break and have a chat in comfort.

Updating the garden rules

Another achievement – and quite a big one – has been to update our local garden rules.

Convenor's sign-off

This is my final report from O'Connor as I stepped down as convenor at the end of May, before publication of this issue. The next report will be from a new convenor. After all we achieved last year and this year, I am confident I am leaving the garden, the garden community, the new convenor and the committee in a good position for the future.



A message from the garden committee

The committee and all at COGS O'Connor Community Garden extend a huge thanks to Deborah Hamilton for her work as convenor. We really appreciate her donating so much of her time, energy and hard work to maintain and improve our garden.

Convenor Deb in her home garden – just as abundant as the plot Photo: E. Doney

Erindale trumps tomatillo and tromboncino

Convenor **Didi Sommer** reports that the garden had great success with two less familiar crops – tromboncino and tomatillo – last summer.

* * *

Tromboncino (literally “little trombone”) is a type of squash most often used as a summer vegetable. It is sometimes known as zucchetto, acknowledging its likeness to that most familiar of summer squashes. Both belong to the genus *Cucurbita*, but they are different species: *moschata* and *pepo*, respectively.

Tromboncini have a vining growth habit, and Didi reports that the Erindale plants were grown over an arch made from reinforcing mesh, built about 2 years ago. The mesh was sourced for free in the neighbourhood. “We are very good at recycling useful stuff”, Didi says. [Well done. Ed.]

Tromboncini can grow to remarkable lengths and into interesting shapes (see page 11 story).

The other big success of the Erindale garden’s summer was tomatillo, also known as the Mexican Husk Tomato, and like the tomato a member of that great family of food plants, the Solanaceae.



(above) Harvested tomatillos, some halved to show the tiny seeds inside; (left) Bushy tomatillo plants can grow up to 2 metres tall. Photos: Didi Sommer.



The tomatillos were grown from seed raised by Markus, and their husbandry involved learning on the go, since there was no prior experience among the gardeners. The plants turned out to be very vigorous, growing up to 2 metres tall and bearing many lantern-shaped fruit.

The garden’s homemade compost was dug in before planting the seedlings and a seaweed extract mixed in rainwater applied occasionally as a tonic. Tomatillo plants like regular watering when it’s hot.

The tomatillo plants grew much better than our tomatoes, Didi notes.

What’s more they were disease-free and happy to grow in any position. Some were planted interspersed with eggplant seedlings. This was not a good idea, as the tomatillos outgrew the eggplants very quickly. Next season’s tomatillos will be grown with plenty of free space around them.

Tomatillos are a staple of Mexican cuisine, most famously in salsa verde, their cultivation and use dating back to pre-Columbian times.

Thanks go to Mayra from the Erindale garden who has kindly provided her recipe for chicken enchiladas with salsa verde (see page 25).

A tromboncino tale

Susan Collier recounts her arrival at the Erindale garden and her discovery of the tromboncino and what it led to.

I joined COGS last year and became a volunteer at the Erindale Community Garden in January this year. Didi Sommer, the convenor of the garden, has introduced me to many vegetable gardening ideas, including the planting of many bee-attracting flowers amongst the vegetables, and not changing the layers of earth by digging up the garden, but cultivating the soil in a way that maintains the trove of important microorganisms in the earth.

However, the most interesting thing I have discovered is a vegetable – the tromboncino.

This amazing vegetable looks at first like a zucchini, but botanically it is a squash or pumpkin. When young and green it cooks up somewhat like a zucchini, and when it is golden and mature, it is more like a Butternut Pumpkin. It is well worth eating in both its forms. It is a summer squash in its young, green form, but matures as a winter squash like the butternut pumpkin. As a winter squash it stores well in a cool, dry place for up to 3 months.

The tromboncino is native to Central and South America, having been domesticated in ancient times, and was introduced to us in the modern age via Italy, where it is an heirloom vegetable. It derives its name from its fruits that are shaped like a trombone.

Linda has grown two interestingly shaped tromboncini. One is like a tyre and the other resembles a swan. My friend and I couldn't resist drawing the swan tromboncino. I did the pen drawing of a sleeping swan and Genevieve did the upright swan tromboncino using a drawing application on her iPad.



(above right) Markus measures the length of a tromboncino at 1.2 metres;

(below) Susan's (left) and Genevieve's (right) renditions of the tromboncino 'swan'. Photo: Didi Sommer.



Crace Community Garden clocks up 10 years

Elizabeth Dangerfield recounts the Crace garden's genesis and development into a vibrant community asset showcasing the rich benefits of organic gardening and produce.

It is amazing how time passes so quickly. It will be 10 years this year since COGS' Crace Community Garden was opened on 31 August 2013. At the time, the suburb was still being built. In fact the majority of homes in the suburb were not completed until 2015. We were very fortunate that a lot of effort went into ensuring that Crace would be a great suburb in which to live. This included building lots of park areas, both large and small, with a range of facilities for the community to enjoy. As part of this, the developers built a 2,000 square metre garden complex, fully fenced and ringed by productive plants such as blueberries and dwarf pomegranates.

The development included 30 raised garden beds, many of which are divided to allow more community

Clouds and sunshine: the stunning metal sculpture at the Crace Community Garden. Photo: Elizabeth Dangerfield



Raised planting beds at the Crace Community Garden. Photo: Elizabeth Dangerfield

members to enjoy the garden. A sculpture, garden shed, picnic table, gas barbeque and 10 compost bins were provided. The compost bins were well used until it became apparent they were equivalent to a 'Rat Hilton', so they have been replaced. Beehives have been installed for both honeybees and native bees, as well as a wasp hotel. It seems the insects find the gardens to their liking too. As you can see from the accompanying photographs, at first the local inhabitants thought the gardens had been built just for their benefit. But who could be angry with such beautiful, rambunctious birds as the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo for treating the place as an avian drive-through.

