

communitygarden



To find out more about community gardens, see John Patrick's story on *Gardening Australia*, ABC1, Saturday August 7 at 6.30pm.

plots of plenty



The allotments of the Ringwood Community Garden are about more than just home-grown produce – they are also a vital social forum for locals, says JOHN PATRICK.



Ringwood's legendary tomato grower, Arthur Kollaos, among a field of bountiful chillies.

The Ringwood Community Garden, a little oasis in the heart of Wantirna, 23km east of Melbourne's CBD, celebrates its 30th birthday this year. Its 102 plots are full of healthy vegetables, and they all have better-looking rhubarb than I can grow. No wonder I have serious plot envy.

The garden covers 0.6ha, divided into plots measuring 3m x 10m. I love the way the garden is designed in a grid pattern as, among other things, it makes strolling around to meet the gardeners so easy.

Earlier this year, the garden was open to view as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme. I visited with a delegation from Hawthorn, so that we would know what to expect when we open ours.

Generational gardening

Meeting the next generation of gardeners is always a delight, and the youngest financial member at Ringwood is Laura Bermingham, aged nine. She comes to tend her plot three times a week after school. Although she's harvested lots of squash – now being made into pickles – these are not her favourites. "I really love snow peas, corn and strawberries. Coming to the garden is fun and it's good to take home produce to eat," she says.

In the next plot are Adrian Cox's berries, which he grows up a wire trellis. His specialty is thornless blackberries, and boy, are they good. Lucky for me, Adrian is happy to share his crop as I can't get enough of the huge, delicious fruit.

Adrian is a horticulturist who collects the leftover mulch and clippings from his work for the plot. This helps to improve the soil and suppress weeds. He reckons about a dozen berry plants are enough to keep a family provided with ample fruit from mid-December to mid-February.

Cultural crops

Sri Lankan-born Mayuran Siriratnam says his plot is the perfect place to grow hot cayenne chillies, rated 8 out of 10 on the chilli heat scale. "We can buy the dried red ones, but we pick these when they are green and put them straight into the pot. They are still a little bitter and



Clockwise from left Laura Bermingham and squash from her plot; a harvest of Rondo de Nice zucchini; Mayuran Siriratnam finds the garden ideal for growing super-hot chillies; Ringwood club president Helen Jacobs.



“ We have people from all walks of life, from scientists to school principals, and they all converge in the garden. ”

excellent in sambals,” Mayuran says. For him, the community garden is a great place to come and learn. He's going to trial leaving his eggplants in over winter, and he also wants to try growing corn.

Another highlight is getting to see the legendary tomatoes grown by Arthur Kollaos, 76. People assure me “they are

the size of footballs” and I am not disappointed. Originally from Greece, Arthur has an amazing veggie plot where he also grows chillies, zucchini, potatoes and leeks. He visits every day to collect his bounty and loves being a part of the community, meeting his friends to swap yarns, seeds and growing tips.

Everyone's a winner

For club president Helen Jacobs, the best part of being involved with the group is meeting people from all walks of life. “We have everyone here, including school principals, scientists and microbiologists, and they all converge in the garden.”

She believes that watering restrictions have strengthened rather than damaged ▶



Clockwise from left The delegation from Hawthorn inspects Ringwood's healthy gardens; John tastes Adrian Cox's plump blackberries; garden produce for sale.



scratch to patch


The Ringwood Community Garden started 30 years ago and is one of Victoria's oldest community gardens. Initially located at Canterbury Road, Ringwood, it had to move to make way for a highway. Members moved it to the current Wantirna site in 2004. Original members say it's really been a journey from scratch to patch because the site was nothing more than a grassy paddock when they first started. About 20 members helped create the block with its grid pattern of plots and paths. Now there is a waiting list to join. Similar to other community gardens, there is a one-off joining fee of \$30 together with a rental of \$40 a year. There is also a sensory garden and five raised garden beds designed for people with disabilities.

using plenty of horse manure. It's spread over absolutely everything and the soil here looks so much better than mine.

The gardeners tell me they are lucky to have ready access to manure from neighbouring properties, with bagloads being collected and liberally applied.

Members unite

What strikes me about this community garden is the sheer enthusiasm of its members. I've enjoyed meeting the team who started this garden, and they are proud of what they have achieved. It's hard to believe that only six years ago this productive paradise was a horse paddock.

The best tips I take away with me are that you just can't mulch enough, and plenty of compost and organic fertiliser, such as horse manure, is the way to go. 

FURTHER INFORMATION

● For more information about the Ringwood Community Garden, visit ringwoodcommunitygarden.org.au Learn more on community gardening at communitygarden.org.au

their sense of community. "In the past, people would come at different times to water, but now everyone is restricted, so we are all here together and often finish the watering off with a sausage sizzle.

"Restrictions have really made people water more thoroughly, deeply and less often. But look around you – it's all so healthy. Everything we use here is organic, and everyone uses mulch. The two tips that really apply here are deep watering and heavy mulching."

Helen's own plot includes a lovely patch of strawberries that her children 'graze on' whenever they come to help out. It is also cheerfully planted with sunflowers, corn and pumpkins.

But nearby is another plant that's really caught my eye – hops (*Humulus lupulus*). It's one that is not often grown in gardens, but I reckon it should be. A wonderful climber, it is perfect for growing in a westerly aspect to create shade in summer, while in winter it dies down and lets the sun in to warm. The cone-like flowers are striking and those from the female plant play a valuable role as the bittering agent in beer.

Secret agent

Throughout the day I ask everyone for the secret to the perfect rhubarb and it sounds like it comes down to fertiliser. Everywhere you look, plot owners are