

10 EXPERT WAYS TO MAKE YOUR VEGIE PATCH THRIVE

LUSCIOUS LEAFY GROWTH, SCORES OF VEGIES, MASSES OF FLOWERS – HOW DO YOU MAKE IT HAPPEN? MATTHEW PEMBER, FOUNDER AND MD OF THE LITTLE VEGGIE PATCH COMPANY, SHARES 10 SECRETS OF HIS SUCCESS.

STORY BY MATTHEW PEMBER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE LITTLE VEGGIE PATCH COMPANY



1. CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE POSITION

One that attributes as much sunlight as possible while remaining practical to the

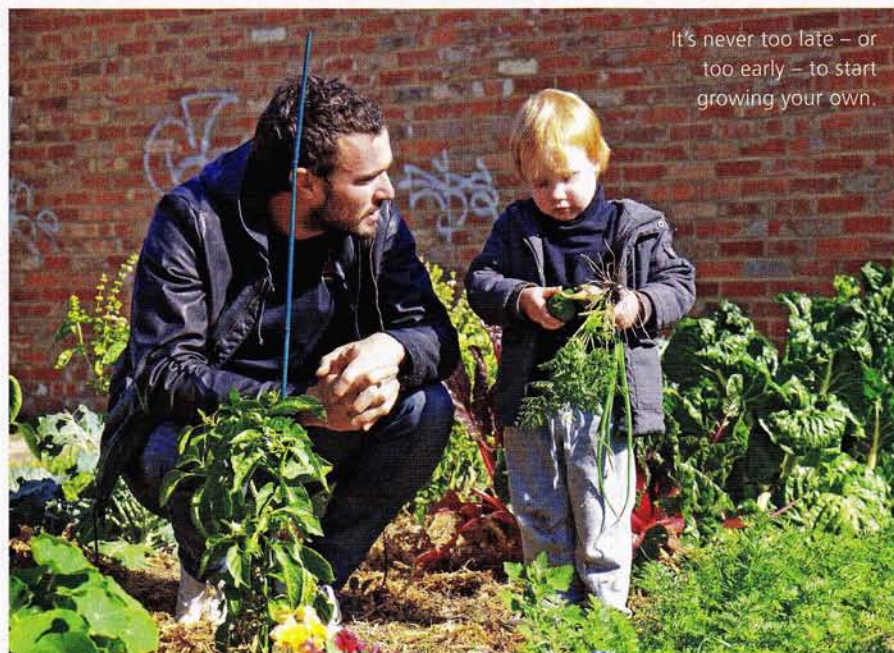
functionality of your yard, and which is also within a reasonable proximity to the house. It should be protected from strong winds but well-circulated air is also preferable.

2. KEEP YOUR VEGIE GARDEN CHEMICAL FREE

Stay away from remedies that use pesticides, herbicides or fungicides; the point of growing your own vegies is to differentiate from the supermarket produce. There will always be a natural alternative. The best way to control pests is by building a vibrant ecosystem that creates a balanced food chain of pests and predators.

3. CONSIDER THE AESTHETICS OF YOUR VEGIE PATCH

Not only is a vegetable garden practical and functional, it's also a potential centrepiece or focal point for your yard. Choose a natural material that suits your existing landscaping and home, and remember that flowers not only add colour they also attract pollinators and repel pests.



It's never too late – or too early – to start growing your own.

4. BUILD UP HEALTHY SOIL CONTENT

Prepare the soil well before planting by introducing organic matter and making sure it drains well. Vegetables feed on the micro-organisms in soil and prefer a consistent soil temperature, so keeping it well mulched and fertile should be your number one priority.

