Personal growth

A community garden is just as much about the friendships as it is about fruit and vegetables.

In an age of packaged meals and junk-food outlets, community gardens provide an oasis of unadulterated produce and old-fashioned friendship. Ringwood Community Garden is an example of this caring, sharing model. Its members pay a $30 joining fee, then $40 a year for a 10m² by 3m plot to grow whatever organic fruit and vegetables they fancy. They are not allowed to sell their produce for profit. Here families with small children work alongside seasoned pros in their 80s—among the stalwarts are two former Hawthorn footballers.

Tomatoes and zucchinis are always popular, as are cabbages, rhubarb, beans, beetroot, asparagus, eggplant, cucumber, leeks, onions, sweet potatoes, cantaloupes, watermelons, raspberries and strawberries. Some opt for more exotic crops such as thornless blackberries and loganberries. And each gardener has his or her own tricks. Some erect mesh shelters, others cover the ground with plastic or use beer to kill snails.

Retired retail manager Bob Neave, 73, has tended his plot for eight years. A well-dressed female scarecrow protects his eggplant, onions, tomatoes, beans and zucchini. And Neave loves the friendship as much as his fresh veggies. “It’s relaxing and you see all the other people here, too,” he says. “There’s all different nationalities.”

The Ringwood Community Garden was established in 1980 in Canterbury Rd. Forced to move when EastLink was built, it relocated to Solkirk Ave, Wantirna, in 2004. The 0.05ha garden now has 87 plots, plus five raised plots. Before developing 13 new plots recently, it had a waiting list of 24 (the attrition rate is only a couple of members a year).

The club is administered by a committee drawn from the membership and elected at an annual general meeting. Two disability groups have plots: EACH (Eastern Access Community Health) and Amnesto, an independent, not-for-profit association that aims to improve community inclusion for people with a disability, older people, their families and carers. Members of the Ringwood Clocktower Probus Club are also heavily involved.

Garden member secretary Ralph Powell says funds from occasional produce sales have helped support various charities. After several years of strict water restrictions, things are now much easier. “We have the same as domestic residences: hand-watering with trigger-nozzle sprinklers,” Powell says. “Restrictions aren’t really an issue right now.”

*ringwoodcommunitygarden.org.au

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Pictures: Ben Swinnerton

Garden plot

[Plot contains silver beet, French beans, sweet corn, spring onions, carrots and parsnips protected by a plastic cover.]

Tomatoes

One of the most popular crops in Melbourne veggie gardens. This grower has gone to great lengths to protect the plants with a wooden structure with shaded sides and roof.

Side fence

Lemon, lime and mini-plum trees, grapes, passionfruit, blackberries and herbs for communal use grow along here. Everyone helps tend them and can help themselves.

Scarecrow

Several plots have them to keep birds such as ducks, hens, galahs and cockatoos out.

Disabled access

Some of the plots are used by people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Garden beds are raised and have sealed paths with wide gaps for wheelchair access.

Water tanks

Several large tanks were
EVENT
An elegant and sophisticated garden will wow garden lovers when it opens to the public this weekend as part of Australia’s open garden scheme. At 3 Ngaumby Crt, Vermont South, Simon and Pamela Jeffers’s formal garden features box hedges and terraced lawns. Designed to be a “garden for all seasons”, it’s sure to provide wonderful ideas and inspiration. Open from 10am-4.30pm today and tomorrow. $5 entry. www.opengarden.org.au

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The constant gardener
At 71, Charlie Schaefer is reed-thin and fit as a fiddle — no doubt thanks to the organic fruit and vegetables he grows in his plot of Ringwood.

Schaefer, who worked in a brewery for 40 years, and wife Verna, 79, regularly tend their four plots. This summer they are blessed with quality tomatoes, purple potatoes, ferned asparagus, raspberries and several varieties of strawberries, including camembert, red and red kowwa.

The flavours are exquisite. At Schaefer’s place, supermarkets must often buy less flavorful and vegetable that last longer. “They would never grow all these things that you produce here,” he says. “Because these don’t keep.”

Schaefer, who grew up in East Germany, migrated to Australia in 1954 and joined the Ringwood Community Garden in 1984. He loves the friendship and challenge that the community garden offers. “You never complete your education,” he says. “There’s always something different.”

The drought, for example, “wasn’t really a problem, because it taught us that you can do with a lot less water.”

CREATING A VEGIE PATCH
- Start small
- Don’t use chemicals
- Include plants that give an immediate crop
- Listen and talk to the experienced gardeners
- Use beer to kill snails
- Plastic on the ground can help tomatoes grow better
- When they are long enough, the garlic stems down so the bulb develops underneath
- Collecting seeds from plants such

YOU NEVER COMPLETE YOUR EDUCATION, THERE’S ALWAYS SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Thornless raspberries
Sweet and prolific, the perfect combination for gardeners and fruit lovers.

Asparagus
This0 uncommon fern continues to grow after the vegetable has been harvested.

Seaberg potatoes
The most widely available variety of potato. This healthy crop is the result of a no-dig garden with plenty of compost.

Charlie Schaefer’s place
Charlie (see right) built the shelter using recycled materials and with his wife Verna tends four plots bursting with organic fruit, vegetables and flowers.

You can’t produce a good crop next season
Remember that hybrid varieties won’t produce seeds