

HOMEGROWN: URBAN FOOD GARDENS ON THE RISE

By Kate Schrire

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Kate Schrire spent a weekend with three groups that are inspiring city dwellers to grow their own food. Over a weekend, she builds compost heaps, fills trench beds with layers of soil, leaves and manure, she mulches and waters, and plants seeds and seedlings. When she's done, she's newly armed with the knowledge fundamental to our ancestors but revelatory in modern times: how to feed ourselves.

The soil samples lie in small piles on the table, a study in textures and colours. The pale, dry grains of Cape Flats sand; claggy russet clay; and moist, brown loam, rich in humus. The unexpected but welcome winter sun filters through the pine trees. We get up from our tree stump seats to peer closer and, at Pat's urging, run our hands through the soil.

Sixteen of us are participants in Grow to Live, a two-day course in food gardening run by Pat Featherstone, co-founder of Soil for Life. Within the first hour, most of us have spent more time considering soil than we have in our whole lives. And it's easy, when we are surrounded by Soil for Life's model food garden, carved bed by bed out of an old dump in the heart of Constantia, Cape Town. Not your typical garden, it shuns order for riotous fecundity. Potatoes grow in old tires, and lettuces in every available recycled container. Even its neatly rectangular vegetable beds house different plants, companionably side by side.

It is also a living classroom: before the weekend is out, we too will have built compost heaps, filled trench beds with layers of soil and leaves and manure, mulched and watered, and planted seeds and seedlings. Then we part ways, newly armed with the knowledge fundamental to our ancestors but revelatory in modern times: how to feed ourselves.

Pat and her co-founder, Moira, launched Soil for Life, a locally based organisation in Cape Town, in 2003. Today, the organisation establishes food gardens in impoverished communities that request their assistance, either running intensive three-to-four-day courses, or training one day a week over the period of two months.

Residents are taught how to grow vegetables in their own gardens, with a focus on building soil fertility, totally natural maintenance and pest control and the creative use of the resources around them. Soil for Life is now also building community gardens, which can be used as satellite training facilities and a resource for the surrounding community, supporting seedling nurseries, compost heaps and entrepreneurship projects, such as food preserving for "Soil Soul", their range of chutneys, pickles, jams and curds.

But the focus, says Pat, always comes firmly back to the soil. "We're absolutely and utterly dependent on soil. Without healthy soil, there can be no healthy people." Hence Soil for Life's motto: Build the soil, grow the plants, feed the people, heal the planet.

One woman who has taken the motto to heart is Yoliswa Ngqame. She is the shining light at the centre of what many might consider a failure. "Others think that people want food gardens," Pat notes, "but in actual fact, most people don't. It's hard work, and you've got to keep at it!" Soil for Life established a community garden in the poverty-stricken community of Vrygrond, in Cape Town. They trained 30 people, but with community politics, fighting and apathy, only Yoliswa is left now tending the garden.

And yet, what a garden. In ground little better than beach sand, she has created a thriving maze of vegetable beds, compost heaps and a covered seedling nursery. She pays members of the community to help her in the garden, sells them fresh vegetables and also sends her produce to markets set up by Soil for Life. She is planning to teach community members how to make the Soil Soul range of preserves. She seems strong and forthright, but her gaze softens when she surveys the garden. "This is my baby. I'm here seven days a week, from eight to five. It's very hard work, but I wanted it. And Soil for Life is helping me do it."

She rattles off a list of vegetables she's harvested and sold in the past week: 10 bunches of kale, six bunches of beetroot, 30 lettuces and six bunches of spring onions. "I can stand on my own now, and my mission is to help the community." And in the face of such success, community interest is returning. Soil for Life distributes coupons to the community, which uses them to pay Yoliswa for mulch, seedlings and seeds, to use in their gardens at home. Soil for Life then reimburses her for the coupons, and redistributes them once more, creating a cycle of trade and empowerment which remains in the community.

Later in the week, I find myself in a very different garden, visiting a gardener who serves a very different community. Noel Martin, tall and rangy, with wild curly hair, invites me into his kitchen and proceeds to make us both a glass of fresh carrot juice. While he potters happily around the kitchen, a puppy winding around his ankles, I look out the door at his garden, a jungle as relaxed and vibrant as its creator. Noel is a food garden design consultant for Eat Your Garden, one of several new gardening services launched in response to the demand for urban food gardens. Their services range from once-off consultations (R300) to designing, establishing and maintaining a vegetable garden in your home garden (R3,500). They also plan to offer garden design templates and information packs, to allow home gardeners to create their own gardens, at more affordable rates. They have created 15 gardens since launching in October last year, and are about to open a branch in Gauteng in response to the demand.

Noel consults and designs, while the actual landscaping is outsourced to specific landscaping firms. For Noel, permaculture allows him to marry his background in graphic design with his love of gardening. Permaculture, a shortened version of "permanent agriculture and culture", is a method of designing and creating self-sustaining agricultural systems based on nature, where all organisms are interconnected to create balanced ecosystems.

