

~ This is Community ~

'Muuu-um. I don't want to go!' My son's voice is an irritating whine which has an effect on me similar to a mosquito in the bedroom.

We're on our way to an extra gathering of the Winter Open Garden Circle, the incarnation during the cooler months of the year of our West Croydon Community Fruit & Vege Swap. Once a month from May to October we gather in someone's garden, enjoy great company, hot drinks and morning tea, and get an inside look at one of the gardens where the wonderful summer produce originates.

Lisa is keen for us to visit her fledgling garden and is hungry for any tips, ideas and advice we can offer. I'm not sure who is going to come, or if anyone at all will turn up: the Vege Swap is like that, completely unpredictable, and I deliberately don't encumber it with RSVPs. I have found that even the tiniest impediment – such as the expectation of a commitment indicated beforehand – can inhibit the spontaneous way in which people feel able to participate.

Winter gatherings are always slow to get going, and warm up as gently as the morning sun warms Lisa's patio. People arrive; suddenly there's a babble of conversation. Morning tea appears as if by magic on the table. Produce accumulates seemingly of its own accord in baskets and buckets – silverbeet and English spinach, herbs, lemons, oranges. There are also cuttings and seedlings. Despite the protestations of keen gardeners that a garden in Adelaide's climate should easily produce as much food in winter as in summer, I have observed that produce at the Vege Swap is far less abundant during the cooler months. Nonetheless, somehow a bountiful spread always seems to materialise, and nobody ever goes home empty handed.

Lisa shows us her garden plan and brings to life before our eyes the vision of a complete garden in the space which is currently half-landscaped with a few vague shapes marked in: fruit trees, vegetable patches, compost and perhaps chickens. She considers the plan well worth the money she paid a gardening expert to devise it. However, she notes apologetically that 'we are probably not following it *exactly*'. This makes me smile. Gardening is not a precision science.

Through my participation in the Vege Swap, I have come to believe that gardening is about letting go of perfection and precision, perhaps even letting go of control. The

observant gardener quickly learns that no amount of expertise will suffice to control nature. Someone tells of a man they knew who took a ruler into the garden and measured the position of trees and garden beds to within centimetres. Five years later, his garden hadn't grown much from how it was then. Centimetre by centimetre is a hard way to go.

Each garden that we visit with the Circle is so different, reflecting the interests and inclinations, background, knowledge, financial position, living situation and the life experience and gardening experience of its owners. They're not model gardens, mostly – not gardens you'd see in a magazine, just ordinary gardens like yours or mine which sometimes produce wonderful food and other abundances, and which greatly enrich the lives of those who create them. Visiting these incredibly diverse gardens makes it clear that in gardening there's no right answer, just infinite possibilities.

Gardening is about trial and error, about getting to know your garden as you know your bedroom – intimately; or as you know your child – recognizing its individual needs and temperament and working with these to allow it to flourish to its maximum potential.

Crop success is dependent on so many factors which vary from one section of your garden to another, let alone from one garden to another. At the gathering someone recounts the story of a fruit tree which had never fruited, salvaged from the rubbish heap by a next door neighbour only to fruit abundantly in an identical position in the next-door garden. Those present agree that the success or failure of a particular crop is often inexplicable, but as you work your garden from season to season you gradually find out what works for you.

I often come home from the Vege Swap with a handful of cuttings, a few seedlings, or a packet or two of seeds. Because these have arrived by serendipity, as it were – I simply find that I have them in my hands, without planning or purchasing – I just 'stick them in and see what happens', without excessive attachment to the outcome. Sometimes nothing happens, and at other times wonderful successes result. This has taught me more about gardening – and produced more food – than all my carefully planned attempts.

At Lisa's we talk about fruit trees and we talk about pruning, we talk about compost and soil improvement and worms and shade, about irrigation and plants and planting and

everything related. People share information about their favourite products as well as their favourite information sources. Lisa comments afterwards: 'We got some really valuable ideas. I just felt like every individual had a valuable contribution. Literally everyone in the group is committed and knowledgeable!' Yet nobody here is an expert, we're not even particularly experienced – the really masterful gardeners among our circle are not present today. We speak from our own experience, our mistakes and our hard-earned or unexpected successes, and between us we find there is a lot to tell.

Morning tea is fabulous – crispbreads with rosemary-roasted pumpkin, vol au vents with cheese and bacon, fresh fruit and nuts, dips and crackers, and a block of chocolate. There are no rules here. Items contributed for morning tea aren't required to be 'healthy' nor to be 'vegetarian' nor 'organic'. They needn't be home made nor wrapped in biodegradable packaging. It is up to each participant's discretion what they bring, and how. Neither is there a stipulation that the produce we swap be grown 'organically'. There are many different styles and approaches to gardening represented here. Participants who have special requirements are free to ask other participants about how they grew the produce on offer.

The principle here is 'start from where you are'; the intention is to make everybody comfortable and welcome, so they can be part of the information exchange which inevitably fosters new ideas and new ways to try. One thing I've come to understand is that real change in human behaviour is slow and organic. It grows as gradually as a garden, germinating deep inside from the fertile soil of eagerness and acceptance. Lasting, positive change does not grow from a sense of inadequacy or out of self-reproach. Human beings are highly sensitive to signals which tell them they don't belong, or don't meet the standard. Anything which invites people to feel that they fall short in some way is an obstacle to change.

Children have arrived, a little boy and a baby, then an older girl. My son is in four-year-old heaven. The children play 'ring a rosy' with one of the mothers, with huge delight, and later I see them playing it again by themselves. They run races along the driveway, jump from one mountain of dirt to another, and my son loads his ute and trailer up with stones. I know that my son will be saying, over the next few days, "Muuu-um, when can we go to the Vege Swap again?"

This little boy has grown up with the Vege Swap – he'd just passed his first birthday when he rode on my back in his baby carrier to the Swaps that first summer. Every time we come home from the Swap he seems to glow. He thrives on the sense of genuine community, in which people of all ages and various backgrounds intermingle in a warm and completely informal and spontaneous way. At four, my son confidently interacts with and befriends people of all ages, and I thank the Vege Swap for its part in this.

Lisa is overjoyed. She's discovered in a bucket among the other produce a sapling apricot tree – exactly the tree her garden needed next. The Vege Swap operates with this kind of serendipity. Looking around at the smiling, relaxed faces and bulging bags, it's clear that everyone present has gained something from the morning.

At Adelaide's recent EarthStation Festival, experts painted a bleak picture of a future marred by climate change, pollution and other adversities. The audience begged to know, "What can we *do*?" The experts replied, "*Talk* to each other."

That's what we do at the Vege Swap: many people with many points of view *talk*. The Vege Swap is a rich garden in which conversation flourishes, organically and in profusion.

On the way home in the car, Trina, a first-timer today, comments 'What a lovely group of people. They were all so *nice*!' Lyn, who brought Trina along, concurs: 'The first swap I came to, at Natasha's house, I just noticed how *nice* everybody was.'

'I think it's because it's so informal,' Trina says. 'As you said before, Julietta, there are no rules. You can't get it wrong!'

That's how the Vege Swap works, and to my mind, it's the definition of community. You don't have to have the same ideas, lifestyle, values or outlook as anybody else. You don't have to fit in. You don't have to meet any particular standard or make any particular commitment. You don't even have to bring anything, except a smiling face and a willingness to interact. You can simply be yourself. You will be accepted, respected and included, and you will find that you belong.

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