

# A feast for all senses **Celebrating** *the edible garden*

**Australian gardeners are embracing productive and edible gardens with ingenious techniques and characteristic zeal, writes Kate Herd.**

**N**o longer do vegetable gardens need to be hidden away in the backyard, separate from the main garden; productive gardens are increasingly celebrated for not only their edibility but for being just as decorative, functional and appealing as ornamental ones. This is hardly unprecedented, of course: over the centuries, aficionados of the edible garden – from monks to kings – have acknowledged that the productive garden can be a beautiful, three-dimensional art form which deserves to be displayed in plain view.

These days we tend to be preoccupied with reducing water use in the garden and decreasing our carbon footprint, and we're interested in the many health and environmental benefits to be gained from a garden-based seasonal diet. These commendable and pragmatic motives don't mean however that the aesthetics of the veggie patch are being neglected. In fact, Australian gardeners are constructing food gardens in a myriad of creative and playful ways. Before contemplating the fundamentals of soil preparation and planting, there is much scope to dream and plan. What kind of productive garden do I



Photos: Simon Griffiths | iStockphoto



**(left)** A productive, coastal kitchen garden demonstrating sympathetic use of materials. Photo: Simon Griffiths

**(below)** Potatoes growing in a repurposed baby cot painted by the gardener and her children. Photo: Kate Herd



want? A single bed with a few herbs intermingled with vegetables or six beds to allow for crop rotation? Do I want a low-tech, soft and curvy mandala garden or a more elaborate multi-bed potager with paving and a pizza oven? Maybe a funky vertical food garden on the balcony of my highrise apartment? Beyond the conventional (yet lovely) rowed vegetable plot à la 'Mr McGregor', gardeners are creating all manner of interesting spaces in which to grow their herbs, fruit and veg – most are highly practical, many are ingenious. By utilising recycled and found materials imaginatively, it is possible to create a great garden even with a limited budget. The possibilities for beautifying (foodifying) your own and the local amenity by making a produce garden, be it upon a nature strip or within a private or community garden, need only be limited by our imagination, access to sunshine, space and water and the raw materials for containing and growing plants. Apart from following sustainable gardening practices that benefit the soil and the wider ecosystem – there are no rules in designing the contemporary kitchen garden!

In the course of writing a book on kitchen gardens in 2009, I visited over 60 productive gardens around Australia. I saw farm vegetable gardens which typified the Australian rural vernacular as well as space-age fortresses against wallabies and bowerbirds, and ...►

(right) Raised vegetable beds made from livestock water troughs.  
 (opposite) Renowned cook Beverley Sutherland Smith's food garden is a potager in which flowers and edible plants happily coexist (see garden number 404). Photos: Kate Herd



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labyrinths which had to be negotiated in order to harvest the salad. In the capital cities I visited suburban gardens in which every plant was edible, and inner-city ones where chook runs and frog ponds adjoined neat veggie patches sandwiched between a fleet of water tanks. In addition to traditional row gardens Australian gardeners are making wicking beds, grid gardens, low or no-irrigation food gardens and food forests. Our food gardening philosophies and practices – be they organic, biodynamic, permaculture, intensive, hydroponic or aquaponic – all result in their own inherent garden aesthetic. This will often extend to the layout (formal or informal or in-between) and to the type of materials used in construction (recycled or new, traditional or contemporary, timber or stone

or simply soil and turf). As the guru of creative veggie gardening, Joy Larkcom, writes: 'There are many ways to make picturesque virtue out of practical necessity.' The structure of the food garden is what provides the permanent framework – beds need to be designed to be of workable size and proportion, and the paths with accessibility and maintenance in mind. Good structural 'bones' mean your food garden can look good all year round.

