

Demeter's Daughters Talk

by Katie Little (March 2010)

The theme Demeter's Daughters is about women providing food for their family. My piece is about my garden, which I think you'll find supplies us with a lot more than just food.

The first memory I have of gardening is of digging up a little patch of soil in my parent's backyard in Paddington and sowing silverbeet seeds. I must have cared for them reasonably well as I remember the huge dark glossy green leaves and how proud I was of them. I loved them so much in fact that my parent's suggestion of cooking them for dinner was positively horrifying! I wouldn't let anyone go near them with a knife and fork!

Although my parents were not gardeners my grandmother was, and I fondly remember her Kirribilli apartment where I would go to visit. The window sill was lined with African Violets, the little fuzzy leaves of which would be left to strike in crystal tumblers, and on her balcony was an odd collection of pots that she'd pour the dregs of the teapot onto. Her advice to any plant was to 'give it a good bucket of water', advice to which I still lovingly adhere to.

My parents' garden was mainly ornamental camellias and ivy but down the back was an enormous old mulberry tree that had come with the house. Who knows how old it was... The trunk was at least a couple of feet in diameter, covered with rough bark and big knobby bulges. Friends and I would climb the tree to pick mulberries and would come back down to earth hours later stained purple from head to toe.

I remember also picking a few small green beans that had escaped the neighbour's yard and popped through our fence. My Mum obligingly boiled them for me and served them up seasoned with salt and pepper. They were the best beans I had ever tasted and maybe that was the first spark of a desire in me to grow my own food.

I don't know about you but I have never enjoyed supermarket shopping - the confusion of too many products to choose from, the muzak and fluorescent lighting, everything wrapped in plastic with no smell or texture. It is so important to me, particularly now as a mother, to know where my food has come from, without having to read the small print on a label.



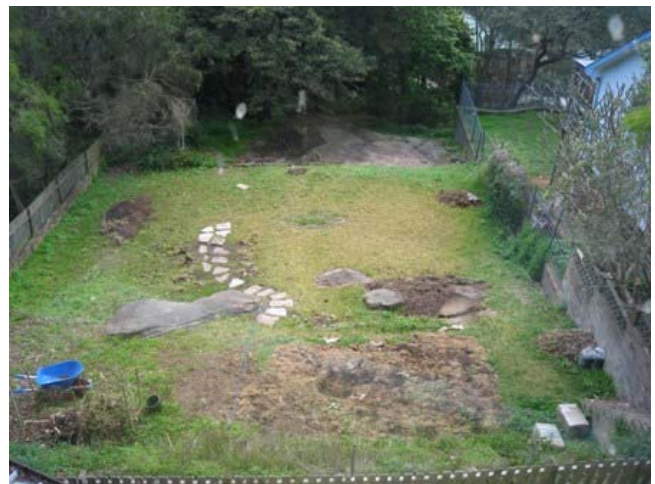
Above: our first garden
Right: making a start

Just before my son Tom turned one we moved out of our inner city apartment and bought the first house we could afford. The real estate agent wasn't joking when they advertised that it was 'full of potential' - it really didn't have much else! The block was large but sloping and the garden was full of nothing but morning glory and mosquitoes.

I remember playing a game on a long car trip with my sister-in-law's family, asking her five year old various questions to pass the time. "Where does rain come from?" "Clouds", "Where do leaves come from?" "Trees", "Where does milk come from?" "Coles". No matter how many hints I gave - her answer was irrefutable. I tried asking her where honey came from, and eggs, but each time her answer was the same: 'Coles'.

You have to laugh because the implications of this are really quite alarming. In this day and age the majority of children are able to recognize dozens of logos - MacDonalds, Coca Cola, Lego but have trouble naming the most common animals and plants that live around us.

So you see I had always wanted to grow my own food but it was only when I became a mother that the desire for a garden really became a priority.



I really knew next to nothing about gardening but undeterred I plunged in reading books and magazines, researching everything from crop rotation to companion planting. I drew plans and sketches noting sunlight and wind direction and even stood in the rain noting where water coursed or flooded. Being so exposed with neither a shrub nor tree, the ground would get baking hot then become boggy and waterlogged for days following rain. I dug down to discover clay and bush rock beneath a thin layer of topsoil and began to worry I would never grow anything but weeds.



Just as I began to despair I came across a book by a controversial Australian Peter Andrews. He likened my clay deposits to great sponges able to soak up and store water for deep-rooted trees during the hot summer months. Encouraged, I went and planted three Sydney Blue Gums, several paperbarks and bottlebrush and that was the end of my waterlogging problem.

The young trees soared upwards almost before our very eyes and within a year the harsh sun had been softened to a lovely dappled light.

That was the start of my passion for natives which has grown now to include kangaroo paws, grevilles, banksias, wattle, Christmas bush, native violets and mint, lillypillies, blueberry ash and dichondra – a ground cover much more beautiful than lawn that never needs mowing!

Peter Andrews also changed my thinking about weeds, which was a good thing as I was starting to become



dispirited by them! His book taught me to see weeds as friends rather than foes, holding the soil together repairing erosion, and paving the way for other more fragile plants that struggled to grow in harsh conditions. I no longer hated the Morning Glory but realized we both had the same goal – to convert my steep rocky lawn into lush greenness.