The garden is managed by COGS and is fully organic. The garden is eclectic with gardeners trying out a range of approaches to gardening. Crace gardeners are willing to try different things – amaranth, okra, sweet potatoes and other 'exotic' plants seem to thrive. As well as vegetables, many gardeners include

flowers in their plots. Like gardeners everywhere, we enjoy giving away our produce, sharing tips and working together to keep the garden going. Any spare produce is given to the Mustard Seed outlet (see article in this issue) which supplies very cheap food to those in need.

We are very lucky! We have a garden that was ready-made, that provides health benefits to community members, that encapsulates the principles of organic gardening – working with the natural world not against it, and follows the ideals originating from the concept of allotment gardening – there is nothing better than to grow your own vegetables and flowers in the company of like-minded people.

So we have lots to celebrate. We are having an open day with a sausage sizzle on 24 September 2023 between 11 am and 1 pm. We would love to see you. Come along to our garden at Drooka Crescent and see how a young suburb is embracing community gardening.

Photo credits: Elizabeth Dangerfield

Crace charity cuts the mustard

John Myszka reports on Crace Community Garden's long association with and contributions to a local charity food pantry.

* * *

The Crace Community Garden was established in August 2013. Plot holders chose their plots and paid their dues. A couple of years later at one of our get togethers, we discovered during a conversation with Nelson, one of our plot holders, that he was taking his surplus amaranth to his temple to help those less fortunate than himself.

We thought that that was a good idea. My wife Elizabeth started to look for an organisation that would accept fresh vegetables to help those in need. She came across The Uniting Church's 'Mustard Seed' food pantry in Gungahlin. After discussions with the minister and an understanding of when the pantry was open we started to deliver surplus fresh vegetables every Thursday at 10:00 am. Our vegetables plus food from OzHarvest and other donors is provided to the pantry's clients.

Two of our plot holders, Allan and Maude, had been collecting and delivering fresh vegetables for 2 years. Elizabeth and I then took over and have been doing so for about 6 years so far.

We have a notice board where plot holders chalk up their plot number and what we can harvest. The edge of the gardens is what we call a common area. We sought and were granted permission to grow vegetables for the Mustard Seed pantry in a narrow 15-m long plot along the edge.

We regularly provide silver beet, beetroot, amaranth, zucchini, tomatoes, garlic, packets of mixed herbs, garlic, chillies, broccoli, carrot, pak choi, choi sum, cucumbers, tromboncino, rhubarb, Warrigal Greens and occasionally

Liz and Vera packing. Photo: John Myszka



John and Vera at Mustard Seed. Photo: John Myszka

flowers, each in their season. We have recently had a glut of zucchini, and Butternut and Queensland Blue pumpkins, to the benefit of the pantry.

With the advent of COVID we could not deliver food for a time, but after about 18 months we started again with a modified procedure. We had to reduce human contact with the fresh vegetables, so we bagged portions of food to minimise handling.

Another person that must be mentioned and thanked is Vera. Vera is not a plot holder but she comes and collects vegetables and bags the food every month.

Trombocini, zucchini and more. Photo: John Myszka



Spark joy in your COGS garden

Marie Kondo (konmari.com), author of bestselling book *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, famously said “Keep only what sparks joy”. She applied the concept to cleaning: we can apply it to gardening. Ask yourself, “does my COGS plot spark joy?”. If your answer is anything other than a firm “yes!”, read on, writes Ryl Parker from Kambah Community Garden.

* * *

Gardening should bring you happiness. Any other benefits, such as eating healthy food, while important, are secondary. So, keep only that plot space which sparks joy. If your plot space already brings you joy, ask yourself how to gain even more joy from it.

Make your COGS plot right for you

For those with large plots, consider subdividing your plot. This can save you time, energy, stress, and money. Maintaining a large plot in excellent condition can be expensive and time-consuming. For example, my plot costs me about \$641 per year (\$21 per square metre per year), and I need to spend at least 200 hours a year to maintain it (4 hours a week)*. Any less than that and nothing grows for me.

For those considering giving up their plot, first think about downsizing. A smaller plot might help you visualise and focus on what you want to grow and pursue that goal with passion.

**In reality, I spend more like 400–600 hours there (8 to 12 hours a week). My costs over the last year are: \$35 in membership fees and \$4.20 per square metre in plot fees. Looking at Bunnings receipts and bulk orders made through COGS, I spent \$125 on a steel arch, \$42 on lucerne hay bales, and about \$40 in seeds, \$7 on twine, \$30 on a misting kit and (I estimate) \$200 in seedlings. That totals to \$605. My plot is about 30 square metres, thus, my annual expense is roughly \$21 per metre square.*



A joyful Ryl in her community garden plot. Photo: Mike Gisick

Don't let fear of the unknown hold you back.

If you're looking to obtain a plot, try any of these tips: attend your local monthly COGS meeting; offer to tend community plots or fruit trees; and visit your local COGS garden on weekends. There's nothing like meeting fellow gardeners face-to-face to inspire them to subdivide their own plots to help new members.

For those seeking to leverage the joy they gain from their current plot, try any of these tips: take advantage of vertical space using trellises and arches; grow only what you like most; and give yourself permission to spend as much time on your plot as you like, rather than giving into the demands of others. If a task or activity does not spark joy, or bring you closer to something that will spark joy, don't bother with it. Offer to water your neighbours' plots if they're going away for a while. Offer to help maintain any communal gardens. Share your ideas at the monthly meetings. Let your local

convenor know if you'd like more plot space; you never know what opportunities may arise.

