

outside.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a bright red bowl filled with several fresh, orange carrots with their green leafy tops. The person is wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt and a black apron with white polka dots. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with gravel and some colorful flowers.

home harvest

What's the most effective way to cut grocery bills, reduce your carbon footprint and enjoy healthier food? Start your own veggie patch. Linda Ross shows you how to create a garden you can pick your dinner from.



Left: Landscaper Matthew Pember prepares the area where the new garden bed will be placed; level earth with easy access, good drainage and plenty of sunlight is ideal.

Above: Trimming tree branches to ensure the vegie patch will receive plenty of sunshine.

GROWING YOUR OWN food is one of the simplest ways to reduce your impact on the environment, recycle kitchen waste, and provide organic nutrition for your children while helping them understand how Mother Nature works. A vegie patch creates a tangible link to the natural environment, educating kids in an interactive way about how the seasons, vegetables, soil and insects can coexist.

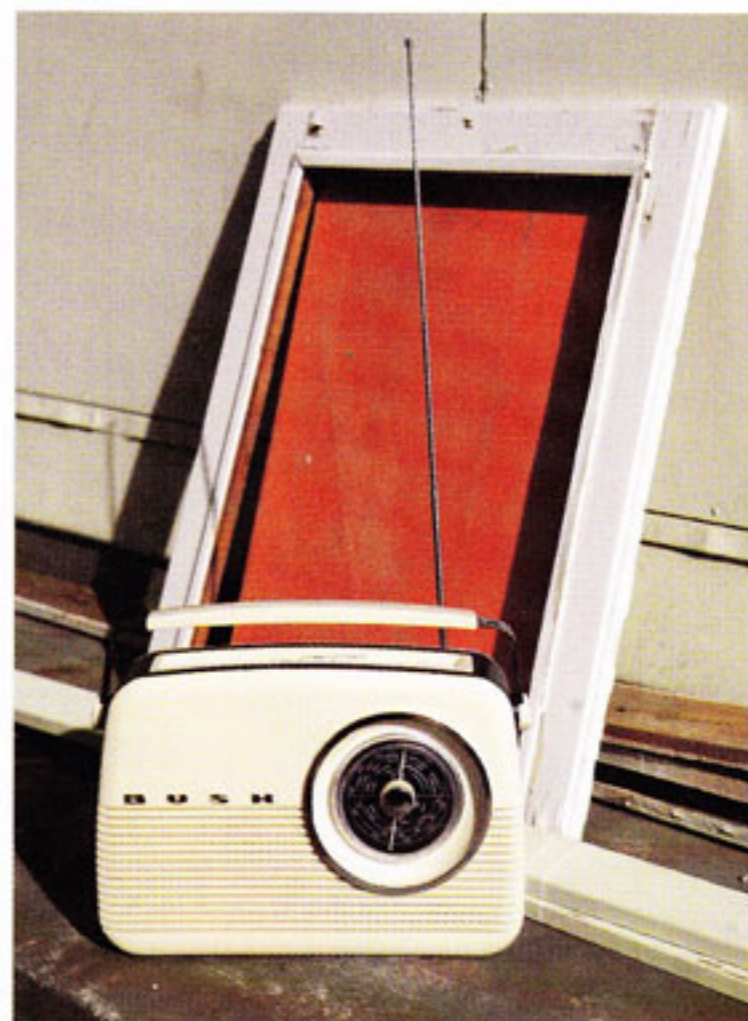
Last month, Lisa and Matt Faulkner from Melbourne set about teaching their young kids, Mia and Tom, about food and where it comes from. Lisa wanted to cut the grocery bill and provide healthier food with no chemicals that was truly organic, while Matt wanted to cut their carbon footprint. So they decided to build a vegie patch from scratch, but knew they needed help with the nitty gritty.

Enter landscaper Matthew Pember, 29, who, since the global financial crisis, has focused his landscaping business The Little Veggie Patch Company ([www.](http://www.thelittleveggiepatchcompany.com)

[thelittleveggiepatchcompany.com](http://www.thelittleveggiepatchcompany.com)) on creating kitchen gardens for families across Victoria. Matthew says, "Growing my own food satisfies a kind of primal urge. It's something that feels completely natural and purposeful. There's something ingrained in each and every one of us that finds true reward in growing food. And as a lover of food, nothing surpasses the flavours of fresh, naturally grown vegetables. Cooking is a great way to express yourself and growing your own food is the first step of that expression. I can't possibly quantify the satisfaction of making a dish for those I love entirely from the vegetables I have grown."

