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Developing Community Gardens

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[Presentation Report]

Brisbane City Farm – Morag Gamble

Brisbane City Farm has been operating since April 1994 on four hectares of land, three kilometres from the town centre. It has more than one entrance and prides itself on being very open. The design respects the maintenance of paths that were already existing there. The group formed about a year before they actually obtained the piece of land. The land is owned by Brisbane City Council with whom the City Farm has been working right from the start, firstly to find the piece of land. One of the members of the group was actually a councillor on the City Council and so the group found it comparatively easy to find and obtain a piece of land. The land was a residential area until the 1974 floods and the council resumed the land. It consisted of three small parcels of land, and the council did not know what to do with it. In 1988 attempts were made to grow an orchard there but no one maintained it and so there were bonsai fruit trees already existing when the group started on the land. These included mangoes and mulberries.

Their first step was to establish a vegetable patch demonstrating no-dig gardens, sheet mulching and also a food forest. For the first year of the project the group had no funding whatsoever. People donated equipment and tools and they brought in water with a bucket from the far end of a nearby creek. In the second year, the group received funding from a Community Benefit Fund which went into their nursery. The council then contributed a shed and then an ample supply of tools, provided mulch and connected the Farm to the local water supply. The gardens have evolved organically over time with the people that have contributed and the ideas that have come from these people, without incorporating a master planning process. They are an incorporated association and the management committee welcomes new members and their input. Anyone can have an input into the decision-making process. They have so much happening there now that a number of sub-groups have developed, each of which are managed by one person.

The group set up a demonstration backyard in the City Farm about a month ago (early September, 1996) which covers an area equal to that of the average Queensland backyard (and which incorporates a hills hoist clothes line). With this area the group is aiming to demonstrate to visitors what they can do in their own backyard. They will also put canopies over this area to demonstrate the layering of plants possible.

Their nursery is going to be one of their first enterprises. Recently, they have been producing herbs for the local naturopathy college. All the work in the City Farm has been done by unpaid volunteers who have spent three days a week there. So they are now looking at ways to set up small enterprises, including their nursery, worm farm, and a few other projects on the site which can generate income.

One of their major functions is education. They are currently working with a primary school. There is also a secondary student who is on placement once a week, some university Social Work students who work there regularly, and visiting TAFE and LEAP groups who also put in some work there. The Farm is also participating in a recycling exchange with the community.

There is a bush foods garden and a native corridor as a windbreak in the City Farm, through which the group hopes to have an interpretive trail and from which they hope to run courses on the uses of bush foods.

The Brisbane City Council continues to be very supportive of the project and the City Farm and the Council are currently negotiating the possibility of a 10 to 15 year peppercorn lease. The Farm is not required to pay any rates.

UNSW Community Garden – Russ Grayson

This garden began two years ago after the Student Guild at the University of New South Wales approached Pacific Edge Permaculture to run a one week course in permaculture design. It is a medium-sized Sydney community garden at twenty square metres (the smallest Sydney garden is eight metres by fifteen metres). The students also wanted a memorial to a student who was killed in the Dili Massacre. Pacific Edge has been involved as an advisor and workshop co-ordinator. Some of the students have now completed registered Permaculture Design Courses and are taking on the training role. The student energy has been very dissipated in that the students tend to go away on holiday and neglect the plants, so the process has been quite slow in comparison to other community gardens. Other members of the community who have completed a PEP design course have begun to participate.

It started as a large patch of lawn, behind which there is now a new child-minding centre. The area consists of sandy soil with a pH of about 8.5, which is very alkaline. It's near the Randwick Racetrack so there is an ample supply of manure and mulch. The garden has been spreading out in manageable 'chunks.' The students 'transplanted' metre-deep tanks from outside the Chancellor's office to the garden and these tanks are now supporting various water plants. Pacific Edge is encouraging the students to do some experimental work. For example they were looking at which indigenous plants fixed nitrogen and could be used as mulching ground-cover, experimenting with *Hardenbergia violacea* (Native Sarsparilla) and *Kennedia*

rubicunda (Running Postman) [ed: Running Postman is *Kennedia prostrata*] which grows to about ten centimetres thick. These, they found to be excellent groundcovers under orchard trees.

Communication is critical and the students use a blackboard that is kept in the tool shed to advertise meetings and show watering schedules and they meet sometimes on Friday evenings and Saturdays.

Fairfield City Farm – Russ Grayson

Fairfield City Farm in western Sydney is the biggest City Farm in the world. Fiona and Russ were employed there for a number of years as landcare educators working with secondary school geography students. The Farm is on the urban green-belt and has also been taken over by National Parks to be revegetated over time, working with Greening Australia. The site is very degraded as it has been farmed for 100 to 150 years. The soil is very compacted, eroded and slumped. All the slopes demonstrate the degree to which the soil is eroded. There is remnant bush of the Cumberland Plain clay soils and when there were labour market programs, bush regenerators were working there to rid the bush of problem weeds. A program called City Landcare in Your Own Backyard, funded by the National Landcare Program, was developed to demonstrate what people could do in their own back garden. It was designed by a Sydney permaculture designer, Bronwyn Rice, and was a 'larger-than-life' urban backyard which integrates a large herb spiral, a worm farm, different types of orchards (cool temperate and subtropical), and a chicken rotation system. The herb spiral – about 5 metres in diameter and about 1.6 metres high – was designed to be interactive so that children could walk along the edge of it and brush past aromatic herbs – a catch to get children interested in plants. The chicken tractor system consists of five yards which integrate existing trees and planted fruit trees. The chook house is fitted with a solar thermal system to keep the chooks warm.

Russ finished by stating that people join community gardens for social reasons first and foremost.

Blue Mountains Community Gardens – Supapon Raffan

These gardens were started four years ago. It took three years to obtain the land from the council, as the council was not very enthusiastic about the project. It is situated in six and a half acres bounded by National Park. Therefore a main concern is to prevent nutrients entering the surrounding National Park. To this end, they have built culverts, bridges and bunds. The site is in a valley but gets a lot of light and has a lot of remnant vegetation which they are revegetating. The council gave the group two tasks to fulfil in order to get the land. The first was to build a huge carpark and the second was to build a disabled toilet and building and so on. They have just built the building from mudbricks that they made themselves from donated soil and completed some gardens designed entirely by permaculture designers. Supapon believes that by having access to a community garden, society changes to become more responsible because they can see what can be done. The group is teaching at schools and has got schools involved in the garden and two radio programs being broadcast. Their main function is education. The group has

also obtained a site that covers an area of 20 acres on which they are working with many groups including an Aboriginal cultural centre and the Arts Council and many other groups. All the work completed in the community garden has been voluntary. Supapon also stressed the important role of social interaction in community gardens and that she had made so many friends through these projects.

They have planted an Heirloom Apple orchard, pear orchard, and quince circles and there is an orchard system in swales that is being constructed at the moment. They have planted native species down the bottom of the slope, closer to the watercourse and they are in the process of taking down all the fences.

The Blue Mountains Community Garden group is looking at setting up a seed bank with other community gardens in Australia to export surplus seeds to similar projects in developing countries.

National networking

A national register of community gardens and city farms has been published to strengthen the community garden network in Australia so that these groups may learn from one another.

In Brisbane community garden groups met in August this year and are now planning to meet every six months to collaborate. They are also organising a 'green fair' together and are looking at how they can buy resources together and do courses together.