If you want to keep your plot but need extra support, don't be afraid to ask for help. Make friends by showing vulnerability and asking for advice or introductions to others. Most people, but especially gardeners, love to be helpful and share their knowledge.

The bottom line

If something doesn't bring you closer to your life's goals, then find a way to cut it out. Remember why you joined COGS in the first place – for fresh, organic food and a friendly community. Don't settle for a plot that doesn't spark joy. By observing your feelings and asking yourself, “Does it spark joy?” you can find true happiness in your garden. Imagine your ideal plot and pursue it with courage. As Marie Kondo says, “to truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose”.

A few 'golden rules' of harvesting and storage

The following article, written by **Bob McAlister**, was originally published in *Canberra Organic* #77, Autumn 2013

Handle vegetables for storage very gently. Even invisible bruises and tiny surface scratches provide a foothold for storage rots and diseases. This is especially true of onions and garlic. Carefully rub off surplus mud and remove rotting leaves. The foliage of root crops should be cut off an inch or so above the root. With beet it should be twisted off to minimize bleeding.

Onions, shallots and garlic should be left in the soil until the foliage has died down naturally. Some of our international clamp storers believe that the practice of bending over the tops does nothing to help the process and, indeed, may be harmful. Then ease them gently out of the ground, and leave them to dry in the sun for a week or so, preferably raised off the ground on sacks or upturned boxes. Try to dry them as fast and thoroughly as possible, so that the skins are tanned and crisp. However, if the weather is damp, bring them inside after a few days, and complete the drying under cover — in an airy kitchen, for example. Stored onions, shallots and garlic need both low temperatures and plenty of ventilation. They are best hung in nets or old nylon stockings, or if there is enough leaf attached to the bulb, plaited into ropes. Otherwise, spread them out in trays, rejecting any thick-necked onions, which never store well.

Pumpkins will store well only if harvested well.

Swedes, turnips and carrots tolerate a fair amount of frost, but tend to lay down cellulose in winter, becoming progressively woodier and less palatable. There is also the risk of damage by slugs, mice and even rabbits if they are left in the soil. So



Photo: Can Stock Photo / gajdamak

they are normally lifted and stored in boxes or clamps. In very light soil they are sometimes left in the ground, though the carrots would normally be covered with straw as protection against frost. But in most circumstances it is easier and pleasanter, in the depths of winter, to retrieve vegetables from boxes or clamps stored safely in your shed or garage than to dig them out of muddy ground.

With **potatoes** there is no option: they are easily damaged by frost so must be lifted by late autumn, dried in the sun for a couple of hours, then stored in root clamps outdoors, or under cover in hessian sacks or double-thickness paper sacks, tied at the neck. If kept in sheds or cellars they are best stood up against an inside wall. Give them extra protection with sacking or straw if severe frost threatens. The ideal temperature range for storing potatoes is 4–10°C (39–50°F); at lower temperatures they may become unpleasantly sweetened. They should always be kept in the dark. Remove the tubers that become green with the formation of poisonous alkaloids.

Store under cool conditions. With root crops (other than potatoes), onions, and cabbage the temperature should be as near zero as possible. The atmosphere should not be too dry or the vegetables will shrivel.

Only the very hardiest vegetables can be left in the soil without deteriorating or being damaged by frost. **Jerusalem artichokes, parsnips, Hamburg parsley, Chinese winter radishes, and celeriac** are prime examples. **Parsnips**, indeed, are said to improve in the soil, becoming sweeter. It is also worth covering the rows with straw, bracken or dead leaves to try and prevent the ground from being frozen solid. Otherwise it may prove impossible to lift the roots in severe weather.

Discard any diseased or damaged vegetables as they will rot quickly in store. If necessary store them separately and use them first. Inspect stored vegetables regularly and remove any which are rotting.

Reference

How to store vegetables in boxes in a cellar: illustrated guide. At <https://bit.ly/3LDSWXN>

The Garden of St Erth

Deborah Hamilton recounts a memorable visit to the Diggers Club's Garden of St Erth, with photographs of just a few of the delights of this stunning garden. She also provides a bit of the history of the place.

* * *

The Garden of St Erth was beginning to seem like an apparition. After several wrong turns, I was wondering if it really existed until I rounded a bend on the winding road from the village of Blackwood, and finally glimpsed a charming cottage and garden, and a sign – 'Welcome to St Erth'. My excitement rose as I pulled into the carpark. I had known about this garden for years and at last I had found an opportunity to visit this gem hidden down a country road in Victoria's Macedon Ranges.

The visitor part of the Garden of St Erth is small but, as the saying goes, perfectly formed. On entering, I trod a stone path surrounded by a clipped, brilliant green lawn with brightly coloured dahlias and perennials filling the herbaceous border by the cottage verandah. I also glimpsed a tantalising view to stone steps surrounded by an arched hedge inviting me to explore up the hill and beyond.

After completing formalities at the cottage, and taking in the small nursery and shop there, I set forth into the garden, map in hand to make sure I'd miss nothing on my all too brief visit.

I was immediately struck by the significant trees and, in particular, I enjoyed locating the mature Gingko, Dawn Redwood, Monterey Pine, Copper Beech, Strawberry Tree and Himalayan Cedar.