5. PLANT VEGETABLES YOU LIKE TO EAT

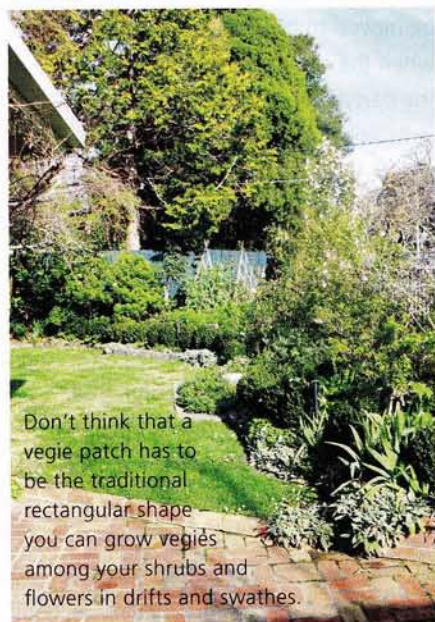
The whole point of growing your own vegetables is to reward yourself with fresh, tasty, chemical-free vegies you like to eat.

6. PLANT OFF A GOOD GUIDE

Engage in companion planting, grow vegetables you like to eat and stick to easy-growing varieties to begin with. Growing success early will spur you on to the challenge of more difficult varieties.

7. PLANT HEIRLOOM SEED VARIETIES

Use heirloom seed varieties that are naturally evolved, have proven to be hearty and have good yields.



Don't think that a vegie patch has to be the traditional rectangular shape you can grow vegies among your shrubs and flowers in drifts and swathes.

8. START WITH A SIZE YOU CAN MANAGE

Build up your confidence by starting small, there's always the potential to expand later on. Baby steps first.

9. SPEND TIME IN YOUR GARDEN

Visit your garden as regularly as you can manage. This will make you more sensitive to the needs of your vegies and in turn you'll become a better grower.

10. BUILD UP A VIBRANT ECOSYSTEM

The greater the diversity of your mini ecosystem the greater the chance

you have of growing success. Plant fruit trees and flowers to attract good insects and birds to your yard.



Follow these 10 principles and you'll have a thriving patch in next to no time!

SMALL & SWEET

TESS KERBEL SPEAKS TO MATTHEW PEMBER, FOUNDER OF THE LITTLE VEGGIE PATCH COMPANY, ABOUT ORGANIC FRUIT AND VEGETABLE GARDENING IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE LITTLE VEGGIE PATCH COMPANY

Q. First of all, congratulations from the whole F&V team – The Little Veggie Patch Company is a really exciting new initiative.

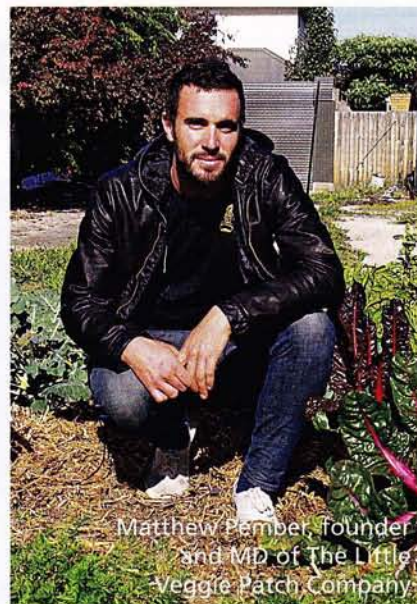
What inspired you to start it?

A. Quite simply the love of fresh food, something I developed at a young age. I remember being in my grandparent's garden, digging for worms, smelling the plants ... actually I think I made a bit of a mess! I quickly realised though that the flavours of home-grown vegetables far surpass anything you'll find on the supermarket shelves. Later, I found myself working for a landscaper, installing grass and thirsty

plants in areas ideal for growing food. Every time I found myself in this situation I'd end up in deep discussions with my fellow workers regarding the merits of what we were doing as opposed to what we could be doing. It's from these conversations that the business evolved.

Q. Have you worked with any especially challenging sites? If so, what sort of problems did they present and how did you solve them?

A. We work primarily in urban areas, within confined spaces, so we rarely get the opportunity to work on a 'blank canvas' without limitation.



Matthew Pember, founder and MD of The Little Veggie Patch Company

Everyone's living arrangements are unique and therefore we encounter unique challenges, almost without exception, from one client to the next. Quite regularly we need to find solutions for rental properties and apartments, and these sites usually present the biggest challenges – access, availability of space etc.

