Canberra organic

Summer 2023
Vol 31 No 4 Issue 121

Crace tenth birthday Open Day

New local food strategy

Selecting organic inputs

All about sunflowers

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.

editor's note

I am writing this on 9 November, and I can hear the patter of rain on the verandah roof. What a glorious sound of what has been a rare event over the whole of spring. Keep going, I think. But, as Andy reports in his weather page, El Niño continues, so it seems likely that there is a challenging summer ahead for gardeners. Commitment, innovation and resilience will be called for.

There's quite a bit of what we might call 'admin stuff' in this issue: on what can and shouldn't be brought into our organic gardens and, relatedly, on plastic plant pot recycling; on COGS submission to a new local food strategy announced by the ACT Government; and on governance issues. These are topics which, directly or indirectly, affect all members. Read about them.

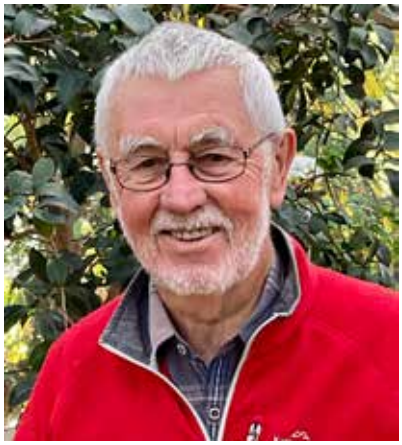
Richard Buker's article 'Coffee waste to grow vegies – really!' in our spring issue led a reader to point me to an article, 'Hold the coffee', in the 17 June 2023 issue of *New Scientist* magazine, the main gist of which is that caffeine, present aplenty in coffee, is allelopathic, by which is meant it suppresses plant growth. I tracked down another article on this phenomenon by the same author, James Wong, in *The Guardian* newspaper way back in 2016. His message is that coffee grounds are more likely to suppress plant growth than encourage it.

On reading those accounts, however, I deduce that Wong is writing about straight, untreated coffee grounds, whereas Richard's coffee waste is a compost. He writes: 'My experience is that to get the best value from the black gold of coffee grounds they should be composted in a balanced mix of "greens and browns", water and aeration.' The author of a new book* on composting, published just a few months ago, and which I hope to have reviewed for the next issue, agrees:

> It's not a good idea to apply coffee grounds directly to your soil without composting them first because caffeine can suppress seed germination and root growth. Add the grounds to your compost bin, and allow the microorganisms to break them down first.

Readers can assess the practical and documented evidence and draw their own conclusions.

Now a 'mea culpa!' In the print version of the Spring issue of *Canberra Organic,* I inadvertently



omitted crediting Linda Booth of the Erindale Community Garden for the wonderful front cover photo of Minister Rebecca Vassarotti and Erindale convenor Didi Sommer. My apology, Linda.

Cathy, our brilliant 'Drawn to the garden' artist is taking a break this issue, but I am sure that members will be chuffed to hear that her 'Spotted Pardalote' in this year's Winter issue was selected as a finalist for the 2023 Holmes Prize for Excellence in Realistic Australian Bird Art. Splendid!

Hope you all have a bountiful summer harvest and a festive season full of pleasure.

Ed Highley

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* Kate Flood, *The Compost Coach*, Murdoch Books, 2023.

Contents

FRONT COVER: Collage by Matt Mawson

president's column

Welcome to the Summer 2023 edition of *Canberra Organic*. The spring just past proved to be a busy period across our gardens and for the Executive.

Garden events – connecting with the community

Crace Garden celebrated its 10th anniversary with an Open Day in September. It was well attended (see page 6). Kambah Garden, in collaboration with *SEE Change*, hosted a very successful composting workshop presented by Fiona Buining from Ainslie Urban Farm in early September (see page 8). The Dickson garden held a similar event in mid November and had an Open Day on the 25th of that month. Kambah Garden held its highly successful annual Open Day and seedling sale on 4 November (see page 11).

Oaks Estate Garden held an Open Day in October as part of a broader Oaks Estate Floriade festival. Also in October, Mitchell Garden, together with Vice President Michele Barson, hosted a delegation from the Penrith City Council who were in Canberra as part of a broader tour of the region (see page 7), as well as a separate visit by local MLA Andrew Braddock.

Events such as these are an important way for members to connect with their broader community and message the importance of community gardens.

New convenors and garden committees

Perhaps the most important thing to happen over the spring period was the annual general meetings at each of our gardens. New committees were elected and, at around half our gardens, new convenors or co-convenors were elected. New people taking on these roles over time is important as they bring fresh ideas and new perspectives. Both renewal and continuity are strengths of COGS. I thank everyone who as stepped up to help run our gardens and ask all members to give them a hand. The names of our convenors can be found on page 4 and on our website.

The work of the Executive Committee

The COGS Executive Committee has been busy promoting COGS and working on several issues. Firstly, we prepared a submission to the ACT Government's draft Canberra Region Local Food Strategy (see page 14). We updated our policy on selecting inputs for organic gardens, particularly focussed on the growing range of products certified for use in organic gardens, the use of wooden pallets, rodent control, and the use of plastics (this policy can be found on our website and on page 22).

I held a couple of interviews on local radio (666 ABC and 2CC) to promote COGS and to talk about the draft food strategy. Also, several of the Executive went to the City Farm Open Day in October and manned a stall to promote COGS.

A small team from the committee has been progressively refreshing some of the content on our website and we will be looking to undertake an overhaul in coming months to make the site more user friendly.

Minimising the use of plastic in our gardens

Plastic is so useful for everyday life, but it is also huge problem for our soils, rivers and oceans. According to the United Nations, globally we are now producing 400 million tonnes of plastic waste each year. As part of the inputs for organic gardens policy

mentioned above, garden committees have been asked to review their use of plastic materials and, where feasible, identify biodegradable alternatives. I encourage all members and readers to try and minimise their use of plastic in our gardens and in everyday life. I recently walked around Holder Garden and in just a few minutes picked up little bits of plastic (pictured below) lying around on the pathways. There must be a better way. I am interested in people sharing best practice and ideas. Post your photos and comments for our Instagram and/or Facebook pages to info@cogs.asn.au or send them through to editor@cogs.asn.au to store up for a future article.

Enjoy the summer and I hope you have a successful growing season. Also, I hope you all have a peaceful Christmas and New Year holiday period with family and friends.

Neil Williams
President

Canberra organic

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

Editor: Ed Highley
Designer: Matt Mawson
Proofreader: Walter Steensby

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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Garden Coordinator:	Jo McMillan
Information Officer:	Mike Gisick
Editor, *Canberra Organic*:	Ed Highley
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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.

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Canberra Organic – searching past issues

Past issues of *Canberra Organic* constitute a treasure trove of information on organic gardening and related topics. Thanks to Peter White, a COGS member at the Charnwood Community Garden, we now have an index of articles of perennial interest appearing in the magazine since the Autumn 1993 issue.

The index is included as a 4-page supplement to this issue of *Canberra Organic*. An update of this print version will be provided annually. It is also available with search functionality on the website, where all issues of the magazine are accessible.

Things are happening at www.cogs.asn.au

A small group formed earlier this year to update and enhance the COGS website is making steady progress.

Already the 'Links and References' page has been updated and, serendipitously, Peter White of the Charnwood garden, recently completed a selective index of *Canberra Organic* editions from 1993 to the present. That is now on the website, with a degree of machine searchability.

Work is under way to update the 'History of COGS' timeline, which currently ends at 2013, and to update the 'About' page for each of our gardens, providing up-to-date photographs and information.

Share your special knowledge

The 'Growing Guides' on our website are clearly one of its most important, practical features. A number of fruits and vegetables currently have no guide. The search is out for gardeners who can help here. If you have expertise and experience in growing a particular crop, please volunteer via the form https://cogs.asn.au/organic-gardening/growing-guides/local-grower-form on the website. The form is a template identifying and facilitating provision of the information required for each guide.

There's plenty of scope for contributions. For vegetables, we seek growing guides for artichoke, beans, broccoli, capsicum, cucumber, eggplant, parsnip, radish, rhubarb, silverbeet, squash and zucchini. And for fruit: apple, apricot, fig, kiwifruit, nectarine, peaches, pears, plums and pomegranate, and for various citrus crops.