The garden is laid out in 'rooms' that are separate but, as it is a small garden, I could see the transitions and this whetted my appetite to visit the next room. Each room or area features contrasting plantings, purpose and character. Part of the garden is only ornamental and edible



The netted, possum-proof, productive kitchen garden

exotics and this contrasts with the Bush Garden, which is a curated walk with tall eucalypts and mature exotic trees and mountain views. Near the Bush Garden I found a secluded pool, hidden by the surrounding giant Gunnera and Elegia plants.

At the time I visited, the daffodil garden had finished flowering and the rose garden was past the spring flush but a few lovely roses were still in flower. After a short climb, I took a rest in the middle of the dry climate garden situated on top of a knoll. Here I took in the view and revisited my map to plan my course through the remainder of the garden.

I next visited the other produce gardens, including the kitchen garden, food forest and dry climate orchard. It was clear that all the produce gardens needed protection from possums and other critters,

as most were heavily netted, and where not netted there were signs of produce having been heavily nibbled.

The kitchen garden showcases The Diggers Club heirloom vegetables, and the food forest is based on permaculture and biodiversity principles, mimicking a natural forest system with a canopy of almonds, olives and hazelnuts and a mixed garden of berries, perennials and flowers. The wetter season had taken something of a toll on some of these areas, with signs of fungal attack on some plants, while others obviously loved the wetter weather.

On my COGS plot, I grow an espaliered dwarf apricot, as well as thornless blackberry, black and red currants and josta berry, so I was especially keen to see the espaliered orchard and berry gardens. I was amazed to see how the forty-four



*(above) A visitor's first view of the cottage and garden;
(below) Where does this lead? A tantalising view.*

espaliered fruit trees make such efficient use of very limited space yet are very productive with the fruit in easy reach for harvesting. The orchard is located part way up the hill behind the cottage on the site of a 1930s orchard, and is fed with recycled water. The trees were covered in ripening apples and pears.

I finished my walk in the garden proper with a brief investigation of two glamping tents set up at the top of the hill and a restful stroll through the Bush Garden, taking time to sit on the several cleverly designed timber seats to take in the views, before returning to the cottage where I bought a couple of perennial ornamentals for my home garden.

Before leaving I visited the extensive berry garden located across the road from the cottage near the carpark. It was filled with many trellises and types of unusual berries, all past their fruiting time when I visited and beginning to look rather tired.

I, however, was not feeling at all tired – I was uplifted – finally I had visited The Garden of St Erth. It had offered me its treasures. I came away admiring the care given to each of the different areas and the successful mix of planting and purpose so the garden is both productive and aesthetically pleasing, offering biodiversity for all visitors, including birds and bees.

Readers interested in the history of the garden can find the results of my research on that topic on the COGS website at <https://bit.ly/3nlMH1v>.



My tortuous path to gardening wisdom

Kambah gardener **Ken Fraser** recounted some of the twists and turns on his journey to gardening enlightenment at the garden's March meeting. We tell his story again here.

After rashly agreeing to be the first speaker at a new, regular timeslot in our garden meetings, I realised (with mounting panic) that 5 minutes might be rather too long to tell everything I know about gardening. I can generally exhaust my store of knowledge on most topics in around a minute and a half. But I guess it's nice to be 'breaking new ground'.

So I developed a cunning plan. I decided I would recount just a few of the things I have learned during my 5 years at the garden. I have listed these under three main headings:

- foolish assumptions
- steep learning curves
- great garden mysteries.

Here they are (in no particular order):

Tomatoes: I had foolishly assumed that all tomato skins were the same until fellow-gardener Anna pointed out that this is not so and that some tomatoes have tougher skins than others, e.g. Roma skins are thick, Grosse Lisse yellow has thin skin, as has Beefsteak. This is important information in the battle against pests such as fruit fly. Obviously, the thicker skinned varieties will withstand their attacks better. There is only one thing scarier than eating a tomato with a fruit fly maggot in it, and that's half-way through eating one with half a maggot in it.

Artichokes (1): I knew nothing about artichokes when I planted my first two plants here. I didn't realise that the heart would need to be eaten before it flowered (many weeks beforehand in fact). I have never actually eaten a leather saddle but I imagine that it and a late-picked, overdone artichoke heart would taste much the same. Always pick the heads when they are quite small, say 3–5 inches across. Neither did I realise that if you decide to remove the plants, the roots are so large that they need to be dynamited from the ground. They don't tell you these things on *Gardening Australia*.



Drawing by Ryl Parker

Artichokes (2): Early last year, a friend of mine in gave me a couple of young plants. She said "These are Jerusalem Artichokes". So, innocent as a lamb, I planted the three seedlings. Late last year I discovered that the seedlings were now some 3 metres tall and bore no resemblance to any other type of vegetable that I had ever seen. Apparently one eats the roots, but it seems tragic to sacrifice a 3-metre plant just to pander to one's taste buds. I guess I'll just put the episode down to being on a steep learning curve, and I won't bother getting in that consultant from Tel Aviv.

Picture this: I think by now you are now getting the picture that, as a gardener, I need all the help I can get, so I invested in a plant identification app called *Picture This*. It is actually remarkably accurate and good value for around 80 cents a week. If only I'd had it as the Jerusalem Artichokes reached for the sky.

Dwarf beans (1): When I bought a packet of dwarf beans last year, I wasn't sure which was vertically challenged, the plants or the consumers. Whatever

and nevertheless, when I tried propagating them home at home I found that (believe it or not) they can grow up to 12 cm (5 inches) overnight. I am sure this is where the story of Jack and the Beanstalk came from.

Dwarf beans (2): The other amazing fact I learned about dwarf beans is their incredible resilience. I had opened a packet of beans some weeks before and had inadvertently left the open packet beneath a seedling tray on the bench outside my house.

