

HOW DOES YOUR CAULIFLOWER GROW?



Christina samples her produce

Have you been hooked by growing-your-own vegetables? Do you visit Peter Cundall's vegetable patch in Hobart's Botanical Gardens and wish you could transport it back to your place? Do raised beds, no-dig gardens, purple carrots, companion planting, seed-gathering and hot composting mean anything to you? Do you lie awake at night worrying whether your seedlings are coping with the frost outside your window? Do you catch yourself wondering how to get the right balance of nitrogen to carbon in your compost while waiting for the traffic lights to change? Or are you someone who turns the page when you get to that section of the weekend paper, bemused at so much fuss over a few tomato plants?

FIMBY, Food In My Back Yard, was founded in 2008 by Christina Giuliani and Juliet Chapman in response to a surge in interest in growing vegetables. At the time it struck them that if growing your own vegetables was to get beyond a craze, and become a way of life, gardeners needed someone to turn to when decisions and problems arose. And so they put out their shingle.

When a new mother brings her baby home from hospital she's often met with a barrage of advice. Similarly on starting a vegetable garden a lot of well-intended advice will come your way. Far from adding to this barrage with yet another list of how-to's, FIMBY has a different brief. Christina and Juliet set out to tailor a very personal vegetable garden, and a way of working together to achieve it, in close consultation with members.

FIMBY, as Christina describes it, is no gardening Freemasonry. It has members of every stripe. At one end are those who require nothing more than a monthly newsletter with seasonal pointers, while at the other are members who want their hands held, from sowing to harvesting, and everything in between.

'Everything is easy once you know how' is received wisdom for many practical domestic skills - from cooking, gardening, DIY, to sewing. This saying is, of course, right. Planting from seed really is much easier once you understand that some seeds sprout best after being soaked, and have grasped that it's futile planting carrots in winter. However Christina and her merry band at FIMBY have taken this wisdom one step further: vegetable gardening is much easier once you've been shown how.

Taking the guesswork out of growing vegetables was the inspiration for FIMBY - or, from clueless gardening to enlightened gardening. Forget wilting seedling trays sitting forlornly at DIY store checkouts, Christina and Juliet bring their own seeds and only make suggestions for planting after a good long chat about what your household actually likes to eat. After all there's no point becoming the Eastern shore's Queen of silver beet if your family groans at the sight of dark green leaves piled up on the kitchen bench.

And if you're completely lacking in gardening confidence, FIMBY will take you from an unpromising square of soil to worm-filled bounty in a few easy seasons. Or perhaps you already have a green thumb but would like to know the finer points of grafting or propagating. Or you might be honest enough to admit that you're more interested in eating your produce than in growing it - and opt for a cheese-making workshop, learning how to shape your own cheese before gobbling it up.

Christina and Juliet's hunch has proven to be right. Growing your own vegetables isn't just a craze - akin to breeding silkworms in your basement or exploding cider in your garage. More and more people are craving authenticity in their lives. They're looking for real experiences. Growing your own vegetables, for anyone who's graduated beyond watching bean sprouts grow on cotton wool on the window sill, is no fantasy. It's demanding and rewarding and - like carpentry or sailing - never entirely mastered. Even the most experienced gardener gets used to things going wrong.

Story: Helen Hayward

Images: Kate Burton

When my kids were small one of their favourite picture books, still picked up from time to time, was a story about a rabbit called Lop Ear. Lop Ear is an avid gardener who, after many trials in his vegetable garden, goes on to win first prize in the local agricultural show for Best Cauliflower. But not before he loses cauliflower after cauliflower to the caterpillars in his garden which are so partial to them.

Lop Ear tries everything to rid his vegetable beds of caterpillars – ground pepper, unpleasant noise, sprinklings of vinegar. In despair he gives up, goes inside, sits down at his kitchen table and writes two notes. One note reads ‘Eat These’ and the other ‘Please Don’t Eat These’. Miraculously the caterpillars respect Lop Ear’s notes and only eat their allotted share – leaving the remaining cauliflowers to grow to prize-winning size. Lop Ear is an organic gardener.

Ironically enough Christina Guiliano rears rabbits in her backyard in South Hobart – beautifully tended, well fed and humanely-killed rabbits for her family’s table. And yet even this process causes her ethical problems: once one of her rabbits acquires a name and becomes effectively a family member, she finds she’s unable to eat it, however humanely it meets its end.

Chickens are next in line to share her backyard, where they’ll be moved around under an elaborate aluminum frame, the design of which she’s still fine-tuning. An agricultural farming and corporate energy consultant in her other life, Christina is always keen to find ways to lighten her footprint on the planet – not in a greenie alternative reaction to mainstream culture, but in ways that bring as many people as possible with her. With over a hundred members, clearly the FIMBY message is catching on.

She is however no purist, and enjoys working with people from all walks of life, with every level of commitment. From clients who are happy to bring in the diggers and completely alter the lay of their garden, to a client with hardly any backyard who has quietly colonised her street’s medium strip, planting it up with rhubarb, zucchini and snow peas – a sure-fire way to suss out her neighbours’ sympathies.

Many of FIMBY’s clients are new to gardening, or at least experience themselves in this light. There’s so much information out there that it can be hard to admit finding all this information a bit intimidating. Far from liberating you into growing armfuls of succulent vegetables, all too often you end up throwing up your hands and feeling disheartened. Do you know the feeling? I know I do.

Having worked with scores of gardeners Christina appreciates just how personal vegetable gardening is. Just as a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work when it comes to learning to cook, she’s aware that vegetable gardens thrive best when they dovetail with a person’s particular needs and wishes. (Why grow fennel when your partner hates even the smell of it in the fridge?)

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Christina nurtures sprouts and seeds in her kitchen



The garden is full of surprises



The house has a rustic feel – even the produce!



Good compost is full of worms and is vital for a productive garden

Vegetable gardens evolve – they’re the home of seasonality. After three years of watching people being changed by turning their soil Christina is confident that the experience of growing your own food has a knock-on effect on your worldview. ‘No matter how you vote,’ she says, ‘having your own vegetables in your fridge can’t help but impact on you’.

One of her favourite clients began her journey as a self-confessed ‘clueless gardener’ with two regular-sized colour-bond raised beds. These days Jackie Purves takes especial pride in taking bags of excess snow peas into her colleagues at work – and gathered 80kg of zucchini in just her second season. That’s a lot of pickle.

Clearly Christina gets genuine pleasure from her clients’ delight in harvesting real food. Although she can make better money as a corporate consultant, she finds the enthusiasm generated by helping members growing things in their garden - and of overcoming initial hesitations and fears of failure - especially rewarding.

She’s now persuaded that when it comes to practical matters, like sowing and pruning and composting, it’s not enough to know how to do things. For it to really sink you need to be shown how to do them. And even then, even after you’ve been shown how to do something, often you have to do it a few times for it to become familiar, and then a few more times again for it to become native.

Yes, of course, some of us really are too busy to grow our own vegetables. However what Christina has discovered, time and again, is how empowering and satisfying it can be to watch your own carrot tops push through the topsoil, to thin and to tend them until, at last, they’re big enough to pull up, admire and even eat. There’s a deep contentment, unlike no other, that comes from harvesting your own food – even if it’s just a few herbs from pots in the courtyard.

Children’s stories are full of tales of planting seeds and waiting and perhaps singing and then waiting some more for them to grow. Even once we’ve grown up there’s something miraculous about growing things that makes us feel that we’re part of a loop. For many of us this experience of being part of a loop is just as rewarding, just as reassuring, as the taste of home-grown carrots.

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