

## **A History of our Community Garden in Cooma from My Perspective**

One of the ideas at a “Big Ideas” public meeting two to three years ago was a community garden. A volunteer group, mostly younger people with small children, gradually set up a formal committee with all the usual decision-making positions. Regular monthly meetings were held in various venues around the town – library, hospital cottage, homes, etc. – which tried to gauge the level of interest within the community and decide how to proceed.

The local town council was contacted and ideas aired, and a particular request made for the original vegetable-growing site along the creek to become the Community Garden. Presentations were made with vegetables, growing plans, etc. – at council meetings. We held stalls at the local markets and fund-raising events, an open garden, etc. The volunteers tried to gauge local interest in having a “plot”-type community garden, but the main need seemed to be for domestic gardens.

We have so many skills within the group of volunteers, including a self-professed bureaucrat attached to Southern Area Health – brilliant for council paperwork and logos! Our secretary is computer smart with a gift for transforming discussions into recognisable minutes and reports. One of our young mothers searched for grants and handouts, another had visions of our direction, and organic gardeners and teachers all came together in an eclectic group to form a garden. But where?!

The local council prevaricated and vacillated and generally took far too long to make any decision. The patience of committee members was running out, and they were becoming burnt-out and tired with the continual delays. The site of our preference has deep soil tilth, and is beside a walking path adjacent to the Cooma Creek. It is council land has no buildings and is being used to graze horses. It has water and fences, but restricted parking access, particularly for trailers and trucks.

A committee member of the Uniting Church decided to ask the church if consideration could be given to establishing a community garden between the church halls and the uninhabited manse, the latter being rented out to our local challenged community. The space in question was deserted, dry, sterile with one hedge across the middle, and a second one between the grass and the road, with an old dying infected apple tree in the centre.

After 10 years of drought, the area was compacted and neglected. One lady from town said that since 1933 she had never seen anything grown here! Our congregation is ageing and grass cutting is a chore.

Gradually the church, in conjunction with the Challenge Foundation, drew up a Memorandum of Understanding with our committee and a space was allocated temporarily. Arrangements were made for various church members to represent the church and help the gardens to be born. We are not charged rent or water rates, which is marvellous.

The area in the first place was small and a number of demonstrations, workshops and seedling days were held, and eventually a harvest festival.

The church buildings are so convenient, and in inclement weather the facilities are hired and used for various lectures and social gatherings. The “no dig” chemical free gardens thrived, but the majority of the original committee (with their own gardens at home) were burnt out. Winter arrived and the gardens and enthusiasm declined.

Along came rain and Spring 2010, interest perked up, our new site manager beavered hard, and interest was re-newed, with a number of people wanting a “plot” with community involvement.. We had come the full circle.

Our vision is to be flexible enough to service the garden and community and keep a thriving healthy garden that continues to demonstrate how to grow anything in this challenging local climate of ours.

We are very grateful to the Uniting Church for their encouragement, enthusiasm and help in preparing a successful grant application for the new water tank, the organisation and installation of which has all been achieved by the Church. We hope to continue co-operating with them and to demonstrate our gratitude by making donations of produce, presenting the grounds attractively and participating in church events such as fetes and harvest festivals.

We expect the garden to continue to provide flexible learning and social experiences to be shared by all.

-- Hazel McKenzie-Kay  
2 April 2011