I didn't move the tray for some 2 weeks and when I did, I found that the remaining few beans had germinated and grown, and (with virtually no air, water or earth, for some 2 weeks) had managed to stretch themselves out onto the green baize cloth which I had used to cover the table. This was indeed a cosmic message to me.

It's true: life springs up everywhere. However, I have come to the uncomfortable conclusion that my plants do best when I'm not around and I just let them be (as the Buddhists might say.) In fact I'm sure I heard one of the beans say to me recently: "Can you stand a little less between me and the sun?" Maybe the children's fairy tale was originally called Jack and the Beans Talk.

Great gardening mysteries – rhubarb: One of the great mysteries of life generally (along with the pyramids, Stonehenge, the yeti and how some politicians ever got to be prime minister) is: why (in spite of smothering them with love, compost, Seasol and three types of manure) are my rhubarb stalks still thinner than Ryl's rhubarb stalks? I have lost sleep over this conundrum.

The plot thickens: As well as aspiring to be a good gardener, I have also cultivated a love of writing stories and I can see lots of similarities between the two. For example, in writing fiction you need a good plot, an attractive setting and great characters (such as the lot in our garden). I'm very lucky – I've got the trifecta. My earthbound limitation is probably just a general lack of ability. But I'm working on that one (with a little help from my friends).

CBRLocalFood: mapping and quantifying home and community food production

Many COGS members will have responded to the registration survey for this project earlier in the year. The project team at the **University of Canberra** reports here on progress and invites further participation.

* * *

We thank everyone who is participating in our project, which is supported by the Australian Citizen Science Association, the Theo Murphy Initiative and the Australian Academy of Science. We are seeking to understand the amount of food produced by ACT residents, who in particular produces it, and their motivations and challenges. Understanding how much food is produced and the how and why is an important step in promoting increased urban food production. We are pleased to share with COGS a snapshot of the data we are collecting.

Launching in mid February, we invited broad participation in the project through nurseries, food-growing associated groups, and print and radio media. By Easter we had received 124 contributions to the producer survey and 90 production entries. Many respondents grow food in their backyards, about a quarter of them in community gardens. Actual amounts have not yet been collated but participants report having grown tomatoes (20%), zucchini (14%), cucumber (9.2%), French beans (8.6%), capsicum (8%), herbs (7.7%), beetroot (6.5%), egg plant (4.9%), lettuce (4.9%), carrots (4.6%), silver beet (4.6%), lemons (4.3%), berries (3.7%), potatoes (3.1%), rhubarb (3.1%), kale (2.8%), onions (2.8%), sweet corn (2.5%),

plums (2.15%), spinach (1.9%), apples (1.6%), Asian greens (1.6%), cabbage (1.6%), pumpkins (1.6%), peach (1.2%), squash (1.2%), almonds (0.9%) ... and more, revealing the diversity of foods grown. Animal food production is providing meat (4%), eggs (22.6%), manure (8.9%), honey (7.3%), worms (3.2%) and other (1.6%). Participants provided information about specific challenges in raising their particular crops.

We are building up a rich picture of urban food production and its challenges in the ACT.

The registration survey provided rich information about participants and their gardens. Respondents included equal numbers of retired and full-time workers. We have participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, although Australian, British, and European backgrounds are predominant. Participants grow food to feed self/family (98%), to share (49%) and to donate (6.5%), none to sell. Food is grown for relaxation/leisure (86%), to improve wellbeing (75%), for its enhanced taste (73%), for better nutrition (65%), for sustainable living (69%), to avoid use of chemicals (59%), to save money (47%) and to avoid purchasing from large commercial food suppliers (44%). Participants variously source their gardening knowledge from websites (74%), books (48%), friends (38%), community groups/workshops (34%), television (27%), magazines (24%) and family (23%).

Information has been collected on garden size and location. This will be used in production calculations. Gardens are affected by shade from trees (46%), buildings (21%), exposure to the elements (53%), poor aspect (8%), poor drainage (13%), animal pests (57%), poor security (3%) and other reasons (11%). Everyone has invested time and money into soil improvement: most used home-made compost (79%), mulch/straw (89%), fertiliser (64%), purchased manure (56%), externally sourced garden-bed mix (48%), purchased compost (39%), home-made manure from chickens (25%). Water for gardens mainly comes from mains supply (87%), home-collected rainwater (41%), grey water (5%) and other sources (4%). Under half of respondents grow from seed (45%) rather than seedlings. Most seeds or seedlings were sourced from a national supplier (76%), some from previous crops (57%), from local networks (23%), purchased from local sources (30%), and other (11%).

We are building up a rich picture of urban food production and its challenges in the ACT. Our initial focus is to collect data at key harvest periods in summer/autumn and winter/spring, but we welcome year-round participation. To participate please visit CBRLocalFood and if you would like to participate but can't provide data to the online survey we are happy to mail you a paper survey and return envelope if you let us know via the projects email: cbrlocalfood@canberra.edu.au. We are also listening to suggestions on how to improve the survey. Thank you.



Rumbledethumps

Here's a Scottish dish to warm more than the cockles of your heart and make good use of your potato and winter vegie crops. Don't you just love the name? The same dish in Ireland is called Colcannon, which is quite a nice name, but not nearly as evocative or onomatopaeic.

Ingredients for four moderate servings

600 g potatoes (peeled weight)
 400 g turnip (peeled weight)
 250 g cabbage, finely sliced
 100 g butter
 30 g sharp Cheddar cheese, grated

Method

Boil and mash the potatoes and turnip. Melt half the butter in a pan and cook the cabbage until just tender but still bright green. Combine the mashed potatoes, turnip, cabbage, and the rest of the butter, and mash together. Season with salt and pepper and transfer to a deepish ovenproof dish. Top with the grated cheese. Bake at 180°C for 25–30 minutes, until golden brown and piping hot. Enjoy!