The COGS Committee is considering ways of freeing up access to the information on the website, to attract a much wider audience. As a first step, it is pleased to announce that current issues of *Canberra Organic* on the website will now be accessible to all, not just COGS members. Tell your friends.

– Ed Highley

How COGS works – a governance tale

For most of you becoming a COGS member your main concern is to secure a plot and grow fresh produce on it. But some of you might wonder where you and your garden fit into the overall structure of COGS and how it all works.

The land on which nine of our gardens operate is subject to the terms of a 10-year licence with the ACT Government, which has several conditions, such as that food cannot be grown for commercial gain. Our other three gardens operate under memoranda of understanding with schools (Kaleen and Dickson) and a church (O'Connor).

In essence, COGS is like a small company. It is a legal entity, which means it can enter into contracts, can sue and be sued, has public liability insurance, owns assets, can buy goods and services, and has an Australian Business Number or ABN. The type of company we are is an Incorporated Association. COGS is subject to the rules and regulations under the *Associations Incorporation Act 1991*, including having a constitution. Consistent with the requirements of the Act we are governed by an Executive Committee or Board. Members of the Committee are, in effect, the directors of the organisation, and we are subject to requirements to act in good faith and with due care and diligence, to be impartial and not misuse information, and to avoid conflicts of interest. Garden committees are subcommittees of the Executive Committee, which has delegated to them the day-to-day running of the gardens, subject to COGS rules under the Constitution.

One of the practical consequences of all this is that when a garden wants to apply for a government grant, COGS is the entity that applies for the grant and, if successful, enters into the grant agreement and ensures its delivery. Garden committees therefore need the approval of the COGS Executive to be able to apply.

How this all hangs comes together is, of course, through the work of dedicated volunteers, none of whom are paid for the work that they do. There is a lot going on behind the scenes so that we can all get to reap the benefits of what we sow.

Now you know!

Neil Williams
President

Crace tenth birthday Open Day

Crace Community Garden scribe ***Elizabeth Dangerfield*** *reports on the big event.*

* * *

The Crace COGS Community Garden celebrated its tenth anniversary with an Open Day at the gardens in September this year. The weather was brilliant – warm, bright and calm in contrast to the subarctic conditions experienced in the days leading up to the event. It was a joy to be out in the garden on such a fine spring day. Peter Newbigin, the Crace Community Garden Convenor, and his team had organised a sausage sizzle, seeds and seedlings for purchase, guest speakers, and the biggest and best garden-themed cake you could possibly imagine. Members of COGs came from far and near. The Mitchell contingent presented the Crace Garden with a very healthy oregano plant the size of a triffid. Members from Crace enjoyed showing guests around the garden.

Neil Williams, President of COGS, Michele Barson, Vice President of COGS, and Ed Highley, Editor of *Canberra Organic*, attended the open day. In his speech Neil congratulated the Crace members for what they had achieved over the 10 years. He reiterated how gardens contributed to the health of people and the environment and how community gardens provided multiple benefits to the those involved. He made special mention of the Crace Garden's long support of Mustard Seed, a local food pantry. He also mentioned that the Crace Community Garden was the last community garden to be established in Canberra. Although there have been initiatives to establish new community gardens since then, for one reason or another, these initiatives have not borne fruit.

Given the benefits that the Crace Community Garden has provided – a beautiful, stressless place to spend time which improves physical and mental health; the production of healthy, organic food; a place for bees and other beneficial insects to flourish; support of those in need through donations to the Mustard Seed food pantry; and a sense of community that working together in a garden engenders – it would be great if community gardens were seen as integral to the design of any suburban area.

Preparing to cut the cake: (L–R) Mark Hosking (Crace garden committee), Mathenge Mwange (Crace garden original), Suzanne Orr (MLA for Yerribee), Peter Newbigin (Crace garden convenor), Alan Timmiss (Crace garden original), Leanne Castley (MLA for Yerribee), Margi Blyth (Crace garden member and cake maker), Michael Pettersson (MLA for Yerribee), Bob Lewis (Crace garden original), Andrew Leigh (MHR for Fenner), Neil Williams (COGS President). Photo: Ed Highley

A number of local Yerrabi members of the ACT Legislative Assembly attended the Open Day including Leanne Castley, Suzanne Orr, and Michael Pettersson who lives in Crace and supports community involvement in the suburb. Andrew Leigh, federal Member for Fenner, also attended and spoke of the role of community gardens in building resilience in communities, especially when those communities are under stress.

After the speeches came THE CAKE, a work of art designed and baked

(continued on facing page)

Mitchell hosts interstate visitors

Mitchell Community Garden, on behalf of COGS, hosted a visit by staff from the Penrith (NSW) City Council on Friday 13 October. Six of the visitors had been awarded a scholarship by their council employers to visit Canberra for 2 days to look at sites that could provide ideas and information for improving the sustainability of operations in their council area. The visitors were met by Mitchell co-convenors Oli Busst and Dave Peel who, with garden members Penny Kellett, Narelle McLean and Jane Rickard, led them on a tour of the garden,. The visitors were interested in how the garden and its facilities were established and how it operates; and especially in its members – their age range, how far they travel to work in the garden, how often they visit, and their multicultural spread.

Jane Rickard (left) and Penny Kellett at Mitchell's donation garden. Photo: Oliver Busst

They visited the orchard, the donation garden, where they were very impressed by the thriving bed of garlic, the glasshouse for raising seedlings and the beehives. They enjoyed lunch on the verandah of the shed out of the wind, heard a bit about COGS and its establishment and operations. A shared problem discussed was the difficulty of finding land for community facilities, including gardens.

We sent our visitors away on their bus back to Penrith with copies of *Canberra Organic*, small potted succulents grown in the glasshouse and pumpkin seeds harvested from the garden.

(from previous page)

by garden member Margi Blyth. It seemed a shame to dismember it, but all such thoughts disappeared with the first bite.

The day would not have been such a success without the help of Crace members, including organiser Peter Newbigin; Margi Blyth, cake maker extraordinaire; Angela Mackenzie and Ramesh Malik, photographers and Dave Murphy, the Bee Man; as well as Mark Hosking, Alan and Maudie Timmiss, Rashmi Malik, Bob Lewis, Hung Lee, Julie Schranz, Olga Sass, Jo and Kelly Agostino, Mathenge Mwangi and Jill De Luca.

A good time was had by all.

COGS President Neil Williams spoke on the achievements of the Crace garden. Photo: Ed Highley

Composting, soil regeneration and carbon capture

Kambah Community Garden was fortunate to be joined on 2 September by Fiona Buining of Ainslie Urban Farm, who gave a very engaging talk on composting and soil amendment as part of SEE Change's Roving Regenerator program. ***Mike Gisick*** *reports on the event.*

* * *

Most of us are well aware of the benefits compost brings to the garden, but Fiona was also keen to emphasise its broader environmental benefits. Food scraps sent to the tip break down anaerobically, if at all, releasing in the process large quantities of methane, a greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide. Globally, food waste accounts for about 10 per cent of greenhouse gases, equalling in Australia the emissions of the domestic aviation industry, Fiona said.

The three phases of Fiona's presentation

Composting theory

Hands on – how to prepare a garden bed in a way that will regenerate the soil and capture carbon

Q and A – a chance to ask questions about composting and carbon capture

In contrast, composting returns most of the carbon in food waste to the soil where it fuels the growth of plants that absorb even more carbon from the air. In the process, compost builds healthy, fertile soils that help plants resist pests and diseases – removing the need for synthetic fertilisers and pesticides that have their own dire environmental impacts.

For those reasons, Fiona advocated a maximalist approach to composting, including the oft-eschewed trio of meat, wheat and dairy. These are often reckoned to increase the likelihood of rodent infestation, but in Fiona's experience rats and mice already find fruit and vegie scraps plenty attractive. If rodents do become a problem, she recommended getting the compost off the ground into an enclosed tumbler or onto the counter in a Bokashi bucket. Bokashi can be integrated into a broader composting system as a pre-processing unit for potentially offensive materials like meat, which can be added to conventional compost once partly broken down.

