

## Urban agriculture: it's a veggie-roots movement

Peter Kearney

**As a child, I was lucky to learn food growing skills that have stayed with me ever since – including through a long career in finance and technology. I often wonder how many of today's adults could grow their own food if they had to. My vision is for organic gardening to be built into the national curricula from early childhood centres upwards.**



Credit: Courtesy Courier Mail

For many years, Australians living in cities have become totally dependent on a food system from which they are physically disconnected. So-called 'fresh' fruit and vegetables on supermarket shelves have often travelled thousands of kilometres, been picked before their prime to extend shelf life, stored for months, and grown with artificial fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. Is it a wonder they have little flavour?

People want to move away from food grown using artificial chemicals. The huge success of farmers' markets clearly indicates consumers want a personal connection with those who grow their food. This evolutionary cycle is now moving toward rapidly increasing numbers of city dwellers growing their own food at home and in community gardens. It will be followed by small-scale growers in and around cities expanding their productivity and generating surpluses to supply their suburbs, repeating what historians tell us happened when people first started to live in cities thousands of years ago.

The cycle is not only about food supply, food quality and price; it is also a cultural change in which people are realising how much enjoyment and well-being they get from growing food and connecting directly with others in the process. This cultural change is beginning to filter into our education system, which for the past 50 years has unfortunately moved the art of food growing aside in favour of all the other knowledge taught in schools. The importance of children connecting to nature also is now slowly moving back into the education system.

My approach is to combine organic techniques with aspects of permaculture and biodynamic gardening. This

philosophy of borrowing the best from different yet complementary streams of gardening know-how, then adding my own practical learning, is embedded in my Brisbane-based business, Cityfood Growers. It focuses on educating people to grow their own food via the web site [www.cityfoodgrowers.com.au](http://www.cityfoodgrowers.com.au), using 21st century technology to connect households with age-old food gardening techniques.

Cityfood Growers provides timely knowledge on food growing anywhere in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. As climate is the most crucial factor for home-growing success, the information is tailored to our subscribers' local weather conditions.

The members of our community of city food growers range from gardeners living in apartments to small inner-city plots, and from larger suburban settings to rural-residential hobby farmers living close to cities.

An increasing number of schools are subscribers to Cityfood Growers. Over the last 12 months, this welcome educational focus has also been directed to early childhood services. A current project involves creating a food gardening knowledge platform for teachers and parent helpers of 650 early childhood centres managed by GoodStart (formerly ABC Childcare), with over 40 000 families in the network. This wonderful project introduces young children to an essential life skill. Hopefully, it will sow the seeds for children and their families to permanently engage in urban food growing.



Credit: CityFood Growers

In the planning stage of the project, a survey indicated that nearly all GoodStart centres around Australia wanted vegetable gardens. The training materials for GoodStart have incorporated the diverse physical environments of centres, wherever they are: dealing with issues such as artificial surfaces, space constraints for beds and sufficiency of light for gardens. Some centres have excellent land for food growing, and one centre surveyed wanted a large community garden. In contrast, another fully indoor centre located in a city business district was suitable only for growing seedlings for other centres.

Of course, many adults also have much to learn about food growing if they want to join the urban agriculture movement. To help, each year the Cityfood Growers web site adds new food crop content – about growing vegetables, herbs, fruit trees or Australian natives – and additional functions and support tools.

Cityfood Growers is now one of the largest interactive organic gardening web sites in Australia. Ultimately, the site will also provide a sophisticated online trading environment for local food.

What are you going to grow in your food garden?

*Peter Kearney's business, technology and gardening skills converged in 2007, when he founded Cityfood Growers. His vision is to localise food gardening knowledge online, responding to the 21st century challenges of sustainability and food security in our times of climate change. Follow Peter on Twitter @cityfoodgrower or Cityfood Growers @yourfoodgarden, or on Facebook.*

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