The recent trend in raised garden beds has seen huge sales in corrugated steel garden beds – which now come in kit form or can be custom-made to any height and size. Bales of straw or hay, old apple crates or plastic fruit crates, EarthBoxes®, polystyrene boxes, baby's baths, concrete laundry troughs and stock water troughs are all good alternatives to the plot at ground level. One food garden I visited in Alice Springs was created in a series of old enamel bathtubs. Not only did this make picking easier but it solved the gardener's ongoing battle with soil-borne nematodes. Recycled and re-purposed materials – an old timber boat, for example, or broken slabs from a concrete drive stacked up to form retaining walls – can not only look good but are ecologically sound. There are also various kinds

of recycled plastics now available in sheet, board or even pre-made garden bed form. (First and foremost, materials used for productive gardens must be non-toxic.) Timber weathers to a beautiful silver-grey, blending perfectly with a bush or coastal environment. Walls and edges made of brick, bluestone cobbles, concrete blocks or stone do however last longer. Each material has its own particular affinity with other types of landscaping materials, be it gravel, granitic sand, pebbles or paving.

They say good fences make good neighbours, but they really mean food in one's stomach! Much as we love native wildlife, fences of wire mesh, metal or timber are necessary to keep kangaroos and wombats as well as rabbits and other feral animals, livestock or the family dog at bay. Fully enclosed netting roofs or cage structures are added insurance against birds, rats and possums. All can be attractive as well as protective. Such enclosures give a sense of separateness, like the classic *hortus conclusus* wherein, on entering through a gate or doorway, you feel as if you've stepped into another world. Solid gates of timber evoke a secret garden whereas gates of pickets or wire permit tempting glimpses into the space beyond. Hedges (edible of course) are another wonderful



way of delineating the landscape: bay, rosemary, olive and citrus are common kitchen garden hedges but what about strawberry guava (*Psidium littorale* var. *longipes*), feijoa (*Acca sellowiana*), or the prickly Natal Plum (*Carissa macrocarpa*)? And in warmer, frost-free climes: jaboticaba (*Myrciaria cauliflora*) or the native lemon myrtle (*Backhousia citriodora*)?

Vertical elements in the form of garden architecture and plant supports provide a third dimension in the kitchen garden. Tripods of bamboo or hardwood poles, metal obelisks, woven willow lattice, stakes and string, star pickets and baling twine, galvanized wire netting or rusty 'reo' (reinforcing mesh) can all support climbing plants like peas and beans and contain scandent and floppy plants such as cucumbers, tomatoes and broad beans. Pergolas, gazebos and arches are perfect structures upon which to grow kiwifruit, grapevines or passionfruit – making living tunnels and green ceilings to shade us on hot days. Such oases can help to cool our homes in summer and make great sense in this warming, drying climate.

Then there are the plants themselves. While the rapid summer growth of annuals is a wonder to behold, perennial and evergreen food plants provide



Kate's garden is open on 7th & 8th May 2011 (see garden number 376).

a more permanent structure in the kitchen garden. Nut and fruit trees are not only edible but they're climbable, beautiful and provide shade. Trees can be trained into arches and tunnels or espaliered and topiarised to create living sculptures. Many edible plants have scented leaves – and a few, like citrus trees or the tamarillo (*Solanum betaceum*) with its waxy white flowers, are also deliciously fragrant. The food garden is definitely a multi-sensory experience! Colour is very important – ripening fruit and vegetables trigger our 'taste bud memories', and foliage in a million shades of green (but also

KATE HERD is an artist, designer and writer and lives in Melbourne. She is passionate about plants and gardens, especially productive gardens and native plants. In her work as a garden designer, residential gardens constitute the majority of her projects, and as an artist she likes to explore the potential for using interesting and unusual materials in the landscape. She aspires to developing planting schemes that are exciting and beautiful. Being a practical type however,

she believes that it is imperative that our domestic spaces are functional and liveable, and that we must design gardens with sustainability and the changing climate in mind. Kate often collaborates with her landscaper and designer partner Philip Stray and his team at Crafted Landscapes. Her first book is to be published by Lantern in 2011 and is on kitchen gardens in Australia. With gorgeous photos by Simon Griffiths, the book profiles nineteen productive gardens from all over Australia.

yellow, red, purple, blue-grey, silver and variegated forms) provides a sense of a flourishing and fertile oasis. Texture is provided by plants of varying shapes, sizes and colours, as well as by a profusion of flowers and seed heads.

With our rapidly urbanising environment and lower than average rainfall across much of Australia, the green, productive and therapeutic space that is the edible garden is becoming an increasingly precious human habitat. Just don't forget to build a seat amongst the garden beds – somewhere to sit and enjoy the gorgeous results of all your hard work! ✨