Fiona promoted the use of the broad fork and the Korean Ho-Mi Hoe hand-weeding tool, both of which are kind to soil structure. Photo: Ed Highley

Finished compost is enormously beneficial as a top-dressing for new and established plants and as a component in homemade seed-starting and potting mixes. Fiona did, however, warn against using compost as an exclusive growing medium as this can be too much of a good thing, leading to excess nitrogen that encourages plants to prioritise foliage and put on sappy

Fiona (centre) had an attentive audience spanning all ages. Photo: Mike Gisick

growth that can attract aphids and other pests.

Another potential issue with compost is an unbalanced pH. Depending on its constituent components, it can run either slightly acidic or alkaline but will generally neutralise with time. If testing turns up any problems, it is usually best to leave the compost to mature a while longer. Additives such as lime (for acidic soil) and sulphur (for alkaline) are options, but the latter takes months to work. Either way, testing – both of compost and existing soil – is a crucial part of the food growing routine.

Photo: Ed Highley

Finally, Fiona noted the Australian soils are generally poor in micro-nutrients — the nutrients plants need that aren't N-P-K. Soils deficient in, say, calcium will produce calcium-poor plants, and where people are dependent on the garden for food, calcium-deficient humans as well. These trace minerals may be present in good compost but can also be added to the soil using volcanic rock-dust or some organic fertilisers.

All-in-all an enlightening and entertaining presentation that I would recommend to all COGS gardens.

About carbon

Carbon is the chemical backbone of all life on Earth. All of the carbon we currently have on Earth is the same amount we have always had. When new life is formed, carbon forms key molecules like protein and DNA. It's also found in our atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide or CO_2. The carbon cycle is nature's way of re-using carbon atoms, which travel from the atmosphere into organisms in the Earth and then back into the atmosphere over and over again. Most carbon is stored in rocks and sediments, while the rest is stored in the ocean, atmosphere, and living organisms. These are the reservoirs, or sinks, through which carbon cycles. The ocean is a giant carbon sink that absorbs carbon. Marine organisms from marsh plants to fish, from seaweed to birds, also produce carbon through living and dying. Over millions of years, dead organisms can become fossil fuels. When humans burn these fuels for energy, vast amounts of carbon dioxide are released back into the atmosphere. This excess carbon dioxide changes our climate — increasing global temperatures, causing ocean acidification, and disrupting the planet's ecosystems.

— US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Erindale news and new faces

*Convenor **Didi Sommer** reports on some recent activities of Erindale Community Garden members.*

* * *

Two of our newer members, Lilian and Susana, are making their mark in the garden.

Lilian is an expert in vegetarian cooking and formerly had a catering business specialising in vegetarian cuisine. We are so very fortunate that Lilian decided to join our community garden and is sharing her many talents with us. Her recipe for zucchini and pea muffins is shared with this issue's *Canberra Organic* readers on page 26. The several Erindale members who attended the Kambah garden's recent Open Day (see page 11) sampled them at the ACT for BEES stand and pronounced them delicious.

Susana joined our vibrant community at Erindale from afar only a few months ago. She tells her own story in an adjacent article. Susana has already participated in a range of activities, including collecting bags of autumn leaves for our compost heaps, joining our working bees and growing seeds at home for planting in our community plots.

Susana does not have her own plot, but at Erindale garden we have several dedicated community plots allowing non plot holders to participate in growing and harvesting and all the fun and celebrations at our garden.

Susana and I and several other Erindale garden members are members of Canberra Seedsavers (https://canberraseedsavers.org.au). We are enthusiastic about saving seeds at Erindale and exchanging them with Canberra Seedsavers. We also participate with their Dwarf Tomato Project to maintain these seeds for future generations

So we can get into even more serious organic seedlings production we have lodged an application for a community grant to acquire a greenhouse. We are hoping for success.

Susana planting climbing Japanese heritage cucumbers

Susana's story

Hello, I'm Susana from Chile, a far away country of South America. In my country I had an organic garden in my backyard, I did workshops on "How to have a garden in the middle of the city" for children and adults and I created Instagram content (@huerto_citadino).

I moved to Canberra for my husband's job and, by chance, I met Didi and Peter (COGS members of Erindale) collecting leaves for compost outside my house. We had a chat and they invited me to be part of the Erindale Community Garden. This sounded like an excellent idea to me and so I became a full COGS member and joined Erindale garden.

Being part of a community garden has been such a nice experience. I must admit that at first I wanted to have my own garden, and healthy food for just me and my family. I don't know if it was because my last garden was developed during the pandemic, where it was more of a solitary work, a kind of therapy and wonderful escape from everything I was going through, or just a selfish thought.

But reconnecting with the soil in such a way in a place so far from home, in another language, with strangers, has been wonderful, very enriching and healing for my gardening soul that was sad from what I left behind.

Gardening is community, it is sharing work, care and knowledge. It is to support each other and share frustrations and successes.

I don't know, if I will have a harvest. I don't know how much of what I plant will be mine and how much won't, but I enjoy the garden day by day. I enjoy the present and I keep in my heart the experience and the wonderful learning I receive every time I go to Erindale. In the end, that will be the biggest thing I will take with me when I return home – the wonderful experience.

Big day out at Kambah

In what has become virtually an annual event, Kambah Community Garden held its 2023 Open Day and Seedling Sale on Saturday 4 November. Co-convenors Ryl Parker and Allan Sharp deem it a great success; a tribute to the work of an organising committee that started work many months before the event and the many members who grew seedlings for and provided help on the day. A true team effort!

Some 300 visitors were attracted to the garden and were clearly engaged by what they could see and do there. There were plants aplenty for sale, ornamental as well as edible, and they sold well, delivering happy customers while adding to the garden's funds for future improvements. A proportion of the proceeds was donated to the Marymead charity.

The garden was in fine shape, and most visitors enjoyed a stroll around it either unaccompanied or, for those seeking deeper insights, with one of the member guides on hand. Further enlightenment was available in specialist presentations on growing from seed, indigenous plant use, the benefits of bees, and seed saving.

There was plenty for the many visitors to see and do

Heavy trade at the plant sale table

(below left) Aaron Chatfield, owner of Dreamtime Connections, revealed the uses, culinary and other, of many local native plants. (below right) A popular hands-on workshop on how to grow the best seedling was run by Fiona Buining of the Ainslie Urban Farm. Photos by Ed Highley

A dispatch from Dickson

Michele England *provides an update on activities, facilities, personnel and plans at COGS Dickson garden.*

* * *

G'day from COGS Community Garden Dickson, which is located in the grounds of Dickson College. I am the incoming convener and thought you might like to know a little bit about our garden and some of our plans for the coming year. Garden committee members are John Robertson (also a past convenor), Noel Thomas and Sally Conte.

The garden space was formerly used by students for agriculture studies, which included livestock (sheep) as well as crop plants. When the agriculture program was discontinued, an enterprising teacher realised the value of this space and suggested it would make a good community garden.

On site there is a very large glasshouse, a two-room brick shed, undercover walkways and another brick building. The area is fully fenced and contains about 20 plots ranging from 2 to 36 square metres.

The garden started with about 10 plots, but it has been expanded to 25, with the division of some plots to allow more people to garden. We also have fruit trees and have introduced shared community beds which grow mixed cane berries, bush berries and perennials such as rhubarb. I joined the garden 10 years ago and was previously convener for 3 years. After a break, I am convener again and full of energy, much like the growth in the garden.

The November just past was a busy month for us. We hosted a SeeChange Roving Regenerators workshop facilitated by Fiona Buining of Ainslie Urban Farm. While we already had an active composting system, including weed tea to remove cooch, and open and closed compost systems to turn our scraps into humus, Fiona provided much extra information to workshop participants about composting and its benefits – there is always more to learn. We held an open day on 25 November to coincide with National Community Gardens Day. We had seedlings for sale, provided hot food and baked goods and invited like-minded community groups to provide a talk or table.

Garden priorities for the year include designing, making and installing some wicking beds, organising Dickson College students to revamp our mural, improving the glasshouse infrastructure and organising some outdoor furniture.

Not only are the plants growing but we are too. Yours in gardening, Michele England.

