

FOOD for thought

Tamsyn Murray has a Masters degree in Rural Development and Agroecosystem Health and a PhD in Agriculture, specifically in ecosystem approaches to human health in the Amazon. She ran a small community supported farm for several years in Canada that fed 35 families during the summer months. She lives in Kerrie, near Woodend, where she farms sheep, cows, pigs and hens, grows most of the fruit and vegetables that feed her family and runs Josh's Rainbow Eggs, with much help from Josh.



with Dr. Tamsyn Murray

If you want to be happy for a week, get married. If you want to be happy for a month, kill a pig, and if you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden.

The weekend's glorious spring weather enticed me into the garden. It made me think we should all be in the garden and that perhaps one of the most ethical things we can do as a consumer is become a producer. Deciding to have your own garden and your own food is life changing. This month I have highlighted seven essential aspects that will make your gardening easy and enjoyable and help you make the step to becoming an engaged and ethical producer.



Raised beds

A great vegetable garden begins with raised beds. We made this discovery almost by accident. After our first year on the farm, we noticed how the children's beds were flourishing, bursting with vegetables. My veggies were pitiful in comparison and overcome with weeds. We had made the kids raised beds from the old water tank James had cleverly cut it into three and we filled it with some old compost we found. From that moment standing in awe at the obvious truth handed to us, we began our journey creating as many raised beds as we needed. Initially we bought 12 zinc beds, 1.5m wide and 3m long, and 80cm high. A few years later we built our own from red gum, 1.5m wide and 6m long. The raised beds transformed my gardening experience. Although I am not that old and still relatively flexible, working at waist height is wonderful. You can see everything - it is rather like looking at a table. Whenever I walk past a bed, it is rare for me not to pick something, a flower, a pea, or perhaps pull a weed or grab a snail. If it is at your feet, you don't bend down and do this. The bed suddenly becomes so much more accessible and so you interact with your garden more.

First steps: buy straw bales and create your own raised bed in a few hours.

No-dig gardening

The second way the raised beds transformed my garden was because they allowed me to do no-dig gardening. No-dig gardening mirrors the natural processes we see in forests. The basic premise is you create your own "soil" through layering different materials in your bed, just like in the forest where layers of leaves, grasses, decaying branches and animal manure decompose to create soil. It is

Planting a garden

an instant garden. Within a couple of weeks the materials begin to break down and so create the most beautiful fertile compost in which your plants can grow. The somewhat incidental although equally wonderful consequence of your "compost" bed, is that there are no weeds. Weed seeds are in the soil. It is truly amazing, as now you have more time to plant and to pick rather than weed, and so you have more great produce to eat, which is ultimately what brings the greatest satisfaction. I use a rather simplified version of no dig. I alternate layers of lucerne with manure, and on the last layer of lucerne I apply about 3-5cm of compost to act as a bed for the seeds. I plant right into the bed immediately after preparing. You do not need to wait. The layers of lucerne are about 20cm and the manure about 5cm.

First steps: use fallen leaves, grass clippings, a bale of lucerne hay and a couple of bags of manure



Succession planting

The combination of the raised beds and the no dig weed free compost means there is no time consuming bed preparation needed before planting. Instead planting takes minutes and can be done every few weeks. Such succession planting is vital to your garden veggies replacing those from the store. It also helps when for whatever reason some things don't grow, or get eaten, as a few weeks later you are planting again. If you plant often, you plant less and it is easier to find an hour or so every few weeks, than a whole day twice a year. You will eat veggies that are vibrant and at their peak, rather than eating the older bitter lettuce because your next lettuce is months away.

First steps: begin with the vegetables you eat every day and ones that taste so great when eaten straight out of the garden - lettuce, carrots, radishes, cucumbers, beans, peas, broccoli, and herbs such as coriander, basil, tarragon and parsley.

Growing up: vertical gardening

Trellises can transform your garden. They allow you to grow so much more in the same space, they reduce the incidence of fungi and diseases as there is more airflow around the plants, they make it much easier to pick, and the veggies look great climbing their way up the trellis.

First steps: star pickets with string every 30 cm will do the trick



Companion planting

I have always planted companions in the corners of my beds. My companion plants are herbs, flowers, insect repellents and attractors, even wild plants. In the beginning I read several books and chose a number of plants such as borage for bees, curry and tansy to repel and scented geraniums to attract. One of my favourites is lemon verbena. As I walk by I pinch off a small leaf and roll it in my fingers and then breathe the enlivening citrus fragrance, a few leaves in hot water is equally uplifting. I mix my veggies, carrots and leeks, corn and lettuce, basil and tomatoes. I also plant flowers, bright ones like sunflowers, zinnias, dahlias, nasturtiums, golden sage. When you look out upon your garden the flowers add something very special and then when you pick food you can also bring flowers into the house for the table. Let some of your veggies go to seed - great ones are broccoli, coriander, rocket, fennel. When the flowers emerge the insect life in your garden grows exponentially, and the flowers are bright and beautiful, and cost you nothing.

Mulch and fertilizers

In nature we never see bare soil. Lucerne and pea straw are my first choices for mulch. Mulch is essential as it protects the soil, creates a cool moist ecosystem where soil life can thrive, and eventually breaks down and feeds your plants. With raised beds, fertilizers are not necessary as the bed is incredibly fertile. I do however add trace elements, such as seaweed, rock minerals, and dolomite.

I hope I have sowed some seeds in your imagination. Spring is here - there is no better time than now to plant your garden.

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