In one such case we came up with the idea of a mobile veggie patch, a veggie patch on wheels essentially. All the soil was contained in the structure, which eliminated the issue of mess – though it presented quite the drainage challenge – and the whole thing could be moved to a more convenient area when the client was entertaining. Once the party's over, the patch goes back in its rightful place under the sun.

Q. Have you had any special success stories?

A. One of the first jobs we did is still one of the most satisfying. It was for a lady in Middle Park, in Melbourne Victoria, who lives in a beautiful single-fronted Edwardian home, which is common for the area. Like the home itself the backyard was neatly manicured, made up almost entirely of pavers. The owner made the difficult decision to soften the landscape and dispose of most of the pavers.



Whether you just want a few herbs and vegetables or a full garden complete with fruit trees and a chicken coop, Matthew and his team can help.



This streamlined garden in Thornbury shows how good design can make the most of a space.

We installed a veggie garden and made way for some small fruit trees and a chicken coop. In the flash of an eye she had a mini permaculture garden. Her entire focus at home has changed, she loves the veggie patch and her garden and keeps it in good order. It's produced great crops for herself, her family and her friends. Every time I visit I'm amazed at the transformation and I retain a great sense of accomplishment through my involvement with it.

Q. How beneficial do you think a veggie patch is, both to the homeowner and to the environment?

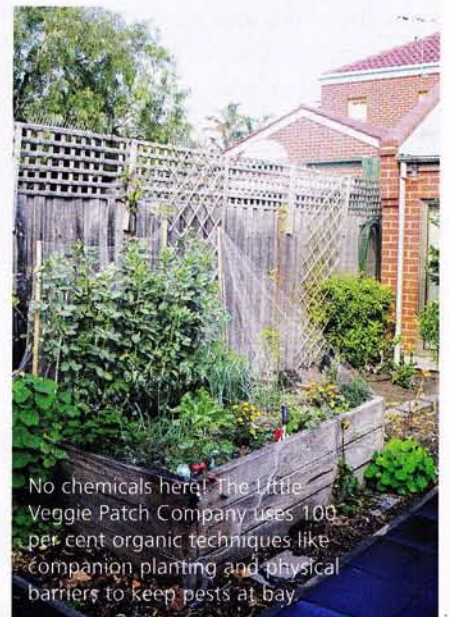
A. A veggie patch can create a new focus for the homeowners as a hobby, an education, a food subsidy, a passion or as a conscious effort to reduce their impact on the environment. It's undisputed that our lives revolve around food, so developing an appreciation and understanding of it, quite literally from the ground up, can transform mundane feeding times into daily adventures. Meanwhile, it helps reduce our reliance on a homogenised food industry whose irresponsible practices

"THE ABILITY TO GROW FOOD IS ONLY LIMITED BY YOUR ENTHUSIASM."

place greater value on yields and aesthetics than the growing environment. And if that's something that concerns you, there's no single easier way to help reduce your carbon footprint and lessen the destructive practices of the modern food industry than by growing your own food. Considering that you can save money, live healthier, learn and have fun while doing so, the decision not to grow needs far more justification than the one to grow.

Q. A lot of people are still sceptical about organic gardening. How important do you think it is to be organic?

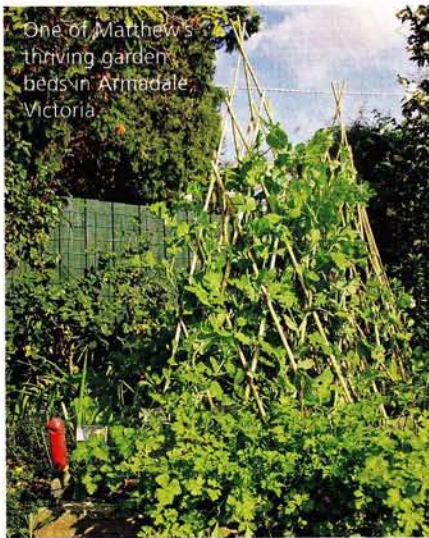
A. To say organic gardening is not important is to disregard nature's process of evolution, which sees the natural development of species through the survival



No chemicals here! The Little Veggie Patch Company uses 100 per cent organic techniques like companion planting and physical barriers to keep pests at bay.

of the fittest and strongest. As much as science tries to replicate nature, not one scientist could claim to outsmart nature or be impartial to the needs of all species.