A view of COGS Dickson garden. Photo: Michele England

Inside COGS Dickson garden's grand glasshouse. Photo: Michele England

Talking to happy gardeners

Hello everyone. I was wondering why people enjoy gardening so much, so I asked a few people at the Kambah Community Garden. Here is what they said.

* * *

"I love gardening at Kambah COGS because it energises me", **Anna** told me, "and it also feeds me! It is my health insurance. It is like arriving at the beach on holidays. When I arrive, I feel a blast of fresh air and hear the sounds of nature. I come home refreshed."

Allan was very happy, telling me: "This spring has been a cornucopia of broad beans, lettuces, rhubarb, broccoli, beetroot, spring onions, Tuscan kale and spinach. The potatoes have survived the frost and are thriving and it's time to plant the summer crops – zucchini, tomatoes, peppers, climbing beans, etc. I used to think my plot was too large to manage. Now I find there's not enough space!."

"There's no greater pleasure than to unwind for an hour or two in the garden. A wonderful antidote to a troubled world! There's such satisfaction in planting seeds, watching them sprout and grow, transplanting them into the plot, and finally harvesting and eating the crop. I look forward to the change of seasons – removing the old crops and preparing for the new."

"Georgia, my heart is absolutely entrenched in gardening", **Shirley** said. "My fingernails are always grubby but who cares!! To me, it is just the most natural, down-to-earth interest anyone could wish to enjoy. I love the challenges and getting my hands dirty."

"I am grateful for the ongoing learning experiences and the successes and satisfaction of growing wonderful healthy food and many other kinds of plants. I have a very large garden at home and two large greenhouses, so my love of gardening extends even beyond the Kambah Community Garden.

Happy gardeners have happy gardens. Photo: Matt Mawson

"The Kambah garden offers the joy of fellowship with beautiful like-minded garden lovers, special friendships, and the experience and knowledge fellow members share, not to mention the occasional four-legged or winged visitors that also love to enjoy our garden."

When I spoke to **Ken**, he told me that there are several reasons he loves gardening. "It relaxes me and allows me to focus on doing one thing at a time. This means not getting caught up in so-called multi-tasking, where people try to do lots of things at the same time.

"Gardening is creative and it allows me to be part of the creative process. I don't actually 'grow' the plants in my plot but I am able to assist Nature in her task. And it gives me exercise (which we all need) while I'm producing healthy food such as tomatoes, rhubarb and broad beans."

"A well-cared for garden is a thing of beauty and it gives me great pleasure to see the fruits (as well as the vegetables and flowers) of my labour," **Ryl** began. "I love gardening because, when I garden, I can stop worrying about how others perceive me, and simply exist in the world. When I see a long-awaited seedling popping up, or a bush just beginning to fruit, I forget about the future and the past, I forget about responsibilities and ambitions, and I simply focus on my senses: the colour of the fruit, the smell of the air, the warmth of the sun, and on and on.

"When I am gardening, everything is easy. Plants grow or they don't, and I watch them eagerly to discover their secrets. I stop labelling things as 'good' or 'bad' and I simply observe."

When **Barbara** talked with me, she started with a quote: "A garden is a friend you can visit any time". She enjoys gardening because, she said: "In the first place it is calming and you barely have to do any thinking (apart from where you put in the plant). Secondly, you get out in the fresh air. Finally, gardening can improve your mood, make you feel peaceful and reduce negative thoughts."

* * *

Columnist's note: *Thank you to everyone who contributed to this article and I hope you enjoyed it. Georgia*

COGS puts its views on new local food strategy

In September, the ACT Government released for comment and community consultation by the beginning of November, the draft of a new Canberra Region Local Food Strategy 2023–2028. The strategy document can be found on the ACT Government website. In response, COGS made the following detailed submission during October.

* * *

The Canberra Organic Growers' Society (COGS) welcomes the release by the ACT Government (the Government) of the draft Canberra Region Local Food Strategy (the Strategy). We note the Strategy is a 'foundational document' and represents the first steps in considering a more holistic and integrated approach to local food production and consumption.

As an overall comment, COGS considers there is a need to turn some of the 'Focus Areas' in the Strategy into actions in the final Strategy and implementation plan, including specific goals, targets and success metrics which could be monitored by the proposed Community Reference Group. The upcoming 2024–25 Budget provides an opportunity to take the first steps to flesh out the Strategy.

The Strategy highlights that the demand for community gardens currently exceeds supply. COGS notes one of the aims of the Strategy is to see more Canberrans grow their own food. This, together with smaller suburban house blocks, increased densification of living and population growth, will inevitably lead to even greater demand for community garden spaces. A key outcome of the Strategy should therefore be an increase in the number of community gardens across Canberra. COGS' comments, therefore, primarily relate to how the Government through the Strategy might best facilitate this increase.

Facilitating an increase in the number of community gardens

COGS has been managing community gardens across Canberra since 1977. We currently manage 12 community gardens on about 3.5 hectares of land. Nine gardens operate through a licence with Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS) and three through MOUs (one with the O'Connor Uniting Church and two with local schools – Dickson College and Kaleen High School). COGS has over 550 members and our current waitlist is over 50 people – some of whom may wait up to a year or more to obtain a plot.

Recently COGS celebrated the tenth anniversary of Crace Community Garden. This was the last COGS garden to be established. To the best of our knowledge, apart from the Canberra City Farm (2015), COGS is not aware of other food producing community gardens of scale (i.e. 1,500 sqm or more and 20+ members) being established in the past 8 years. COGS considers there are two main reasons for this, namely: 1. Lack of access to land; and 2. High cost to establish a community garden.

1. Lack of access to land

One of the biggest challenges COGS has faced in meeting demand for community gardens is finding suitable land to establish new gardens. While the Strategy states there is plenty of land available, the reality is that the processes to identify suitable land and then invest time and money are daunting for groups of individuals and volunteer-based organisations such as COGS. Our recent experience with trying to establish a community garden in Gowrie is a case in point. COGS was working with SEE Change, another local organisation, to draft an application for the Government's 2023 community garden grants program. We had been working closely with TCCS to obtain approval for a licence for a block we had identified in Gowrie. We invested significant time and effort in drawing up plans for a garden, testing soil for contaminants, finding a local convenor, door knocking to gauge community support and seeking quotes to cost the grant application. However, very late in the grant application process we were informed that the block of land we had identified was up for sale by another agency in the ACT Government.

COGS continues to advocate for the Government to use its powers to oblige developers, through the planning and development system, to establish community gardens, particularly in the outer suburbs which are under-serviced. This model is an all-round winner. It comes at no (or limited) cost to the Government and through it, taxpayers, and it provides the local community with an enduring asset. Increased attractiveness to potential buyers may also yield benefits to developers. COGS has

Canberra Region Local Food Strategy

Aims

In broad terms the four key aims of the Strategy are to:

1. Increase local food production and consumption, by getting more Canberrans to grow and consume local food – including through one of the government's initiatives called *Grow it Local* which is aimed at getting more people to grow their own food, whether that be in a pot on the balcony, in their backyard or at a community garden;
2. Increase equitable access to local healthy food – including at local restaurants and local markets;
3. Enhance social and economic outcomes – including improving mental and physical health and creating more opportunities for commercial urban and local farming; and
4. Support more sustainable urban and rural farming practices to adapt to our changing climate.

been in discussions with developers in Ginninderry and Denman Prospect about similar models for community gardens. However, without government involvement or commitment it has remained a slow process with no guarantee of success.

To overcome these challenges, COGS recommends creation of a small working group made up of relevant government agencies such as TCCS, Suburban Land Agency, ICON, ACT Property Group, and EPSDD to work with relevant community organisations, including COGS. The working group would aim to:

- identify possible sites in new and existing suburbs, including areas adjacent to public schools and institutions
- develop the best model to oblige developers in new suburbs to build community gardens
- ensure a more integrated approach within government agencies, for instance to know which parcels of land will not be suitable e.g. future development sites
- facilitate government investment in relevant infrastructure (e.g. road access, water access)
- identify options to streamline the process to apply for land access
- look at providing accessible information to the public on potential sites and the process to establish a community garden, including providing a single point of contact that can provide information and guidance, including on-site in the community.

