



outdoors

Patch from scratch

Let the idea of cooking with fresh garden produce grow on you

>> **Words** Shaunagh O'Connor >> **Photography** Mark Taylor

Mat Pember says people always want to know how to curb the two Ps of the veggie patch: pests and possums.

And, as founder of The Little Veggie Patch Company, this landscape gardener is just the person to offer solutions.

Mat began life in the world of finance. But, he decided life in an office wasn't for him, and being raised in an Italian, gardening family meant he had inherited a green thumb and a love of landscaping.

More than a year ago, Mat set up the company, specialising in building chemical-free veggie patches, from start to finish.

He and colleague Jamie Simpson visit gardens, work out the best spot and size for a potential vegetable plot, and discuss the plants the owner would like to see end up on the dining table.

The pair then builds raised garden boxes, sources and plants the vegetables and offer tips on maintenance and harvesting, or they can return regularly to take care of their creation for you.

"The company started out with the way the environment was changing, with global warming and people recognising it, and looking at ways to become carbon neutral. And we thought, 'now would be a good time to put our passion into a business,'" Mat says.

Throw in many people's response to the global recession – growing their own organic vegies instead of buying them – along with the fact that a veggie garden "is an attractive and practical solution to a dead lawn", and, Mat says, their clientele has started to grow.

Menu plan

Reward your family with fresh produce from the garden.



Fruits of hard labour

A tomato plant takes off in this established vegetable patch (above)

Bountiful back yard

Plant flowers in your veggie garden to add character and a cottage feel (above right)

Cabbage-patch kids

Garden art and other quirky touches will bring your little plot to life (right)



"Before, people would say, 'we can't grow vegetables'. They'd say, 'we can buy organic or chemical-free', but people are realising now that they can do it themselves and it's quite easy," Mat says.

He says the company specialises in creating small, domestic vegetable gardens, and he's noticed that "people have been willing to lose everything that they've spent thousands of dollars on in the past (on landscaping) to put in veggie gardens and fruit trees and chicken coops".

After Mat gets the call to come to a home to start work, he airs the option of placing the veggie patch in the front or back yard, according to the owner's wishes.

"We go around and find the best spot for the garden, a spot with sufficient sunlight, a practical area to fit with the other things they have planted," he says.

"Then we look at what people want to grow, what they want to get out of the veggie garden, if they just want the vegetables, or if they want it to be a centrepiece for the garden."

The garden beds can be beautiful, as well as practical, with aged-timber sleepers an option for their construction.

Mat and Jamie build the garden boxes, bring in soil, and irrigate and plant out the area. And Mat likes to get clients involved in that last step.

For more details, see www.thelittleveggiepatchcompany.com or phone Mat on 0422 067 874. For a raised 3m x 1.5m veggie patch, expect to pay about \$1100, including timber, soil, irrigation, mulch, seedlings and labour.



postscript with Mat Pember

Help! How to deter possums?

They're immune to chilli most of the time, so a lot of people try a chilli and garlic spray (chop ingredients and mix with water) and find the possums don't like the taste. Or you can give them something else to feed on, like the scraps destined for the compost. If you point spotlights towards the veggie patch, the possums are usually scared of the sensor lights.

Which vegies bring quick rewards

Salad vegies are quick growers: lettuce, spring onions, radishes (you can harvest radishes in 30 days). And climbing peas are quick.

How long does it take to build a veggie patch?

A couple of days. We construct the boxes and get the soil on the first day, and plant the next day. We like to get clients and any kids into the planting too.

How much do you need to grow to feed a family of four?

There are two of us eating from my veggie patches, and they're about 30sqm, and we have so many vegies we can't handle it, so we give them to our friends. You can also stagger your planting.