

## COMMUNITIES

*connecting in gardens*

Growing food in community gardens has many more benefits than just providing fresh food for the table, writes **Graham Readfearn**



Volunteers share the produce at Jane Street Community Garden, West End

There is lemongrass and spinach, tarragon, asparagus and dragon fruit, fig trees, guava and chillies – all survivors of the Brisbane floods. Standing in the middle of Jane Street Community Garden it's hard to understand that only a week before this hive of food and friendship was completely submerged under half a metre or so of flood waters. Yet already, volunteers have rebuilt the vegetable beds, cleaned up the pathways and rescued the worm farms.

"Having more than 100 people turn up on the Saturday (after the flood) helped," says garden co-ordinator Jacqui Purce.

Jane Street, established on a stretch of council grass seven years ago in West End, is one of at least 35 community gardens created in Brisbane in recent years. Some have been established in schools or aged-care facilities, others in the grounds of churches and local parks.

But these community gardens, say experts, are helping Brisbanites of all ages to connect to their community and understand that fresh food comes from

healthy soil and a bit of hard work, rather than a supermarket shelf. "It's about growing food," says Jacqui. "Most of our people live in units and when they first come they know nothing about growing food. Some don't even know how to sow a seed or put a plant in the ground. They have no real concept that soil is a living thing that needs to be cared for. They might have read about compost but they've no real idea what it is. You really don't learn until you start doing it."

Because community gardens tend to be founded from grassroots groups, no two work in exactly the same way. Volunteers in gardens will either pay a small rent for their own space or help to tend the entire network of beds and trees and take a share of produce home. Some gardens mix both systems together.

In recent years all the fruit and vegetables at Jane Street have been grown co-operatively with volunteers taking home a share of produce at the end of weekly working bees. But in the future Jane Street will be renting 27 plots of between two and 10 square metres to volunteers for

about \$10 a year for each square metre.

But the core activity for Jane Street – like most community gardens whether in schools or on spare land – will remain the same...growing food, educating people and building friendships.

"A lot of younger people are getting interested now," Jacqui says. "They're interested because of global warming, food security and the chemicals that get pumped into our food."

Jane Street is one of three community gardens in councillor Helen Abraham's ward of The Gabba, where two others are also being planned. "They're great for the community and great for people to be connected to how food is produced," says Cr Abrahams. "I think people now are really looking for something that will connect them to their community."

The Queensland Conservation Council's "Grow Local" campaign is promoting community gardens as one way of providing more local, fresh and environmentally-responsible food across South East Queensland. Grow Local spokesperson Jeff Poole says: "We really need to localise our food production which means cutting down the food miles. Community gardens are places where people learn the skills of growing food and that means we then have a more resilient food supply."

If disaster strikes in the future, argues Poole, localised food production should be able to react quickly. He says that community gardens also promote the use of many varieties of food plants which are not available in supermarkets.

Dr Kristen Lyons, of the University of Queensland's School of Social Sciences, studies the links between communities

and how we grow and consume food. She says as well as the more obvious benefits of community gardens, such as an increase in local fresh food production, there are other positives.

"In built-up areas so many of the spaces where we spend time are commodified – that is, they're places where we have to spend money. But a community garden is a place where people can engage with each other that doesn't involve some kind of cash transaction. Often people are disconnected from where their food comes from. Most of us don't understand seasonality or how the food is grown – but growing food is a powerful way for people to reconnect with the environment."

Dr Shawn Somerset, of Griffith University, has been researching food production in urban areas and believes community gardens have a big role to play in improving our health. "Obviously the gardens are there to produce food," he says, "but they are also a hub for a whole range of social activities."

Griffith University also has its own community garden at its Logan campus which is helping local refugee and migrant communities from Africa and Pacific Islands to integrate. "This is not just about getting more vitamins," says Dr Somerset. "It is also helping increase people's activity levels and their social interaction with others. That enhances the health of a community and of society."

"There are a lot of people who have busy stressful lives but then they go and nurture some plants in the garden and it makes them feel just a little bit more sane."

To find a community garden near you, or for more details see [www.grow-local.com.au/grow-local/community-gardens](http://www.grow-local.com.au/grow-local/community-gardens)

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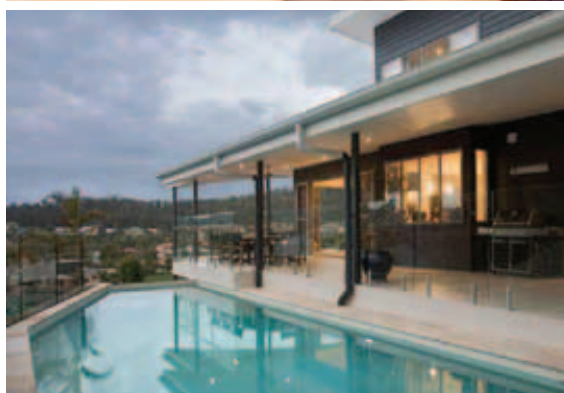
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