Tenure is also key. COGS is grateful for the 10 year licence (to 2030) it has with TCCS for nine of our twelve gardens. This has provided COGS with greater certainty to enable it to invest in improvements to our gardens, including a significant investment in new fencing at Oaks Estate garden, new shelters at Betty Cornhill and Erindale gardens, and a new shed at O'Connor garden. These investments were made possible due, in part, to decreased water bills during the La Niña weather period. However, the thought that the licence could lapse and the land be developed for housing or other uses would run counter to the aims of the Strategy.

2. High cost to establish a community garden

Perhaps the major barrier to establishment of new community gardens is cost. The biggest costs are fencing and connection to water supply and installation of irrigation. Also, depending on the land site, any earthworks, road/carpark infrastructure and vegetation clearing can be very costly. These costs are beyond most if not all local organisations, including COGS.

COGS welcomes the recent increase in funding for the community gardens grant program, but the funding levels are still well short of what is required if the Government wants the Strategy to deliver on increasing the number of new community gardens – particularly gardens of scale (i.e. 1,500 sqm with 20+ members). The current maximum $20,000 grant might just cover the cost of fencing materials and possibly an installer if the recipient uses a commercial contractor. The alternative of relying on volunteers to build large community gardens is extremely challenging from a skills, OH&S and organisational point of view.

To kick start a new wave of community gardens, COGS recommends the Government invest $500,000 over 5 years to build up to five new community gardens e.g. two in Gungahlin, one in South Tuggeranong, one in Ginninderry, and one in North Canberra. In part, this could be funded through consolidation of several existing small grant programs to make an investment with greater economic, environmental, and social benefit.

Other comments

COGS supports greater research into the local food system. The Government could partner with local research institutions to undertake further research and mapping, including mapping of current local food production, distribution, and consumption patterns to identify opportunities to strengthen the local food system.

COGS is supportive of the *Grow it Local* initiative designed to encourage more people to grow their own food, but would support more investment to leverage that platform to expand local businesses and organisations that can help support an increase in local food production and consumption. A suggestion is for the Government to employ a local coordinator (e.g. through a grant to one of the ACT region based food associations) to work with *Grow it Local* and ACT based organisations on coordinating workshops, events, markets and supplies.

At the suburban level there is a need for practical advice on soil management for home and community gardeners, particularly in relation to improving soil structure, retaining moisture, and building soil carbon.

- The ACT Government could partner with local research institutions to provide free soil tests (like the VegeSafe initiative with Macquarie University). This will help build up over time a database of the ACT's soil conditions.
- As part of the proposed working group process above, the Government could fund soil tests, which can be expensive for local community groups (ranging from several hundred dollars to several thousand, depending on the contaminants being tested for and organisations undertaking the testing).
- COGS supports the extension of the SEE Change Roving Regenerators program to run workshops to teach gardeners about improving soil health and reducing carbon emissions through composting, worm farms, low-till gardening methods etc. These workshops can be run in community gardens, and at schools, churches, and other institutions.

COGS also supports establishment through the Strategy and complementary strategies of a 'food hub' or broader 'sustainability hub' which brings together local food and environmental groups to provide a focal point for local growers, training and workshops, and broader action on addressing climate change.

Finally, COGS would welcome the opportunity to be on the proposed Community Reference Group to help flesh out and guide implementation of the Strategy.

The history and value of sunflowers

There's sunflower oil in most kitchen cupboards, but is it good for you? Should you eat the seeds? Where did sunflowers come from? Does the plant have uses other than as food? ***Elizabeth Dangerfield*** *answers these and other questions in her comprehensive coverage of the giant yellow daisy.*

* * *

Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum! – who could believe that a bean plant could grow so tall that Jack could climb up it to reach the world of giants. Coming back down to Earth, who could believe that a giant of the daisy family could grow three stories high? No, this is not the stuff of fairy stories; the tallest annual sunflower *Helianthus annuus* on record, reached 9.17 m, or around 30 feet in the old measurements. Although my sunflowers have grown well over my head they have never reached such heights. They don't seem to appreciate a flock of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos bouncing up and down on the gigantic flowers to get at the seeds.

The annual sunflower appears to have been first cultivated in southeastern North America around 5,000 years ago from wild plants growing on the Great Plains of America. There is evidence of it being domesticated in what have become Tennessee, Kentucky and Mexico. Now it is native to Arizona, California and Nevada, and the western side of Mexico. In fact, its habitat in the wild is considered to be west of the Mississippi and in Canada, although it is considered a noxious weed in some states.

Indigenous American peoples, such as the Aztecs and Otomi in Mexico and the Incas in South America, not surprisingly, used the sunflower as a symbol of their solar diety. The generic name for the plant, *Helianthus*, comes from the Greek for sun – *helios* and for flower – *anthos*. The specific name *annuus* means annual in Latin. Indigenous people also used the plant for many other purposes, such as food, fibre, medicine and for dyeing. By the way, sunflowers only track the movement of the sun when they are young buds; when they grow up, their big heads are a bit hard to move so they permanently face east. That way they warm up early in the morning and that keeps the bees happy.

In 1510, Spanish explorers, never ones to overlook something valuable (except when they smashed up all those emeralds in South America) sent seeds back to Europe. John Gerard, the famous herbalist in 16th century London was quite miffed when his sunflowers grew to only 4.3 m while those of his colleagues in Europe grew to 7.3 m. This could well have been because the sunflowers preferred the drier, more open areas of Europe to the sogginess of England.

It wasn't long before Europeans saw the potential for large-scale extraction of the oil from sunflowers by selecting for the best oil-producing plants and growing them in vast fields of yellow. In the Russian Empire, sunflower oil was very popular, partly because only plant-based fats could be eaten during Lent. In 2020, Russia was the top sunflower seed producer (13.3 million tonnes) followed very closely by Ukraine (13.1 million tonnes), which is one reason why the sunflower is a symbol of Ukraine. It also represents peace, resilience and hope. Ukrainians planted sunflowers around Chernobyl after the nuclear power plant disaster in 1986. Not only were sunflowers a symbol of renewal they actually did help to get rid of contamination around the site.

The annual sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is a hyperaccumulator of dangerous heavy metals. All plants can take up water and minerals and other compounds from the soil. Hyperaccumulating plants can extract metal compounds from deep in the soil and transport them all over the plant. When used to clean up environmental contamination, this process is called phytoremediation. Certain sunflower varieties can remove radioactive metals like the cesium-137 and strontium-90 which contaminated the soil at Chernobyl.

In its native state the plant is no beanstalk, being short and widely branched with many smaller flower heads. Domestication has resulted in tall, stout, single stems strong enough to bear a one gigantic flower. Of course, it is not a single flower at all because it belongs to the daisy family (Asteraceae). It is actually a flower head made up of lots of individual small flowers arranged in spirals based on Fibonacci sequences. This allows the maximum number of seeds to be packed in to the 'flower' disk. The outer flowers, which look like petals, are called ray flowers.

One giant sunflower head can have around 2,000 large seeds. A 30 g intake of edible sunflower seeds provides generous dietary amounts of fat, protein and carbohydrates as well as fibre. It also contains a large amount of Vitamin E, as well as Niacin, Vitamin B6, Folate, Pantothenic Acid, iron, zinc, copper, manganese, magnesium and selenium. But moderation is needed, more than a quarter of a cup a day may cause side-effects for some people. And always eat shelled sunflower seeds or spit out the shells as they can accumulate in the large intestine leading to rectal seed bezoars – best not to eat a lot of any unshelled seeds.

Some sunflower varieties have been bred to increase oil content from 30% to 50%. The seeds are small and black and, when crushed, produce a pale gold, tasteless oil rich in unsaturated fatty acids. This is used in the manufacture of margarines, biodiesel fuels and for cooking. Leftovers from the crushing are high in protein and used for animal feed.

Sunflower oil used for cooking can contain a range of fatty acids. It can contain between 14 and 43% oleic acid, a monosaturated omega-9 fatty acid. It can contain 44–75% linoleic acid, a polyunsaturated omega 6 fatty acid. It can also contain stearic acid which is a saturated fatty acid.