My concern regarding the so-called scientific progress in the food industry is the motivation of the companies undertaking it, where the yields and aesthetics of their species take



One of Matthew's thriving garden beds in Armadale, Victoria

precedence, at all cost, over other species that survive in the ecosystem. So, while their species may thrive, the problems they pass on to others can be devastating. When today's common agricultural practices were originally developed, do you think there was such corporate and social responsibility/incentive regarding the effect of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides on our volatile and fragile ecosystem, including ourselves?

It's too soon to know what the effects of these chemicals are on our health; that's why it's vitally important to protect and plant heirloom seed varieties – we know they have evolved naturally to thrive within our environment and can be grown safely.

Q. What are the prerequisites for starting up a veggie patch?

How many hours of sunlight does it need? How much space?

A. The commonly perceived idea of a veggie garden prescribes a vacant plot of land endowed with full sunlight. While this would no doubt make the job of The Little Veggie Patch Company far easier in terms of quoting for jobs and standardising products, the truth is that the ability to grow food is only limited by your enthusiasm, or in the case of Havana, Cuba, necessity. After the Soviet collapse in 1989, Cuba lost its food imports and agricultural inputs so the people were forced to grow food by any means possible. This meant converting rooftops,

“PEOPLE REALLY ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT REDUCING THEIR CARBON FOOTPRINT, ABOUT GROWING THEIR OWN VEGETABLES ORGANICALLY AND ABOUT TURNING AN UNPRODUCTIVE PIECE OF LAWN INTO A PRODUCTIVE PIECE OF LAND – AND THE LITTLE VEGGIE PATCH COMPANY IS HERE TO HELP THEM DO JUST THAT!”

balconies and empty spaces into food plots. Endorsed and sponsored by Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture and the city's local government, the urban food projects of Havana now produce more than 50 per cent of its total food supply. In Australia – a country blessed with far greater urban space and resources than Cuba – we are no less able to grow food with whatever space we have at our disposal. The only real prerequisite to growing vegetables is sunlight. On average, most vegetables would like to see about six hours of sunlight a day, and the same goes for fruits such as tomatoes, eggplants etc. But leafy and root vegetables such as lettuce, peas, carrots and silverbeet can get by on less.

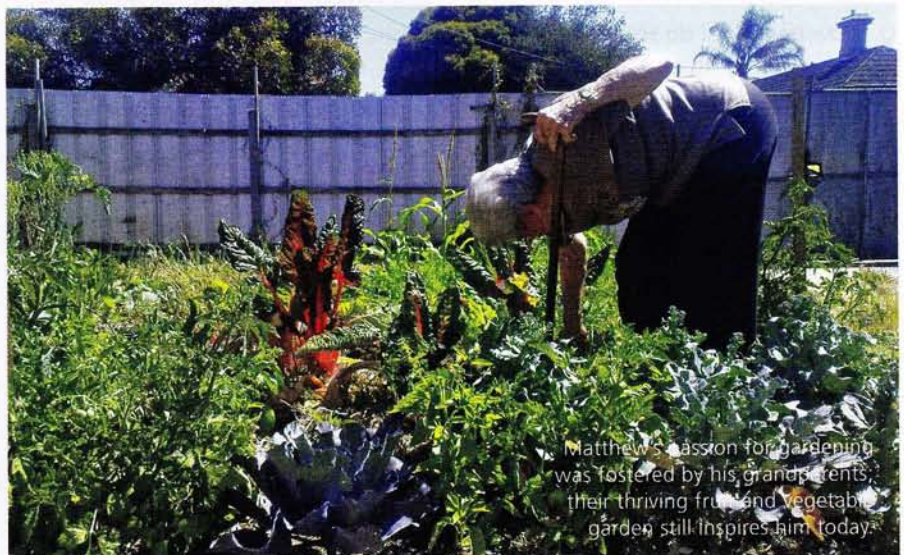
Q. When's the best time to start?

