

~ How does it work? II ~

'Off the scales'

The most common question people ask about the Community Fruit & Vege Swap is "How does it work?" By this they mean, "How do I know I'll take home the equivalent of what I bring?" I know that they expect me to explain some kind of bartering system, a kilo of that for a kilo of this, maybe a dozen figs for three tomatoes.

But that's not how it works. There are no scales. Nobody brings items in kilo bags, and if they did they'd soon be disabused. I explain to those who phone about the Swap that we spread all the produce out on the table, and then everyone takes what they want and what they need, roughly in proportion to what they brought. Yes, that's right (I explain, as the other voice invariably grows sceptical), it's a kind of honour system. The fact is, we've never had trouble with anyone taking more than they should. Instead it's me, each week, urging people to dig in, take more, take what's left, so I won't be lumbered with more leftovers than I can use.

The principle on which the Community Fruit & Vege Swap operates is not *trading* or *bartering*, but *sharing*. People find this hard to grasp. It's something we're not used to in modern Australian society. Everyone is cautious about protecting their assets, anxious about what they might lose. This is how we've been taught to be, perhaps with good reason, but in some ways conserving can be the other face of impoverishment, because nobody starts giving unless someone is willing to go first. In order to receive, we must first dare to give.

I started the Fruit & Vege Swap because we had an abundance of figs. My husband said, "What on earth are we going to do with all these figs?" My primary motivation was to avoid seeing our figs rotting on the ground, rather than to get something back, but if I did so, all the better. If I met people, all the better. I decided to organise the Fruit & Vege Swap purely on my own account - in my own time, in my own name, at my own expense. A few kilos of fruit would quickly return the investment, but I really wasn't attached to the

outcome. I thought that the worst that could happen was my son would have a nice play at the park on Saturday mornings. The Swap was born in this spirit, and in this spirit it flourishes.

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, you can't lose: by sharing your surplus, you reduce waste and gain the satisfaction of knowing someone else is enjoying your produce, without it costing you anything. But nobody ever goes home empty handed. Since what you brought was surplus, the diversity that you gain - an amazing variety of fresh, ripe fruit, vegetables, herbs, along with seeds, cuttings, plants and flowers - is a bounty. As people leave the swap each week with everything from peaches to pomegranates, lemons to curry leaves, they're visibly happy with their exchange.

We swap much more than fruit and vegetables. People bring preserves, such as chutneys, brandy sauce or jam. Recipes and serving suggestions fly above the jam bottles, herbs, exotic fruits. Somebody brought lilly-pillies; we're still looking out for a good recipe. Somebody brought rhubarb; the next week, bottles of home-made ginger syrup appeared to eat on it, stewed, with yoghurt. For the last swap of the year, one person brought freshly made scones and another brought home-made apricot jam.

As the summer produce tapered off, people began bringing other things to swap - plants, cuttings, seeds, bulbs. For anyone interested in produce - and coming to the Swap visibly *increases* people's interest, since producing becomes more interesting and rewarding through the act of attending - an interest in gardening is a natural extension. We have some keen, expert gardeners and others who are just delighted to take the seeds or cuttings, shove them in and see what happens. Some with amazing, established gardens and some whose gardens are just beginning. Some who have little time or

interest in gardening and are just happy to avoid wasting the harvest of their fruit trees.

The Vege Swap brings together people whose paths would never normally cross - professionals, students, retirees, new arrivals to Australia. Life in modern Australian urban society embodies the specialisation and segregation encouraged and valued by our society. We stream out of our houses and commute to places where we mingle with others similar to us in age, status, cultural background and professional class. We socialise in similar patterns, then retire behind closed doors and gates to our "privacy". Don't misunderstand me: I love and value privacy. But the demographic diversity of our streets and suburbs is not reflected in the actual lived spaces of our lives.

At the Community Fruit & Vege Swap you may easily find yourself discussing the use of herbs with a well-known professional chef and business owner, or the propagation of tropical plants with a specialist in infectious diseases. One day I found myself discussing climate change, urban activism and the future of food with a pair of dreadlocked students. "Have you seen the film about Cuba and peak oil?" asked the girl. "Apparently they grow fruit and vegetables on every spare centimetre, even in the middle of the city." Just as I replied that I had, the woman next to me turned around and said, "My husband and I just got back from several weeks in Cuba." "What was it like?" the girl asked, eyes widening as she saw propaganda poised to hurtle into eye witness experience. "Shocking," replied the older woman. "People go months without seeing a piece of fruit."

As the weather cooled and the summer produce dwindled down to a few odd items, this summer's Community Fruit & Vege Swap drew to a close. However, the regular attendees were unwilling to relinquish the sense of connection and friendship. The group will continue to meet monthly over the cooler months as an "open garden circle" - the warmer domestic environment offering an excuse to see and experience each other's gardens, whose fruits we've already tasted. Outlining this concept to one attendee, I said "For instance, it's interesting to see how the beds are positioned and planted..." "Beds???"

she replied, underlining the richness of perspectives within this small group.