Fatty acids

Omega 3 – A number of different types. Found in oily fish, nuts such as walnuts, seeds such as flax and chai.

Characteristics: Polyunsatuated fats; essential to obtain from diet as the body cannot make them.

Possible benefits: Improving heart health; supporting mental health; helping weight reduction; helping reduce liver fat; supporting infant brain development; reducing inflammation.

Omega 6 – A number of different types. Found in plant oils such as soybean oil, sunflower oil, corn oil, processed foods such as mayonnaise, fried foods, nuts such as walnuts, cashews, almonds

Characteristics: Polyunsaturated fats; essential to obtain from diet as the body cannot make them.

Possible benefits: Providing energy for bodily functions; improving heart health; reducing total and LDL cholesterol; could improve insulin sensitivity and blood pressure.

Omega 9 – Found in nut and vegetable oils and nuts and seeds such as olive oil, cashew oil, avocado oil, almond oil, cashews, almonds, walnuts.

Characteristics: Monosaturated fats; can be made by the body.

Possible benefits: May increase 'good' HDL cholesterol levels and decreases 'bad' LDL cholesterol levels; may reduce insulin resistance in people with diabetes; provides energy source, could enhance mood and memory performance; may boost the immune system.

There is quite a lot of debate about whether sunflower oil is good or bad for your health, largely because of the linoleic acid it contains, as there could be a link between high consumption of omega 6 fatty acids and inflammatory diseases. The answer is not simple because what seems to be important for health is getting a good balance between the consumption of omega 3, 6 and 9 fatty acids. One thing is certain, in developed countries, people consume a lot more omega 6 fatty acids than omega 3 fatty acids – 10–16 times as much. So it may be wise to eat more oily fish to restore the balance to between 1:1 and 1:4 and to eat less processed and deep-fried foods. There is a need for more research to confirm the health effects of these fatty acids, but you can't go far wrong with moderation and a varied diet.

PS. Sunflowers look great in a vase and improve mental health with their cheerfulness.

My parsnip pilgrimage

Forget the seed packet, Kambah Community Garden's ***Ryl Parker*** *recounts the trials, tribulations and success of her pioneering approach to growing the humble parsnip.*

* * *

Hello friends. What follows is the story of how I successfully grew parsnips. I read that parsnip seed decays so quickly that it's best to produce your own seed and plant it immediately. So one spring morning last year I bought a parsnip at the supermarket and planted it in my COGS plot. I watered it regularly. It sprouted vibrant green leaves and a stalk that grew alarmingly tall, dwarfing the other plants. I had to stake and tie it so that it wouldn't collapse. That same spring, the stalk produced a spray of flowers then, in summer, those flowers became seeds. By autumn, the seeds were dry.

I was never sure when to harvest the seed. If I harvested too early, the seed might not mature. If I harvested too late, there was a worse risk of seed getting insect, fungal or water damage. So, as insurance, I harvested the seed in stages throughout summer and autumn. The easiest method of doing so was to grab a seed head and shake it over a paper bag. I then left the seed in the paper bag in the garage for 6 months.

Meanwhile, plenty of seed was left on the stalks. I never got around to collecting this. It fell onto the plot, germinated, and grew throughout autumn and winter. In fact, the parsnips were large enough to tempt me to harvest them in autumn! The internet saved me by informing me that parsnips, to grow sweet, need to stay in the ground over winter.

Another thing worth mentioning is I completely neglected my plot over winter, so the plants got almost no watering. Is this why they turned out so well, I wonder? But I'm skipping ahead. This spring, I harvested the parsnips. I'd never bothered to thin them out, so some were extremely small, while others were ginormous. I cooked some of the parsnips in a simple fry-up (see recipe) and gave two large ones to Ken, whose lovely wife Jane made a delicious, spicy parsnip soup using a recipe from *BBC Good Food* online.

The large parsnips were a nightmare to dig out. The small ones were easier to deal with, but harvesting both large and small went against my philosophy of not tilling the soil, so much so that I'll only grow parsnips in raised beds or pots next time. The little ones were tasty raw; I stashed them in the fridge to retain their crispness and ate most of them raw like a carrot.

After I had dug out all the parsnips in my plot, I sowed vast quantities of the seed that I had collected in various places, and watered daily until the seed germinated. I plan to allow these parsnips to grow until next spring. We'll see how that goes: perhaps they'll all bolt to seed in the summer weather. I still have plenty of seed left for anyone who'd like to have some. Much of it is still on its stalk head. If you're looking to long-term storage of the seed, I suggest sieving it after collection, drying it fully, then storing it in glass jars containing dried beans to soak up any excess moisture. Store the jars in a cool, dark place. I hear the freezer is an even better place to store them, but I've never tried it myself.

The accompanying photographs show the smallest and largest parsnips I grew, and a pan of my caramelised parsnip chips.

Did you know?

Parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*) is in the same large family (Apiaceae) as carrots, celery, celeriac, coriander, parsley, fennel, caraway, dill, anise, cumin, ajwain, asafoetida, nigella, lovage, chervil, angelica, and Queen Anne's lace. Still more species in this family are used for medicinal purposes, while some can be toxic if ingested. Hemlock, for example, is poisonous enough to kill you.*

I hadn't heard of Angelica and Queen Anne's Lace. Angelica (*Angelica archangelica*), common name Wild Celery, has stalks that are often candied and used as a decorative element in baking, while the roots and seeds can be used for flavouring in certain liqueurs. Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus carota*) is the wild progenitor of the cultivated carrot. Its young roots are edible.

* Most infamously, hemlock was the agent of the suicidal death in 399 BCE of Socrates, his sentence for sticking up for his beliefs and thereby getting on the wrong side of the Athenian government. Ed.

Caramelised parsnip

Ingredients

As much parsnip as you want/can fit in a pan

A large pinch of baking soda (optional)*

Olive oil

Salt and pepper, to taste

Method

Scrub the dirt off your parsnip/s and chop them into thick matchsticks. Heat the oil in the pan to medium hot. Add the the baking soda (if using) and seasonings. Stir fry until the parsnip is the desired texture. (The longer you cook it, the softer, sweeter and more flavoursome it will become.) Serve with rice and curry or by itself.

* Adding baking soda changes the pH, uncoiling the proteins in the parsnips. They then cook faster and the subtle parsnip flavour is intensified by the loss of moisture. If you find the taste off-putting, add a teabag at the end of cooking to neutralise the pH again. To halve the cooking time, try adding a pinch of baking soda the next time you cook chickpeas, lentils or onions.

Care of the garlic crop

Experienced COGS gardeners will by now have lifted the garlic they grew over winter and spring. This would have been done when the outer leaves of the plants were turning brown and any flower stalks had begun to soften. A bit of 'bandicooting' around the base of the plants would also have given an indication of the state of growth and maturity of the bulbs. It was important to not let the plants die off too much, or the bulbs would begin to separate into individual cloves which are not suited to longer term storage.

Turning to storage: speaking personally my dream each year is to grow enough garlic to supply the kitchen for a year while retaining enough seed for the next season's planting. Haven't quite lived the dream yet, but I'm not sleeping on it. Last year, a La Niña year, was a disaster: garlic just hates having perpetually wet feet and I managed to harvest only a small crop of, for the most part small, below-par bulbs not suited to storage.

The first thing to do is to dry the whole plants in a semi-shaded place.

The key factors in successful long-term storage of garlic are dryness, temperature and good ventilation. After harvest, do not wash the bulbs: any soil sticking to them will dry and fall off in due course. The first thing to do is to dry the whole plants in a semi-shaded place. This initial drying removes what we might call 'skin moisture'. The process would be quicker in full sun, and you could do that, but then closer supervision would be needed to avoid the bulbs getting sunburnt if the weather is especially hot.

… make sure you select a curing area that is covered and well ventilated and is not prone to large temperature fluctuations.

'Curing' is the process that further reduces the moisture content of the bulbs to a level suitable for long-term storage. The whole plants can be hung in loose bunches under cover in a cool, airy space for a couple of weeks to a month, by which time the outer skin of firm, tightly packed bulbs should be papery and dry. Alternatively, the plants could be cured laying on a suitable tray, such as the larger of the plastic trays used by plant nurseries. Whatever, make sure you select a curing area that is covered and well ventilated and is not prone to large temperature fluctuations.

