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Australian City Farms, Community Gardens and Enterprise Centres Network

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[Conference Report]

The Sixth International Permaculture Convergence (IPC6) took place just in time to announce a new initiative in community supported agriculture – the formation of the Australian City Farms, Community Gardens and Enterprise Centres Network. Holding IPC6 in Western Australia was opportune for the network on another way – it made it easy to find state contacts for the network and to visit inspiring examples of urban agriculture in the state.

Significant among these was the East Perth City Farm and the work of FINCA, which has permaculturised an urban park into a true multi-use landscape. Also inspiring was the work of Murdoch University's Remote Area Development Group who are trialing renewable technologies and integrated living systems for remote communities.

During IPC6, community garden activists got together on a number of occasions to talk about the new community gardens and city farms network and to get to know each other. With the national network now in its early stage of development, the immediate task is to define a more focused role for urban agriculture in Australia. This role will exist within a global context in which urban agriculture is growing and, particularly in developing countries, is feeding people.

As a network, our task is to provide evidence for civic authorities, land managers and landowners which shows that community based agriculture and the associated sustainable living demonstration projects and enterprise centres are a legitimate, socially and environmentally responsible form of land use which contribute to the amenity and productivity of public open space.

Specifically, community based agriculture, demonstration and enterprise centres fulfil roles in:

- Urban food production.
- The productive rehabilitation and utilisation of disused and derelict urban land.

- Building community through shared organisation, co-operation, work and goals.
- Improving the urban environment through increased environmental, social and recreational amenity.
- Supporting public health through the self-provision of fresh, nutritious food.
- Supplementing the incomes of low income people.
- Educating participants in horticulture, appropriate technology, land and resource management,
- Organisational and social skills.
- Providing learning opportunities for schools.
- Preserving the world's agricultural biodiversity through seed saving, seed exchange and increasing the supply of non-hybrid seeds by growing them out and returning supplies to the Seed Savers Network for distribution – this is community gardens as seed saving hubs.
- Preserving rare and threatened, locally indigenous plants.
- Providing wildlife habitat.
- Providing positive recreational opportunities, playspaces for children and socialising opportunities for adults.

The potential for community gardens and city farms to play an increased role in the preservation of agricultural biodiversity through growing out and increasing the supply of seeds provided by the Seed Savers Network is now being explored. If successful, community gardens will curate a number of food plants adapted to local climate and soil conditions and return a certain quantity of grown out seeds to the Seed Savers Network. They could also become the focus of local seed exchange networks.

The network has only recently published its inventory of city farms, community gardens and enterprise centres in Australia (\$20 posted from the national address below). In planning are state conferences, an updated edition of the inventory, a new edition of the network's national newsletter and a community gardens education kit.

Contact details

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Fiona Campbell and Russ Grayson have experience in the design and establishment of the successful UNSW community garden and are participants in other community gardens. They have been employed at Fairfield City Farm as Landcare educators and have produced primary and secondary teaching kits for the farm as well as running Permaculture Design Courses in the Sydney region. Their current project is to develop a permaculture and appropriate technology education site.