I decided to change my perspective on the bush rock too. Days of digging exposed a beautiful outcrop that

inspired a pond and Japanese style bridge. Soon striped marsh frogs filled the evening with a cacophony of sound and the mosquitoes disappeared! Friends shared water iris that multiplied prolifically and for his birthday my husband received a bag of Koi fish. I didn't think they'd survive the kookaburras but they were smarter than I thought! They hid beneath the bridge my husband had made and surprised us by having lots of baby fish! I couldn't have predicted what an enormous change adding the pond instantly made to the biodiversity of our garden. Spiders started spinning webs over the water,



dragonflies and bees started to appear and water skinks started sunning themselves around it. The frogs were so noisy that our neighbours thought we had installed some kind of machinery in the garden! The neighbours weren't the only ones hearing the beautiful cacophony of noise emanating from our pond however, my husband was the one lucky enough to discover a huge red bellied black snake half submerged on a hot summers day. It was really a magnificent animal and we left the garden alone for the couple of days he made himself at home. The frogs on the first night sounded like this...(make lots of clicking noises with your tongue!) the second night like this... (make one of two clicking noises) the third night... (silence!) By the fourth day our sleek elapid had packed up and moved on. So you see I am not the only one looking for dinner in the garden!



My garden has become a feast for the senses. Ruby red rainbow chard, climbing broadbeans, black Russian tomatoes, the beautiful aroma of sage leaves and peppery nastertium. One summer I had bowlfuls of the most luscious strawberries I've ever tasted.

I have also discovered the flowers of some plants are just as lovely as the fruit! The pretty blossoms of apple trees, incredible purple passionfruit flowers, and the sweet perfume of citrus. Other fruit trees in the garden include mango, pears, fig, tamarillos, banana and a huge paw paw that popped up all by itself. And I have planted fruits I have only read about too and patiently wait to taste - white sapote, pineapple fejoa and Chilean guava.



Being a relatively new gardener I am constantly gobsmacked by the beauty of flowers...

...waist high towers of foxgloves are easily my favourite. Dainty primroses and delphinium and the heady scent of jasmine, gardenias and sweet peas have attracted bees and butterflies from afar that also attract birds. Their sounds are all around – the racket of rainbow lorikeets, bell-like king parrots, melodic butcherbirds and currawongs, and late at night a haunting tawny frogmouth no doubt watching my compost heap for small mammals. At the moment I have a family of bush turkeys visiting, the littlest is only the size of a quail.



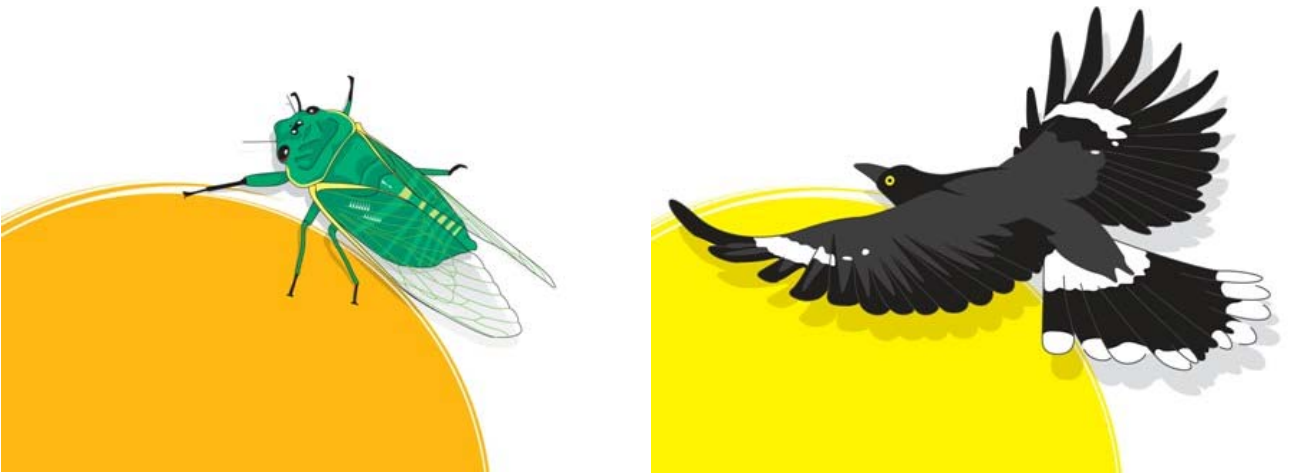
Ultimately I would love to attract tiny threatened birds too such as the exquisite electric blue fairy wren that were once common before gardens became too neat and paved. They are in desperate need of safe scrubby areas in our backyards to survive – an area of thick growing, prickly natives is ideal.



It is amazing to think back to what my garden was like only four years ago when the only wildlife I could see were common garden lizards by the dozen. My husband, Timothy Poulton, has been particularly inspired by the microcosm that has grown in the garden and has taken up macro photography to capture some of the incredible details that most of us are completely unaware of...



And it has inspired me to create artwork as well...



My garden has done a lot more than just supply food.... I have made friends through gardening. I share seedlings and produce with neighbours. My friends' kids love my garden because it has 'things you can eat in it'. I hope to join a community garden project proposed for Figtree Park where I could learn from people rather than books! Comparing my inner city life to the life I live now, it has become so much more joyful and holistic since taking up a spade and secateurs. By giving a little time and energy to care for the land I live on I am caring for a small portion of the planet and it in turn is nurturing me, my family and my community a thousand fold.

It is hard to believe that this (left below) is what my garden looked like only four years ago...

And this is what it looks like today... Thank you!