A bunch of newly harvested garlic hanging for initial drying. Photo: Ed Highley

I cure my garlic hanging in a woodshed attached to the house, where the conditions are, fortunately, just right to leave them there for the duration of storage, foraging for a bulb as needed. Otherwise, after cutting off the leaves and stems to a couple of centimetres of the bulb and the roots to about a centimetre, your garlic can be stored in a cool place in open, shallow trays, mesh bags or even nylon stockings – any means that permits free airflow around the bulbs.

Don't forget to put aside a few of your best bulbs for planting next season.

I recall that back in the 1970s garlic was just beginning to emerge as a culinary staple here in Australia. A major concern among my associates was 'garlic breath'! Now we have to think how we lived and cooked without it. Go to www.garlicaustralia.asn.au to find out more what has become a staple here. There's an enticing recipe there for garlic soup, made using fresh, uncured cloves. I'll be giving that a go.

Ed Highley

Shaping the ties that bind

Every gardener needs plant ties, especially now with summer coming on and the promise of prolific growth on your plot. I want to show you here how to make the best ones that I've ever used. They're economical, adaptable, re-usable, tough, durable, flexible and plant friendly.

All you need to make these champions of horticultural support is a bicycle inner tube, a pair of sharp scissors (Photo 1) and a little bit of the Anglo-Spanish manual dexterity. An inner tube should cost you less than $10 at any of those megastores where you can buy just about anything except food. Go for the largest tube available.

Method

Cut out and discard the tube's inflation valve (Photo 2).

You will see that the tube has ridges running its full length (Photos 1 and 3). Use these as guides to cut the tube into strips (Photo 4). In the tube that I used for this demonstration this yielded 5 strips each about 180 cm (nearly 2 metres!) long.

Three of the strips were 2 cm or a little more wide which, from experience, I figured was too wide, so I cut them lengthways in half. This operation needs a little more care and attention because there or no guiding ridges on the rubber, but it's not too difficult.

In all then, I produced 8 lengths of 1 cm width plant tie material (Photo 5). You can cut the strips to any length you need and use them again and again. There will likely be enough to last you for many years. How good is that?

On the downside, inner tubes are made of butyl rubber, a synthetic product that is recyclable but not biodegradable. Keep recycling your bike tube plant ties and they'll have zero environmental impact.

Ed Highley

Photos 1–4: Allan Sharp

Photo 5: Kerry Highley

Photo 1

Photo 2

Photo 3

Photo 4

Photo 5

Recommendations for selecting inputs for use in COGS organic gardens

Organic growing is a cultivation system that uses biological fertilisers derived from animal and plant wastes and nitrogen-fixing cover crops, and ecologically based pest control instead of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Organic materials such as animal manures, compost, straw, and other crop residues are applied to the soil to improve soil structure and moisture-holding capacity and to nourish soil life, which in turn nourishes plants. Chemical fertilisers feed plants directly. Biological pest control is achieved through preventative methods, including diversified planting, crop rotation, planting of pest-deterrent species, and the use of integrated pest management techniques. Under the society's General Rules (COGS Constitution Appendix 2) organic gardening principles must always be complied with in community gardens. Non-organic pesticides, herbicides or inorganic fertilisers are not to be used. These rules also note that the organic principles for COGS gardens draw on Australia's National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce (September 2016).

Recently updated, the National Standard for Organic and Bio-Dynamic Produce (November 2022) is the framework for commercial production, processing, transportation, labelling and importation of organic produce. Its Appendixes B and C list materials permitted for soil fertilising and conditioning, and plant pest and disease control. While there is no requirement for COGS gardeners to comply with the standard as produce from COGS gardens is not sold, the tables provide a useful guide to the suitability of various materials for organic gardening.

In the ACT, there is a wide range of available garden inputs, including mulches, composts, fertilisers and pest control products certified by several organisations, including The Australian Certified Organic Standard and NASAA Certified Organic (National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia), as meeting the National Standard . Their bud and spring leaf labels (see below), identify products suitable for use in organic gardens.

Under the National Standard (Appendix B), 'Permitted materials for soil fertilising and conditioning' animal manures are also allowed, but have specific conditions for use. If manure is applied by sheet composting (a thin layer added on top of the soil), two green manure crops must be grown before the area is planted to crops for human consumption. Alternatively, the organic matter must be fully composted before use.

In COGS gardens, the most used manures are horse (often obtained as stable litter, i.e. mixed with straw), sheep, cow and poultry manure, with alpaca manure occasionally available. To reduce the risk of contamination by agricultural and/or veterinary chemicals, these should, where possible, be obtained from sources known to be managed organically or certified as organic.

COGS gardeners are encouraged to compost fresh manure well before use to reduce the risk of introducing more weeds. If composting is not an option, it is strongly recommended that sheep and alpaca manures be applied as liquids by soaking the pellets in water to make a manure tea and diluting this before application. This will avoid contamination of the soil by weeds such as oxalis (pink or bent wood sorrel) that are almost impossible to eradicate. The use of sheep manure heavily contaminated with oxalis bulbs is known to have made a COGS plot unusable for the foreseeable future. Mushroom compost (a mix of straw and chicken manure), sometimes used by COGS gardeners, is generally weed free, but often very alkaline, as is fresh poultry manure.

Appendix C of the National Standard lists 'Permitted materials for plant pest and disease control'. A range of certified pest control products is currently available locally, including snail bait, fungicides and insecticidal soap sprays. At the time of writing no rodenticides had been certified for rat or mouse control. Appendix F of the National Standard, 'Substances permitted as postharvest/storage treatment', notes that rodenticides can be used only in semi-enclosed containers located outside [food] processing areas. Recently marketed 'natural' rodenticide pellets are recommended by the manufacturer for use only in enclosed bait stations and are not suitable for use outdoors. The product and its container must be kept away from drains, sewers and waterways (see instructions on the packaging). At present, the most effective rat control for organic gardens is likely to be minimisation of potential food sources, including compost and other soil additives, and reducing potential habitat, combined with regular trapping.

Recycling plant pots and other plastics

Given ongoing concerns about the pollution of soils, waterways and oceans by plastics, COGS gardens have been asked to review their use of plastic materials and, where feasible, to identify biodegradable alternatives (see adjacent article). Re-using and recycling plastics will also help to reduce plastic pollution.

Bunnings Belconnen store is now collecting used plastic pots, labels and stakes made from polypropylene plastic 5 (PP5). Look for the symbol shown below. The collection cage is at the nursery entrance. Users are asked to tap out loose soil and hose pots out so that soil does not damage the machinery which shreds the pots into plastic pellets for reuse.

Clean and dry PP5 plastic containers are now accepted in ACT's household recycling bins. Nurseries and market stalls which propagate plants are often pleased to have their pots and plant labels returned for reuse.

Plastic recycling point at Bunnings, Belconnen. Photo: Michele Barson

Got a tip for reducing, re-using or recycling plastics used in the garden? Send it to the Editor for publication in *Canberra Organic*.

(from previous page)

The National Standard, as a general principle, notes that the use of any product has the potential to introduce unwanted residues and contaminants, including heavy metals. This could include wood products such as sleepers, garden edging and pallets. Untreated hardwood and heat-treated pallets (stamped HT) are least likely to result in contamination. Pallets treated with methyl bromide (a pesticide, stamped MB) are not suitable for garden use, or as furniture, neither should they be burned (plainpallets.com.au). Pine sleepers treated with copper chrome arsenate (CCA) should be avoided as there is a risk of arsenic leaching into the soil. Alkaline copper quaternary (ACQ) treated sleepers do not contain the heavy metals arsenic or chromium. The National Standard, while not specifically referring to sleepers, notes that, due to the lack of any satisfactory alternative and their long-standing traditional use in organic agriculture, copper and copper salts can be used for the time being. Composite wood sleepers contain 60 per cent wood powder, 28 per cent high-density polyethylene (HDPE, regarded as safe for human health) and 12 per cent unspecified additives. While durable and lightweight, the HDPE component is made from petroleum, is highly flammable and has a large carbon footprint.