Let's suppose that someone brings kilo of tomatoes, another person a jar of apricot jam, and a third person half a dozen eggs. The tomatoes have been carefully planted into well dug and fertilised beds, tended, weeded, aerated, staked, pruned, and above all have been watered by hand throughout a long hot summer of water restrictions - at 2am after the owner returned from working evening shifts. The jar of apricot jam has been made to an old family recipe by a professional chef in 40+° heat. The eggs come from chickens who are "more family than pets", who sit on their owners' laps as they watch tv and are kept cool in a wading pool during periods of extreme heat - in addition, of course, to wandering and scratching freely among grass and plants and generally living their lives with the full enjoyment of their natural instincts. (Well, almost - there's no rooster.) How will you measure the relative values of these items - the labour, the fertiliser, the time, the precious water? The unrivalled flavour of ripe-picked fruit; the recipe perfected over generations and the professional expertise brought to bear on its execution? The *care*?

We are accustomed to an economic system in which the worth of things is measured according to only one dimension - their monetary value. I can see that this makes it possible for society to function, and I'm certainly not claiming to be able to formulate any better system. All I'm saying is that the Fruit and Vege Swap, in a small but important way, allows us to step out of that one-dimensional model and see things with the kind of complexity that can't be translated into dollar values. Time, care, labour, effort, knowledge, skill - how do you measure these things? You don't - you just value them, and in order to maximise that value you share them, abundantly.

One day a woman arrived at the Fruit & Vege Swap with nothing to swap, asking whether we would sell items. The answer is always 'no' - it would completely change the spirit of the swap were money to change hands. She insisted, asking the price for half a dozen eggs. I asked the owner of the hens, "How much are free range eggs in the shops?"

and then added a dollar or so to the price. "Oh" the woman replied, "they're not cheap." "No," I replied calmly. "They're not." And the woman went away. If that's what you're looking for, you've come to the wrong place. The goods we swap are not cheap - they're of inestimable worth.

People frequently do come without something tangible to swap, whether this is because it's their first visit, because they are between harvests, or because they don't have a garden. I welcome them to sit with us and invite them to make a donation to our costs. If they come with a compatible spirit, they never go away empty handed. Often things even out over the weeks or months – perhaps you come empty handed while someone else brings baskets of peaches, but your autumn plum tree fills buckets when the other tree is bare. This is another way of seeing equivalence – over time, rather than as an instant exchange.

Although I don't align myself with any "ism", I guess the Fruit & Vege Swap also reminds me a little of the old communist maxim (not necessarily enacted, I should note, in supposedly 'communist' systems) - "from each to his ability, to each to his need". An elderly couple who have relinquished their garden to live in a retirement unit can bring little or no produce to swap. Yet they bring good company, local history, gardening tips often collected over a lifetime in local conditions, or other kinds of knowledge. At the same time their physical needs are correspondingly modest - they're delighted to take home just a handful of things, perhaps two figs and a pair of tomatoes, which the rest of us can easily spare, in exchange for the kinds of connections across generations, across profession, background and class which are often scant in our lives.

One day a gentleman of venerable years attended the swap for the first time. He said he had little to swap since his gardening is limited by his inability to stoop to the ground, so he reaps only a small harvest from plants in raised tubs. He began talking spiritedly about his family's arrival in the Croydon area from England in 1914. He described the shops, streets and schools in our local area during his childhood in the 1920s and painted verbal

portraits of local residents. As we listened, the area we know as our local zone changed its aspect in our minds and began to look altogether different.

As he left the swap that day, eyes twinkling and full of enthusiasm and thanks for our company, he turned back and told us that it was the fourth anniversary of his wife's death.

Other people bring wider perspectives, childhoods in Europe, family backgrounds as pioneers in central Australia - a tapestry of ideas and experiences which keeps us avidly talking long beyond the specified time for the meet. It's a simple idea, a humble endeavour, but quietly powerful in its reach. This summer we have had at least two people among us with life threatening diagnoses. Setting them up with berries and cuttings from goji berry plants – an exceptionally rich source of antioxidants and vitamin C - is only the first layer of the ways in which this gathering may touch them.

Packing up after our second-last meet for the summer, I looked across the park and saw the tall figure of our oldest participant, the widower, leaning on his walking stick, sampling crunchy Indian snacks from a plastic container proffered by the slight figure of my Indian neighbour's young daughter. As I approached, I saw her mother had joined them and was holding out a packet, saying "This is what they are, and you can buy them in any Indian grocer." The lonely man smiled at the foreign young girl and said "I will. And every time I do, I'll think of you."

How do you measure that? To me, it's off the scale.

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