Ed.



Pumpkin gnocchi

The little Italian dumplings known as gnocchi are usually fashioned from potato but, it's pumpkin time, so try this proven variation from Nina at the O'Connor Community Garden.

Ingredients

1 kg pumpkin
 200 g white plain flour
 1 egg
 Nutmeg and salt

Method

Cook, drain well, and pulp the pumpkin.

Add flour, egg and seasonings.

Mix well.

Drop by the teaspoonful into a large pot of boiling, salted water. Don't overcrowd.

Remove with a slotted spoon when gnocchi float to the surface.

Serving suggestion

Serve with grated parmesan or sage butter, which you can make by cooking sage leaves in melted butter until crisp.

Photo credit: Graynehouse



The history and value of ginger

'In my mind, ginger always conjures up visions of Zanzibar, the "Spice Islands" renowned for being the centre of the spice trade for centuries', begins Elizabeth Dangerfield, in her coverage of the history and value of this now culinary stalwart with other uses as well. Read on.

I imagine the scents of cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, black pepper and ginger wafting through colourful oriental markets. It is even suggested that the name of the islands derives from the name for ginger (*Zingiber officinale*). Zanzibar thrived when spices were worth their weight in gold and wars were fought over access to them. Europeans could not get enough of these exotic ingredients as they masked the taste of stale meat and enlivened a basic diet. Unfortunately for Zanzibar, spices are now commonplace and no longer cost a king's ransom and so its fortunes have declined considerably. But I feel we should always think of spices as very precious, as a small amount goes a long way and a world without them would be very dull indeed.

Ginger's generic name derives from Sanskrit via the Greek *zingiberis*. It belongs to the same family as turmeric. It is a native of the coastal areas of Southeast Asia and is used extensively in Asian cooking. Confucius, apparently, ate it every day. It made it to the Mediterranean via the Great Spice Road in the first century CE, but it seems it took another millennium to make it to England. The Spanish took it to the Americas in the middle of the second millennium CE. Here in Australia, it is now part of our eclectic cuisine.

Ginger is a beautiful plant which grows about 1 metre tall, with long narrow leaves that curl around to form stems. At the end there are spikes from which beautiful creamy yellow flowers with purplish markings burst forth. The domesticated version of ginger does not produce seeds



A beautiful crop of fresh, thin-skinned ginger

because it has been cloned from its rhizomes for so long that seeds are redundant. The rhizomes are fleshy and knobby and the fresh ones have beautifully thin skins. I have tried growing ginger plants from these in a cold glass house in Canberra to no avail. A nice warm humid hothouse would have suited it better. Buderim in Queensland has ideal conditions and is a major source of ginger and ginger products.

Ginger is used medicinally as well as in cooking. The volatile oils zingiberene, zingerone and gingerol are among 400 chemicals isolated from raw ginger. Some of these are anti-inflammatory. Interestingly, fresh ginger also contains the enzyme zingibain which has similar properties to rennet.

Ginger has long been used to combat feelings of queasiness or nausea such

as those caused by seasickness. It is suggested that gingerol increases the rate at which food passes through the digestive tract. That food does not linger in the stomach helps to relieve nausea; and in this way it may be an aid to people undergoing chemotherapy; it may cut down on bloating and constipation; and reduce vomiting from morning sickness. But evidence from research on the medicinal value of ginger is inconsistent and more work needs to be done to confirm its benefits. It is worth noting that ginger can cause heartburn and may interfere with the effectiveness of anticoagulant medicine.

Although ginger is pungent, it is delicious in cooking and makes a wonderful tea, and I can never resist it when it is dipped in chocolate.

Spotted Pardalote



Our resident artist **Cathy Morison** captures the stylish plumage of the Spotted Pardalote and tells us its story.

The Spotted Pardalote (*Pardalotus punctatus*) is a tiny gem of a bird that graces some of our local gardens. Its name is appropriate, literally meaning 'diamond bird', as this little guy's head and nape are covered in crisp, diamond-like spots. Splashes of colour on the tail and rump, together with the creamy belly complete the swish plumage, which is (typically) more pronounced in the male bird.

Diamond Sparrow, Bank Diamond and Diamond Dyke (based on its habit of tunnelling into banks when nesting) are other common names for the Spotted Pardalote, while our Indigenous people know it as the *widopwidop* and *bilyabit*. Less kindly is the epithet 'headache bird' because of its repetitive call during the breeding season (<https://bit.ly/3Ln1KQt>).

The Spotted Pardalote can be found on most of the eastern and southern coastline of Australia, and its range extends inland to the mid-west of NSW. Despite not nesting in trees, it is predominantly found in eucalypt forests. Its numbers are apparently declining in urban areas, but the species is not endangered.

In addition to its beauty, a significant feature of this species is its nesting habits. The breeding season for the Spotted Pardalote can range from August to January, generally determined by its geographical location. Unlike many other canopy dwellers, the Spotted Pardalote builds a tunnel in a dirt pile or bank, extending half a metre horizontally into the earth before adding the finishing touch of a nest chamber at the end:

They begin by pecking out a hole, then continue digging with their claws; those tiny feet can hurl excavated soil up to a metre away. Many a Canberra gardener has had to pause activities while the nest dug into the compost heap or pile of soil or sand has been completed and the chicks fledged. (<https://bit.ly/3LDT8pZ>).

