

~ How does it work? I ~

'Local is lovely, simple is sustainable'

The most common question people ask about the Community Fruit & Vege Swap is "How does it work?" By this they mean how do we calculate the relative values of the produce, and ensure that one gets one's "money's worth", as it were. The short answer is that we don't, and I'll address that the question more fully in another blog (see *How does it work? - II, Off the scales*).

How it actually works - that is, what makes the Community Fruit & Vege Swap happen - is, first and foremost, its simplicity. There is no administrative structure. No committee. No meetings. No membership. No fees. No bookwork. No lists, rules, or registers. No money changes hands, and that is essential. No tasks, no rosters, no conflicts.

Because of this it's not tedious for anyone, least of all for me. This is of critical importance. I started the Fruit & Vege Swap because we had an abundance of figs. My husband said, "What are we going to do with all these figs?" Walking around the streets of West Croydon with my small son, I'd noticed many fruit trees and some impressive vege gardens in the area. It occurred to me that everyone must have the same problem: an abundance of one or certain items, verging on the problematic, and at the same time an absence of others. This is the nature of gardening, particularly of fruit trees.

I decided to create the opportunity to meet with others and swap their produce for some of our figs, peaches and tomatoes. I had very little time, a one year old child, and a swag of other paid and unpaid commitments. In order for this to work, it had to take minimum time and effort. It had to be just one very small component of a very full life. In order to be sustainable for me, it had to be less than non burdensome - it practically had to run itself.

And it does. That's the beauty of it. I made flyers and letterboxed them as I walked to the supermarket, to playgroup, to the park. My little son said "Mamma is posting lots of letters!" I made posters and put them up at

the local cafes, supermarkets, schools and churches. These were simply black and white, A4 pages printed from my computer. I contacted the local paper and asked them to place the notice in the free noticeboard section. This was particularly effective, although all modes of attracting interest worked.

Then I turned up at the park, with some figs, to see what would happen. I really had no expectations, and this was part of the magic. I didn't care if it worked or not. I felt happy distributing the leaflets and posters, I was doing something I believed in. I didn't care if ten people came, or a hundred, or one, as long as they relieved me of some figs, if they brought something else, so much the better. (So went my minimalist reasoning, not wanting to hope for too much - that was before I tasted the succulent peaches, fresh curry leaves, home-made apricot jam.) The worst that could happen was that my son spent a pleasant half-hour playing in the park on a Saturday morning.

As far as the costs go, and they are minimal (our 2-sided, 4-up A4 flyers cost \$28 for 2000 on 100% recycled paper), a pivotal step in bringing the Swap into existence was the decision to foot the costs myself - that I would simply pay. The cost, the funding source, can so easily be the sticking point in doing something which brings you real satisfaction, and yet in reality the costs were less than a single restaurant meal. All that's required is to open your heart and choose to *give* - an instinct we're taught from an early age to distrust. Yes, I want to do this, it makes me happy; therefore, I will be the one, I will do what it takes, and I'll personally pay what it costs.

One way I use to explain to people about the Fruit & Vege Swap is that you should bring only what is *surplus* to your own household's needs. That way, (a) you can't lose, and (b) if you get anything back, it's a gain. I always do get something back, and within a few weeks of starting the Swap I'd gained back for my household, in kind, more

than the equivalent of the money I'd invested. Besides, I'd had fun doing it. How much does your household spend on fruit and veges per week over summer? And can anything you buy in a shop compare with the taste of fruit picked ripe off the tree the same morning?

I considered applying for a Council grant for our second summer of swapping, so that I could purchase a banner to welcome people to the swap and inform passers-by about what was taking place. Through my enquiries I understood that the process would be bureaucratic, intrusive and time-consuming, as government processes are. As I've already said, I had very little time to invest in the project and really couldn't be bothered. Accountability brings extra administration and additional responsibility, and we would undeniably in some way become accountable - for what we did, how often, how many attended; there would perhaps be insurance liabilities and red tape. The council would want their logo on our materials - the banner, flyers, posters - and I didn't want people to think it was run by the council; I wanted people to know that it was run by *us* - local residents, individuals, people like them. People appreciate this; some people voluntarily make donations towards the costs, while others photocopy and distribute flyers using their own resources.

Then I drove past a sign on Port Road advertising banners for \$77 a square metre. I needed less than one metre, and gained easily the financial equivalent back during a single summer's swapping.

Of course, we swap much more than produce; gardening and cooking ideas and knowledge flow freely at the meetings, along with local history and personal stories. It all happens organically, of its own accord and without plans, pressure or structure. It feels wonderful.

The answer to 'How does it work?', besides its simplicity, is that the Community Fruit & Vege Swap is deeply, authentically *local*. Although our 'doors' are open (well, figuratively speaking - we have no doors at the pagoda in the park!) and we welcome all comers, the Swap is publicised only within a strictly local area. We letterbox in a radius of

about 2km. People walk to the swap on foot. The biggest non-tangible benefit of the Swap is that people meet their neighbours. It sounds obvious, but it feels amazing; something we are unaccustomed to in modern Australian society. It feels surprising, on swap mornings, to see walking towards you in the park clusters of people you know. Walking through our local area with my son, we no longer feel we're in an inhospitable place, a no-man's land. Suddenly the streets are inhabited, personalised: "That's Sue's house." "That's where Ned lives, look, he's left his toys out." We feel safer, connected - like part of a *community*.

It's because people can walk there (or drive there very quickly), because it's in their own park, and because they meet their own neighbours, that people continue to come. Its local nature is the glue that holds the swap together. Several not-for-profit organisations in Australia, including at least one in Adelaide, have set up swap meets for backyard produce. It's a great idea (actually, I pinched it), and no doubt brings together members with philosophies in common. But apart from feeling too structured and therefore too pressured (before attending we had to fill in surveys specifying what type of produce, as well as what gardening and cooking knowledge, we planned to contribute, and wished to acquire), the idea of having to drive somewhere put me off. If we're going to swap backyard produce in order to reduce food miles, let's walk there! Even with little publicity, and little motivation as yet for people to diverge from the accepted lifestyle of driving to the shops for food, the 2008-9 Swap showed the amazing diversity and abundance one tiny local area produces.

Our swap doesn't need to get bigger, or fancier. It doesn't need a structure or funding or to come under the auspices of other things. It's beautiful, small, simple and local. It works, and we love it! If we begin attracting the attention of many people from surrounding areas, I will encourage them to start their own. My vision is of hundreds of these swaps mushrooming all over Australia.

It's too easy to wait for someone else to do things - the Council, or government, or an organisation to spring up, or perhaps

"somebody" with more time or money or experience than ourselves. Yet it's just so simple to do something like this. It's not hard and it's not expensive. All it takes is one person who decides they will.

In a future where established structures and authorities, including state and local governments, will be stretched to breaking point by climate change and social change in an increasingly stressed world, we're going to need to stop expecting 'someone else' to do things, and, if we want something done, just do it ourselves. We are going to need to make the most of resources within arm's reach - including land, food, people power, skills and knowledge. We might as well start practicing now.

If you like the idea of the Community Fruit & Vege Swap, run one yourself. It's that simple! For support, to discuss how, to visit our swap, or for templates for our flyers and posters, please don't hesitate to contact us.

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