Given ongoing concerns about the pollution of soils, waterways and the ocean by plastics, it is recommended that COGS gardens review their use of plastic materials and, where feasible, identify biodegradable alternatives. It is strongly recommended that gardens consider banning plastic weed mats, which break down into small pieces that are difficult to remove from soil.

COGS Committee, September 2023

El Niño and positive Indian Ocean Dipole continue

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

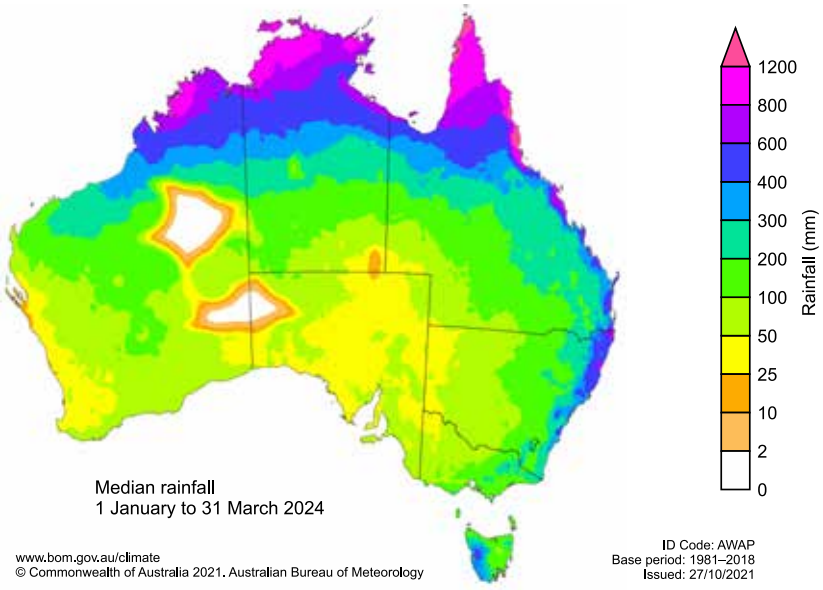
* * *

A Bureau of Meteorology update issued on 8 November 2023 says that the El Niño continues in the tropical Pacific Ocean. Warmer than average sea-surface temperatures in the tropical Pacific persist above El Niño thresholds, with warmer water beneath the surface to support that at the surface. In the atmosphere, cloud, wind and pressure patterns are consistent with El Niño conditions.

Climate model forecasts indicate some further warming of the central to eastern Pacific is likely, with sea-surface temperatures remaining above El Niño thresholds into the early Southern Hemisphere autumn 2024.

A positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) event continues. All models indicate that this positive IOD will likely persist into early December. A positive IOD typically leads to reduced spring rainfall for central and south-eastern Australia.

The long-range forecast for Australia indicates below average rainfall is likely for much of northern, western and southern Australia, with warmer days and nights likely almost nationwide. The Bureau's climate model includes all influences on Australian climate when generating its forecasts.



Global warming continues to influence Australian and global climate. Global sea-surface temperatures were the highest on record for their respective months during April to October.

Australia's climate has warmed by 1.48 ± 0.23 °C since national records began in 1910. Associated with the warming, there has been an increase in extreme heat events and extreme fire weather. There has also been a trend towards a greater proportion of rainfall from high intensity, short duration rainfall events, especially across northern Australia.

Water storage levels in the Canberra region and capital cities

	Nov '23	Nov '22
ACT storages	96%	100%
Murray-Darling Basin	90%	95%
Burrinjuck Dam	91%	94%
Blowering Dam	76%	97%
Sydney	91%	98%
Melbourne	96%	95%
Brisbane	67%	88%
Adelaide	74%	85%
Perth	51%	61%

(left) Necessity is the mother of invention: Mike's rustic support for climbing plants, made from readily available local timber.
(below) My mini-Floriade. Photos by Ed Highley

summer planting guide

Mulch and compost

In summer it is a good idea to mulch your garden beds to help keep the soil cool and moist. One experiment showed that a 4 cm layer of straw reduced evaporation by 73%. Be careful not to lay down a thick layer of sawdust or lawn clippings that can pack down to form an impenetrable barrier to water.

Soil with lots of compost contains all the nutrients your plants need for strong, healthy growth. In addition well-composted soil retains water and acts like a sponge to keep your plants moist through dry summer days.

Heat protection

On days of extreme temperature your plants may need to be physically protected from the heat. This can be achieved by covering plants with shade cloth secured on a frame e.g. weldmesh or irrigation pipe bent over to form a tunnel, with shade cloth secured by pegs.

Watering

Try not to water the leaves of plants that are susceptible to fungal diseases (e.g. tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins and zucchinis) and try to water individual plants thoroughly, rather than watering a whole area.

Always follow water restrictions and check soil moisture before watering—a rostered watering day doesn't mean you must water.

Weeds

Keep weeds down. They compete with your plants for food, water and sunlight. It is best to tackle them when they are small—before removing them becomes an exhausting exercise.

Pests

Pests can multiply over summer. Don't reach for the pesticides. Observe if there are natural predators present, remembering that there will be a delay between the appearance of the pest and the subsequent build-up of its predators.

If you must spray, use an environmentally benign spray. Read books such as Jackie French's *Natural Pest Control*.

Harvesting

Make sure you harvest your crop regularly—in most cases this will encourage your plants to continue cropping and you can enjoy your produce at its peak.

Remember to leave space in your vegie patch for those winter vegetables that prefer to be planted in late summer to early autumn. Brassicas and other winter crops need time to mature before the extreme cold of winter sets in.

	DEC	JAN	FEB
Bush beans	S	S	
Beetroot	S	S	S
Broccoli	ST	ST	T
Brussels sprouts	ST	ST	T
Cabbage	ST	ST	T
Carrots	S	S	S
Cauliflower	ST	ST	T
Celery	T	T	S
Chicory	S	S	S
Chinese cabbage	S	S	
Cucumber	ST	T	
Endive	S	S	S
Kohlrabi	ST	ST	T
Leeks	S	S	
Lettuce	ST	ST	ST
Marrows	T		
Parsnips	S	S	S
Potatoes	S	S	
Radish	S	S	S
Silverbeet	ST	ST	T
Squash	ST		
Swedes		S	S
Sweet corn	ST	T	
Tomatoes	T	T	
Turnips		S	S

S = seed sowing; T = transplanting

This table is a guide only—observe seasonal weather patterns before deciding when to plant, as there will often be distinct differences in summer weather from one year to the next.

Planting times will vary for different varieties of the one vegetable e.g. December plantings of heading lettuce varieties should be successful; while February plantings should be the butterhead varieties.

recipe

Zucchini and pea muffins

Makes 12 muffins.
Preparation time 20 minutes.

Dry Ingredients

2 medium zucchini, grated

1 cup green peas (fresh or frozen)

2 cups white spelt flour

1/4 cup almond meal

1 1/2 teaspoon baking powder

1/2 cup nutritional yeast

Salt and pepper

Wet Ingredients

4 eggs

Herbs – parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme*

1/4 cup almond milk (you can use any milk)

1/4 cup olive oil

Seeds such as sunflower seeds for topping

Method

Preheat the oven to 200°C.

Grease a 12-hole muffin tin and line it with baking paper or paper muffin cases.

Wrap the grated zucchinis in a tea towel and squeeze out as much water as possible.

Put the zucchini in a large bowl along with the rest of the dry ingredients.

Stir together, make a well in the middle and set aside.

To a food processor add all the wet ingredients and blend until completely smooth.

Pour the wet mixture into the well of the dry ingredients, gently fold together, taking care not to over-mix.

Spoon the muffin batter into the prepared tin and top each muffin with the seed of your choice.

Bake for 25 minutes until golden and springy, or until a skewer inserted in the middle of one of the muffins comes out clean.

Enjoy!

* Shades of Simon and Garfunkel. Thank you Lilian for the recipe. Ed.

Want to contribute?

We'd love to hear from you!
Please send contributions to:
editor@cogs.asn.au

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Please contact editor@cogs.asn.au

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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.

Ange McNeilly took this picture of globe artichokes in her Charnwood Community Garden plot