

More than merely for vegetables, community gardens are paying big dividends right the way across the age spectrum as more are being bitten by . . .

The garden bug

CLAIRE VAN RYN looks at a growing phenomenon.

GONE are the days when retirees in their dotage would dig spuds, pull carrots and pluck beans in solitude. For a myriad reasons, from health and environmental concerns to social interaction and tight budgets, the heyday of the community garden is here.

Few pockets of society are exempt from the rise of the humble communal veggie plot.

On one side of Launceston the elderly, who have downsized to retirement villas with little room for rambling pumpkin plants, have opted for a plot at the local community patch. They value the interaction with like-minded people, and the space.

At these gardens you will find the odd fresh-faced gardener, eager to soak up some of the knowledge of the seniors in their midst.

Or they might be working parents with a low maintenance inner-city apartment. The health of their children is of utmost concern and their plot gives assurance of organic produce cultivated with integrity.

On the other side of the city, a community garden is run alongside a school.

Children are taught that, "Tomatoes don't come on trays encased in plastic". They can pull strawberries from the vine, sink teeth into their sweet flesh and understand the organic processes beyond the plastic punnet.

These gardens can even act as therapy to children with special needs, to encourage social interaction and fine motor skills.

Michelle Obama and her White House Garden would be proud.

Throughout Tasmania there are about 100 community gardens, half of which have sprung up in the past two years.

The Eat Well Grow Well project oversees the state's network of gardens, funded by a Healthy Active Schools federal grant.

Project officer Nel Smit said community gardens were "taking off".



St George's School's Eloise Lunn, 11, teacher's aide Tash Goninon and Bronte Hart, 11, enjoy the camaraderie of gardening. Pictures: PAUL SCAMBLER and NEIL RICHARDSON

"There's such amazing enthusiasm to get community gardens established," she said.

"They're just springing up everywhere, it's a bit of a phenomenon really."

Ms Smit said about 70 per cent of the state's community gardens were run on school grounds, often initiated by parents.

"Food gardens are a really important off-shoot... they encourage children to compost, to establish good habits from the start, tasting the variety of fresh foods.

"Trying a fresh carrot from the garden, for example, it really increases their tasting vocabulary and establishes good habits for healthy eating."

The Ravenswood Community Garden, overseen by Sue Jacobs, is one such place engaging with young people.

Students from St Georges Special School and increasingly from Brooks

'Trying a fresh carrot from the garden, for example, it really increases their tasting vocabulary and establishes good habits for healthy eating'

High School and Waverley Primary School, participate in projects on site, doing everything from planting seeds and weeding to cooking relishes and preserves for the garden's internal customer list.

A Salvation Army work-for-the-dole program sees people helping with ongoing maintenance while learning discipline, work ethics and physical labour.

Mrs Jacobs said that she was a daily witness to the fact that this community garden, and others, cultivate more than mere vegetables.

An increasing number of community gardens exist with support from councils, including one recently approved for Devonport.

In Launceston, the Punchbowl Community Garden has a unique relationship with both the Launceston



A taste for gardening . . . St George's School pupil Keira Camino, 12, picks tomatoes.



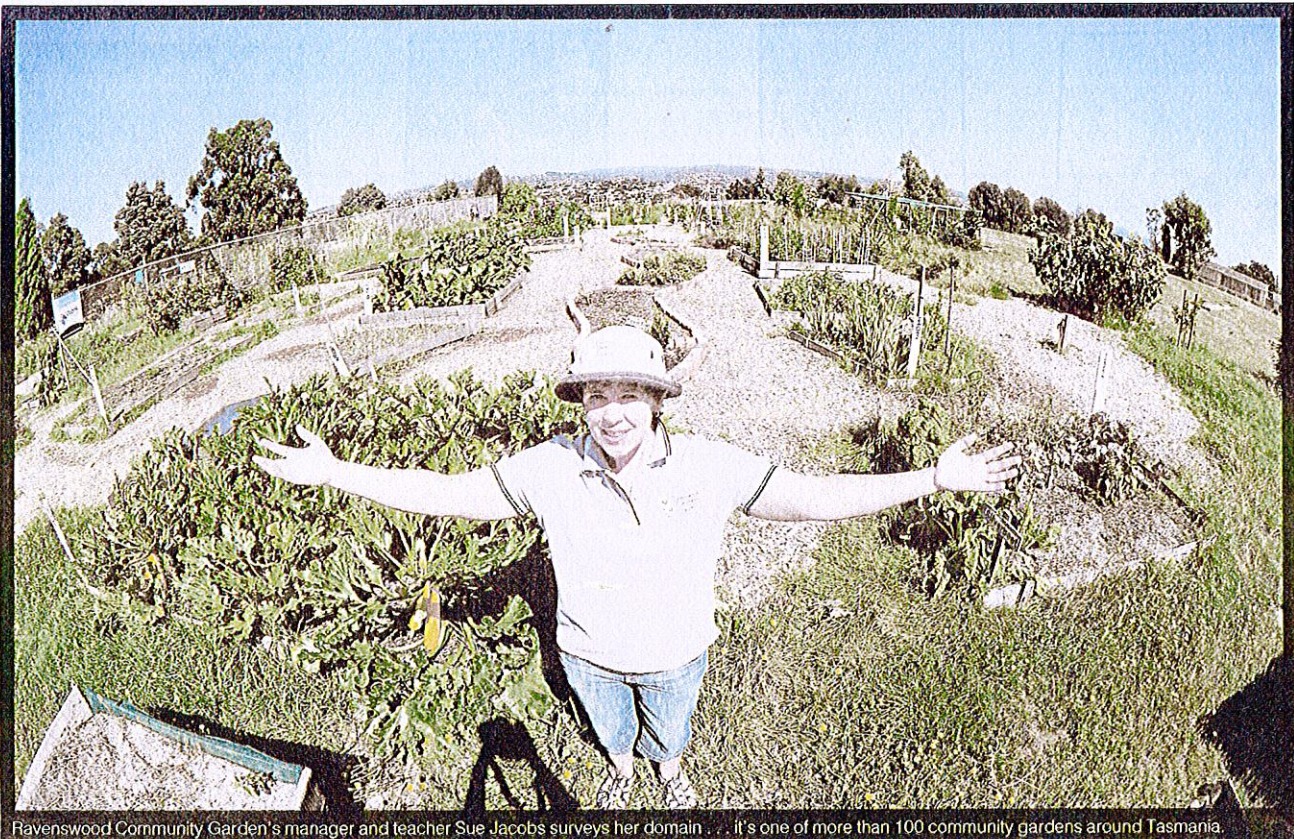
The Ravenswood garden grows vegetables and flowers giving an all-round garden experience.