While permaculture is often associated with grassroots activism, Noel isn't shy about using it commercially. "I'm not afraid of corporate structures and big business. I embrace it. Globally, we're moving into a time when there's going to be a large demand for this, and we need different types of vehicles to get food sustainability out there for the masses."

Rob Harrewyn, founder and owner of Eat Your Garden, agrees. "I saw the writing on the wall, long ago," Rob tells me over the phone. "I lived in the UK for 14 years, and I'd seen what had happened in the food industry here, and when I came home to SA, I'd become increasingly angry how much people – including myself – had become disempowered, forced to buy food from selected outlets, and having no say in how, by who and what was being produced. Eat Your Garden was established in protest. I see growing your own food as very empowering."

Some might suggest that it would be more empowering if people grew and maintained their own vegetable gardens rather than paying others to do it for them. Noel, however, is pragmatic. "Realistically, we live in a world where a lot of people are very busy with jobs, children and all sorts of other commitments, but still want to have the benefit of eating the best food possible. And the best food possible is the freshest food, and the freshest food is from the garden. If you've grown it yourself, you really know what you're eating. Which I want to open up to people even if they don't want to become fully fledged organic gardeners themselves."

Rob agrees. "The more the merrier. Whether people are teaching themselves, or using the service of a company."

Before I leave, Noel gives me a tour of his garden, which is still a work in progress. "Just seeing fruit and veggies growing in the garden, from seedlings right through...it's incredibly powerful for children to see the process, to have a deep understanding of where food comes from," he muses, as we look out over his planned seedling nursery. "For anybody, really. They're gifts."

This is a gift that Leigh Brown very much wishes to give to children in need. "The kingdom of childhood is definitely under attack in the Cape Flats," she tells me as we stroll in the grounds behind Rocklands Primary. The school houses the training garden and head offices of SEED, School Environmental Education and Development. "They need to get the joy and the connection to the earth early on, before they become cynical," Leigh, the program coordinator, says, "and we must build a culture of that. It will spill over the fences into the community, a resource for the community. Gardening is a metaphor for social change."

There is only a ghost of a garden, trenches half dug, and beds overgrown. But the garden is hardly abandoned – an older food garden is being replaced with a larger, more ambitious version, to serve both the school and as training facilities. Leigh braves the winter wind as we march the perimeter. "We want to establish a garden to show what's possible," Leigh tells me. Her enthusiasm is infectious; as she talks and gesticulates at the empty spaces around her, fruit trees and vegetable patches spring up in my mind, drawn by the power of her vision and imagination.

SEED assists schools in establishing and running food gardens based on permaculture principles. With their Organic Classroom Program, they establish the garden and train teachers, caretakers and students to maintain the gardens, run food entrepreneurship projects and integrate the gardens into their natural science syllabus. As Leigh wryly puts it, "We're not just going in, putting in a garden, and leaving." By the end of three years, the gardens should be self-sustainable, no longer requiring SEED's guidance. SEED has created teaching manuals to assist teachers in integrating the garden into the government-set curriculum, and facilitators visit each school one day every two weeks. In between visits, the school environmental club, run by teachers and assisted by willing students, performs upkeep like weeding and watering, and complete tasks assigned to them.

In addition, SEED runs accredited permaculture courses for adults. SEED currently runs food garden projects at nine primary schools on the Cape Flats, with another nine schools to join next year.

Each school presents new challenges, but they all have one thing in common says Leigh, impoverished communities with children in need of hope. "For some kids, the garden's the place they get affirmation that they don't get in the outside world. Teachers testify that the difficult kids find calmness and meaning from working in the garden. It helps them concentrate. It grounds them."

"The food is going to help us. It sounds horrible, but it's true," Leigh Brown tells me just before I leave. "We've been telling people that they need to do this for ages. I'm not happy about people starving and chaos, but our food use patterns are totally unsustainable."

She echoes what Pat tells me earlier at Soil for Life. "There's a lot of space here that's not being used, and there's a lot of broken down communities. We've got to set up a proper growing culture here. I think it would be a huge healing process for South Africa, if everyone gets involved."

Yoliswa in Vrygrond puts it even more simply: "Everything is very expensive now. You really must grow your own vegetables – and organic is the cheapest, best way."

Noel agrees. "More and more the focus has to be on local food. A lot of indigenous staple foods have been lost. Plants which grow really well in difficult African conditions. There needs to be a move back to traditional crops and supporting local varieties. Very exciting – and there's lots of work to be done."

And I've met a couple of people who are already doing it.

SOIL FOR LIFE

021-794-4982

info@soilforlife.co.za

www.soilforlife.co.za

SEED

021-391-5316

seed@intekom.co.za

www.seed.org.za