Pardalotes that choose to nest in urban areas have been known to choose some interesting sites in which to raise their families, including potting mix, mulch piles, carpet rolls and garage roll-a-doors!

Many gardeners may not even be aware of Spotted Pardalotes around them. This stylish little bird can be hard to spot, despite its splash of bright red and gold. Its call is far more likely to give away its presence. Recordings of their call can be found at (<https://bit.ly/422PJXc>).

Their ringing voices, however, are out of all proportion to their size. It's not recorded who first decided that Spotted Pardalotes say a silvery 'Miss Piggy' (with a slow 'miss' and quick 'piggy'), but that's what many of us hear.

It's been reported that in the lead-up to the 1993 federal election Spotted Pardalotes in Canberra switched to saying 'Paul Keating' but that's hard to verify. Striated Pardalotes utter a less contentious but very musical 'whitticher' (<https://bit.ly/3LDT8pZ>).

Spotted Pardalotes forage for food in their favourite eucalypt tree tops, living primarily on insects. Such feeding habits do not lend themselves to handfeeding by urban gardeners. To attract these little guys into your garden and keep them safe, protect eucalypts growing in your local area. Because of their ground-nesting habits, they are highly vulnerable to predation. A pet-free garden with earth banks or piles in the vicinity will help attract pardalotes if they are in the area. If you do find a pair nesting in your piles of dirt, garden

banks, carpet rolls or garage doors, give them undisturbed space and time to raise and fledge their brood.

Acknowledgment

I thank Yass bird photographer Rhonda Corcoran (<https://bit.ly/41RqtUh>) for permission to use her reference photo of the Spotted Pardalote for my drawing.

Other References

(<https://bit.ly/3oRG33E>)

(<https://bit.ly/3LH5Zbf>)

weather report

El Niño WATCH issued

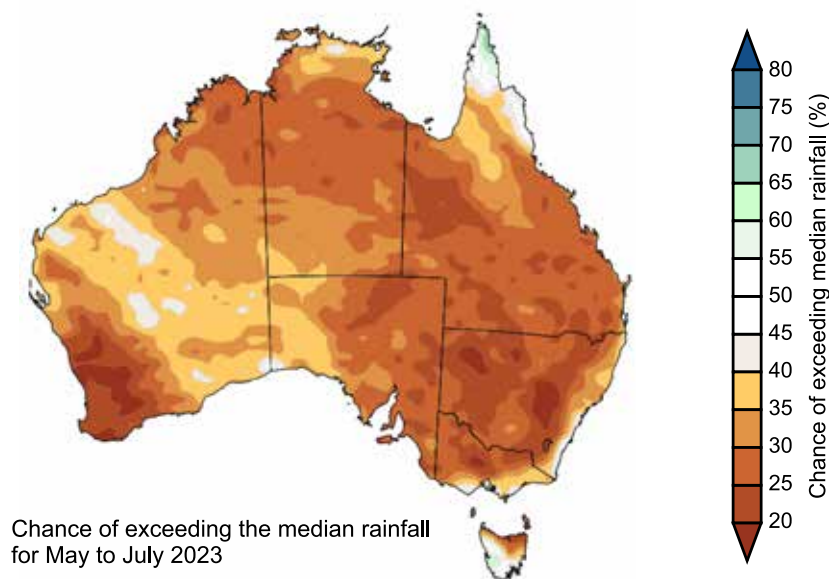
Andy Hrast's regular weather forecast for the months ahead.

* * *

The Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) report released on 11 April notes that the ocean and atmosphere in the tropical Pacific Ocean are at neutral levels at present. However, there are some signs El Niño may form later in the year. On that basis, BoM has issued an El Niño WATCH. This means there is about a 50% chance of El Niño developing in 2023. This is about twice the normal likelihood but is not a guarantee that El Niño will occur, rather an indication that some of the typical precursors are currently in evidence.

International climate models suggest neutral conditions are most likely to persist through autumn. From July, all but one of the models predict that climate indicators will meet or exceed El Niño thresholds. All modelling is showing that indicators will meet or exceed El Niño thresholds by August. El Niño typically suppresses rainfall in eastern Australia during the winter and spring months.

The other major climate driver, the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), is also neutral. A majority of models



Chance of exceeding the median rainfall for May to July 2023

suggest that a positive IOD event may develop in the coming months. A positive IOD can suppress winter and spring rainfall over much of Australia, potentially exacerbating the drying effect of El Niño.

However, the BoM stresses that outlooks for both El Niño and the IOD extending beyond autumn should be viewed with some caution as they typically have lower forecast accuracy than forecasts made during other times of the year.

Dam levels in the Canberra region and capital cities		
	Apr '23	Apr '22
ACT storages	99%	100%
Murray-Darling Basin	88%	86%
Burrinjuck Dam	77%	92%
Blowering Dam	83%	94%
Sydney	96%	100%
Melbourne	91%	85%
Brisbane	81%	89%
Adelaide	60%	47%
Perth	47%	48%

From rags to [soil] riches

When my favourite old T-shirts become really too disreputable to wear, even around the yard, I give them to the worms!, writes Sally Stephens.

My worm-farm came with a fibre 'blanket' that disintegrated years ago. Since then, I've replaced it with old cotton towels, but I've also been using my worn-out T-shirts. I feel they are going to a good cause, and the worms seem to enjoy them.

They last only a few weeks, as the accompanying photos show. Their remains end up in the garden along with the worm castings.

*The disintegration of a Flinders Island Wind Festival T-shirt over a 7-week period.
Photos: Sally Stephens*





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Chicken enchiladas

Mayra at the Erindale Community Garden provided this recipe for chicken enchiladas with salsa verde, 'verde' meaning 'green'.