Cover picture: Cameron Oliver, 12, of St George's School harvests tomatoes at Ravenswood Community Garden.



Katherine Vinson prunes her roses at the Punchbowl Community Garden.



Ravenswood Community Garden's manager and teacher Sue Jacobs surveys her domain... it's one of more than 100 community gardens around Tasmania.

City Council and the Youngtown Rotary Club.

An unused council nursery was opened as a community garden in 1997, the idea conceived by Bill Tann and instigated by the Rotary club.

"I thought that with so many elderly people moving into flats and retirement homes, they might miss their gardens and not get out into the open air," he said.

"We found that to be true."

The garden committee pays council rent of \$50 a year and each gardener is charged \$10 per year, per plot, with maintenance subsidised by ongoing fundraising and working bees.

There is a long waiting list for the 90 plots which sit lush and green, spilling with plump fruit and vegetables and surrounded by native bush. The plot-holders potter, stopping for a natter, a cup of tea and to share some tips on the optimum time to plant beetroot, how to tell when garlic is ready for harvest, what will stop pests from munching on their basil.

A community garden on Flinders Island is proposing to provide enough seasonal fresh produce for its residents, so they are not so dependent on freight and the high prices of days-old produce.

Some gardens in low socio-economic areas provide free produce and, in the case of the Goodwood Community Garden, food boxes with everything people need to get a veggie patch going at home.

Ms Smit said the major difficulty in community gardens was maintaining momentum.

"The challenge for community gardens is just to keep the impetus and support going," she said.

A Centre of Excellence for Community Gardens underway at the Botanical Gardens in Hobart will help to fill that void.

Over the next two-to-three years the centre will be developed in partnership with more than 30 interested community groups and businesses from around Tasmania.

Learning and community engagement manager Marcus Ragus said the centre would use modern technology to connect gardening networks and disseminate information.

"The idea is that it will be a central area of excellence for ideas on horticulture, organic gardening, farming and community gardening," he said.

"The intention is to really focus on innovation and creativity. It's so much more than a community garden — it will be a place that inspires as well. People will be able to come and dig and plant and participate in what's happening.

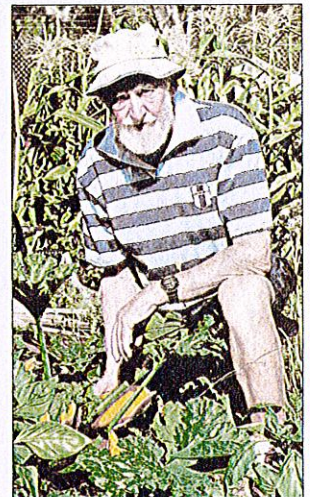
"It's quite innovative, there's nothing like it that's been done in Tasmania before."

The centre will be a resource for the whole community, from school-age to adulthood, and showcase concepts such as sustainability, biodynamics, multi-cultural gardening and community kitchens.

Next month the who's who of Tasmania's gardening realm will gather to share ideas, knowledge and facilitate a connectedness between the state's community plots.

The Good Food Good Future conference in Devonport will include SBS garden show presenter Costa Georgiadis, Bruce French will speak about his database of edible Tasmanian foods and Peter Coxhead will give a workshop on seed saving.

Like most of the community gardens popping up across the place, the focus will be on sustainable, healthy living.



Bill Tann on his garden plot... "I thought that with so many elderly people might miss their gardens... we found that to be true."



How good is that... Riverside High teacher's aide Di Hesp and grade 10 student Tammy Flannery sort and clean carrots at Ravenswood.



GOOD FOOD GOOD FUTURE

THE Tasmanian Growing Communities conference will include practical garden workshops, informative sessions with professionals on everything from food security to seed saving, kids activities and panel discussions.

Where: Devonport Community Garden, Morris Avenue, Devonport and Reece High School.

When: April 16-18.

Cost: 2-day, \$80, \$40 concession, \$10 child. 1-day: \$45, \$25 concession, \$5 child. Friday 'Good Food in Schools' workshop, \$10.

Bookings: essential, visit www.eatwelltas.org.au/gardening for details and to register.