Why grow your own food?

Matthew found when the world economy crashed it turned out to be the tonic the environment needed. He felt we were forced to look beyond our next TV set or car and get back to basics. A lot of people are now deriving great and real pleasure



from growing vegies. So despite the initial fear the crisis would kill his business, it actually strengthened the home-grown food movement. Growing your own food is the single best way to reduce your carbon footprint and we all have the ability to do it in our own backyards.

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Matthew has found home vegie gardens to be a booming business.



Matthew's apprentice fills the new garden bed with rich soil.

TIP

Never pass up an opportunity to learn from your elders. Older gardeners love passing on knowledge gained from decades of growing veg. You'll benefit from their ideas, they offer a shoulder to cry on, words of advice and love to hear you boast when it all goes right.

The basics of a DIY vegie patch

When setting up a vegie garden, it's important to consider how it's going to fit in with your current lifestyle because no doubt, it will change it.

- Positioning the garden is important, not just in terms of sunlight and airflow, but also practicality. Choose the best-drained and sunniest position in your property. Shade, root competition and boggy soil will not create a successful kitchen garden. Fetching herbs and vegies can become a chore if they are located down the stairs, across the lawn, over the hedge and around the corner. Having it handy is a big plus for picking and tending it.

- Aesthetics are also important when trying to fit it into your landscaping style or make it a feature; vegie gardens can be very decorative, full of colours and aromas.

- Decide on what materials you want to build your garden beds. Choose between hardwood, straw bales, movable tankbeds (raised garden beds made from corrugated polymer-coated steel water tanks) or timber sleepers. Increasing the height of the garden has many benefits. It increases soil depth, increases soil drainage and allows you to sit on the edge to plant and harvest while saving your back. Don't skimp on size; big beds are best, but make sure you can reach everywhere within the bed and you are able to harvest and plant from all sides.

Pathways between beds are perfect for separating your beds and creating a stable surface to work from; a hard surface of gravel is best.

- All soil, be it clay, loam or sandy, will benefit from the addition of compost, soil conditioners and aged animal

manures. This will provide most of the nutrients the plants need throughout their growing season, negating the need for commercial fertilisers.

- Don't get despondent if you don't have a big backyard. The ability to grow vegetables is not limited to your ground space. Where there is sunlight, there are vegetables to be grown. Balconies and rooftops make perfect candidates for growing vegetables in planter boxes and containers.

- At first, plant what you will eat and what is not overly challenging to grow. Crops such as leafy greens will be eaten every night and are one of the easiest groups to grow. It's important to see success lying on your plate and that will spur you on further. The more seasons we grow, the better growers we will become.

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IN YOUR FIRST YEAR,
A FAILSAFE METHOD
IS TO BUY SEEDLINGS
RATHER THAN
SOWING SEEDS



Matthew introduces the Faulkner family to their new veggie patch.



Mia loves harvesting their home-grown produce.

What to plant

We want you to start growing what you actually need and what you eat on a weekly or daily basis. Think about the vegetables you and your family eat over the next month and think about how often you eat them.

In your first year, a failsafe method is to buy seedlings rather than sowing seeds. There is an amazing variety of seedlings in nurseries now and it's the best place to start for those of us who have no time to sow seeds.

Crops you can plant every week of the year include my favourite staples such as carrot, beetroot, green onion, leek, spinach, silver beet, radish, rocket, celery, chives, lettuce, wombok, pak choi, 'mini cannonball' cabbage and 'savoy' cabbage.

Airflow

It is important to understand the need for airflow around each plant. This directly relates to how far away you have planted your seedlings; too close and the airflow is impeded, fungal spores jump from plant to

plant, insects munch on vegetables and plants start to overshadow each other. I understand the desire to plant as much as you can into the one area, but good airflow is the key to vegetable health and successful crops.

This is easier than you think. Work out the width of the mature plant from the label or packet and plant it that far away from the next seedling. Plant the correct distance for each cultivar and you will be rewarded tenfold.

Sowing for a trickle harvest

The aim of an everyday kitchen garden is to sow small amounts of seed often as this prolongs the harvest. With the big fruiting vegies you may only be able to sow two or three times through the beginning of the season as they take a while to mature.

However, with salad greens and root crops you will be able to sow every month for a trickle harvest – not too much and not too little. It may take a while to get the exact number of seeds for each veg right for your family, but it's always a trial by error process. ■