A. While autumn is a fun and prolific growing season, most people feel that spring is the best time to install a veggie garden. Generally, new gardens take a while to settle and build up fertility, so

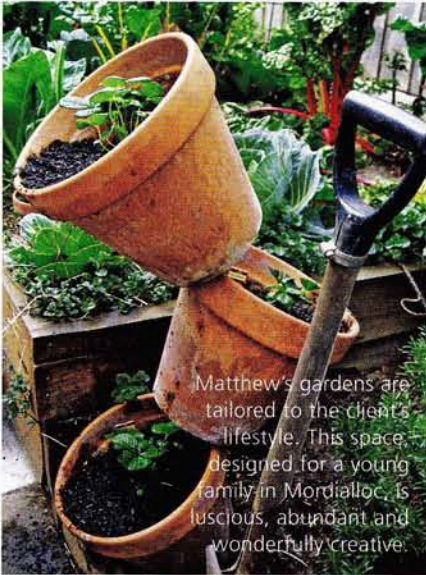
if you start one in autumn the soil will have six months to build up its fertility levels, which better aids your growing success come spring. While spring is without doubt the most exciting time for growing, we have the ability in Australia to grow food all year round.

Q. Can you give us a brief rundown of your process? If I came to you and asked you to create a veggie patch for me, where would we go from there?

A. The first thing is to understand how you'd like the vegetable garden to operate. How will the veggie patch fit in with your current lifestyle and the way your yard operates? With this in mind we'd then go about choosing a space that had suitable sunlight. Of course, the more sunlight the better, but we prefer morning rather than afternoon sun. Once we've decided on a position we work out a size. What can the client manage? Do they want to grow vegetables to subsidise their food bills or



Matthew's passion for gardening was fostered by his grandparents; their thriving fruit and vegetable garden still inspires him today



Matthew's gardens are tailored to the client's lifestyle. This space, designed for a young family in Mordialloc, is lush, abundant and wonderfully creative.

simply to learn from it and teach their children? Then we consider the aesthetics and ergonomics of the design. Most clients, especially the elderly, prefer to pick and tend their gardens at an ergonomic height so we build up garden beds for this purpose. Built-up garden beds can help 'chase' more sunlight, especially in winter when the sun is lower on the northern horizon. In terms of aesthetics, a feature veggie garden made from cypress pine and filled with seedlings and mature perennials is more desirable than a plot of earth turned over with some seeds planted in it; of course, cost is the deciding factor here.

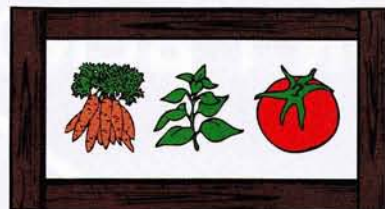
Q. You've created organic gardens in inner-city areas, which is no small feat. How do you combat the problems associated with these spots, like the pollution and damaged ecosystem?

A. I think that growing your own food is a small step in both helping to restore the damaged ecosystem and reduce pollution. Diversity in the ecosystem is important, and your vegetable plants and fruit trees will further add to that, bringing back an abundance of wildlife and helping restore the balance. With regard to pollution, consider trucks delivering food to the city supermarkets – if more people start growing their own food, less trucks will be driving long distances to the city to make their deliveries, thereby reducing pollution. I really believe it's that simple.



Believe it or not, this beautiful backyard in Melbourne's Middle Park was once made up almost entirely of pavers. Matthew and his team turned it into the thriving permaculture garden it is today.

The Little Veggie Patch Company



ABOUT THE LITTLE VEGGIE PATCH COMPANY

The Little Veggie Patch Company is an exciting new gardening initiative founded and run by expert Matthew Pember. This Melbourne-based outfit specialises in creating, installing and maintaining organic fruit and vegetable gardens for people of all ages and stages. No site is too big or too small for this gifted and passionate team.

To find out what they can do for you, give them a buzz on 0422 067 874 or visit <http://thelittleveggiepatchcompany.com>