Ingredients

340 g tomatillos (about 8 medium tomatillos, husks removed)
 2 serrano peppers or 1 jalapeño
 1 garlic clove
 1/8 medium white onion
 4 cups water
 1/2 cup fresh coriander
 2 tablespoonfuls of vegetable oil for frying
 12 corn tortillas
 2 cups of shredded cooked chicken
 1/4 teaspoonful garlic powder
 1/4 teaspoonful onion powder
 Salt and pepper, to taste

Method

To make the salsa, put the tomatillos, peppers, garlic, onion, and water in large saucepan over. Bring to the boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes or until tomatillos are cooked. Allow them to cool, then transfer from the saucepan to a blender with 1 cup of the cooking water. Blend until smooth. Add coriander and blend until same texture.

Heat the oil in a large frypan over medium heat. Using kitchen tongs, dip the tortillas, one at a time, into the oil for a few seconds to soften them. Transfer them to a plate lined with paper towel to drain excess oil.

Season the chicken with salt and pepper, and the onion and garlic powders.



Assemble the enchiladas. Place chicken (1 tablespoonful, say, or whatever amount you like) into a tortilla, close to edge and roll to form an enchilada. Place the enchilada rolled edge side down. Repeat this process with the remaining tortillas and chicken. Spoon the salsa over the enchiladas. Garnish with fresh coriander, and serve.



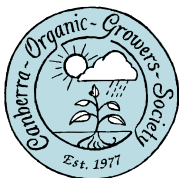
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winter planting guide

VEGETABLES

Asparagus

Prepare the bed before you buy the crowns to plant in late winter/early spring. Since this is a perennial crop which can last for up to 20 years it is well worth the effort of establishing properly. Asparagus needs good drainage and plentiful food and can be planted very successfully in a raised bed enriched with compost and well rotted manure. Seaweed is an excellent mulch.

The crowns are planted in a trench, but with the roots straddling a ridge. Cover so dormant shoots are about 4 cm below the surface. Do not harvest spears the first year, and only harvest for a few weeks the second year.

Remember this is a long-term investment.

Broad beans

Late plantings of broad beans in June may be very slow to germinate. Better results are usually achieved with an autumn or early spring planting.

Kohlrabi

Prepare the soil well with lots of organic matter. Needs rapid growth for flavour.

Lettuce

Plant only winter varieties of lettuces (cos, salad bowl, oakleaf, butterhead and mignonette varieties).

Onions

Mid-season varieties are often sown late autumn or early winter and long-keeping varieties in winter. However, the timing of mid- or late-season varieties is well worth experimenting with by making successive plantings to determine the best time in your specific locality.

Peas

Peas can be planted in August/September for an early summer crop but may be very slow to germinate if the ground is still very cold or wet.

Rhubarb

This is a perennial but plants generally only produce well for a few years, then fresh plants need to be started from subdivided crowns planted in late winter or early spring. It is very hardy, but it is a gross feeder and will appreciate lots of compost or well-rotted manure and plenty of water.

Other possibilities

Growers may wish to start a number of crops in late winter rather than early spring if the winter is mild or if they have a sheltered garden bed.

These crops include artichokes (Globe and Jerusalem), beetroot, cabbage, carrots, potatoes and radish.

Frost-sensitive vegetables such as capsicum, eggplant and tomatoes can be started early in August indoors but may need a heated glasshouse or warm spot to germinate and will certainly need protection before being planted out in spring.

FRUIT

Winter is the usual time to plant and prune soft fruits including:

Strawberries

Plant certified stock or propagate from runners (not from plants more than two years old) in a soil enriched with compost or well-rotted manure. Remove old leaves and excess runners to tidy up the plants in winter.

Berries

Raspberries, youngberries, boysenberries etc. can be planted during winter while they are dormant.

Remember, these bear fruit on canes grown in the previous year so to prune remove all the old canes in autumn or winter making sure to leave the current season's growth for next year's fruit. Autumn fruiting raspberries bear on the current year's growth so are cut to the ground in winter after they have fruited.

Currants

Red, white or black currants are easy bushes to grow in Canberra as they withstand very cold weather and don't mind heavy clay soil. Currants produce a fruit rarely available commercially. They need to be pruned in winter to remove dead wood and around a third of the oldest branches to encourage new growth and allow for good air circulation.

	JUN	JUL	AUG
Artichokes		T	T
Asparagus		T	ST
Broad beans		S	S
Kohlrabi			S
Lettuce			S
Onions			T
Peas	ST	ST	S
Rhubarb			T
Silverbeet		T	S
Snowpeas			ST
Spinach	T	T	S

S = seed sowing; T = transplanting

Want to contribute?
We'd love to hear from you!
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Canberra Organic is a unique way to reach people in the Canberra region who have an interest in organics, gardening and the environment.

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Full page	\$72 (\$60)	\$240 (\$200)

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COGS Community Garden Watering Rules

All plot holders must abide by the COGS watering rules. The rules are based on the ICON Water Permanent Water Conservation Measures and include extra requirements specifically for COGS garden plot holders as follows:



- The use of sprinklers is not permitted in COGS' community gardens at any time.
- Watering must be by:
 a hand-held hose fitted with a trigger nozzle;
 a bucket or watering can; or
 a drip irrigation system.
- Plants must be watered without causing pooling or runoff.
- Tap timers are not to be used.
- Nozzles must not be removed while watering.
- Unattended watering is not allowed.
- Filling trenches is not allowed.

Thank you for your assistance with adhering to these rules.



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Stepping into the bush garden at St Erth
Photo: Elizabeth Dangerfield