

GREEN LIGHT FOR GUERILLA GARDENERS

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At its regular monthly meeting in August, Melbourne's Yarra Council became a green star. Instead of razing local unauthorized street gardens as it had threatened, it did a complete about-face, voting unanimously to champion them.

Yarra, along with other municipalities, is increasingly dotted with community-initiated gardens. These include registered, secure community gardens that councils approve and support. Then there are the others, guerilla gardens, located in places like planter boxes in the street or on abandoned public land, which are established without prior council approval. As their survival relies on councils turning a blind eye, their future is always precarious.

Guerilla gardeners live with this knowledge, but tend to push it to the back of their minds. At least that had been the case with me and my fellow renegades at Windmill Foodgarden @ Tramstop 22 in the inner-city suburb of Clifton hill - right up until the axe fell in early August.

Our plot, established on an ex-nature strip next to a busy thoroughfare, had been flourishing for over a year. Locals regularly collected greens for their dinner and pulled weeds as they passed, the kitchen staff at the nearby *Recreation* pub fed the plants with their rinse water and neighbours organized working bees to keep the plot in shape.

Despite, or perhaps because of the fact that there are no security fences and the garden is open to all, it had never been vandalized. Instead it had developed into a small but beloved community hub, whose first birthday we had just celebrated in July.

That day the guest of honour was resplendent in violas, herbs, salad greens and veggies, with a stylish girdle of thigh-high fig branch fencing. Guests stood amidst the flapping flags in the icy winds, eating and drinking and talking food. But the birthday cake was barely digested when out of the blue a directive arrived from the council.

We were told to either remove the garden ourselves within 30 days or council officers would pull it down. This notice, which was sent to all unauthorised street gardens in the City of Yarra, was ostensibly concerned about issues of contamination and public risk. But that made no sense to us.

The creators of the Windmill Foodgarden were experienced food growers, who knew what they were doing. One of their main motivations was food security, and they put a lot of research, thought and effort into ensuring that their organic produce would always be in peak condition.

They used deep biodegradable trays, which were dug into place and filled with certified clean soil, for planting. Since then the trays have regularly been topped up with compost. As an added security, only shallow-rooted plants are ever used. The Council's concern about contamination seemed misguided. As to risk, we were left guessing as to what they could mean.

We wondered if there was concern about dangerous objects like syringes being tossed into the garden, but that had never happened. Also at working bees and when they come to pick produce, people make a point of removing any rubbish. And although the garden abuts the main road, only low-growing plants are used to ensure there is no impediment to motorists' or pedestrians' visibility.

It was a no-brainer; there was no way we were giving up our garden without a fight. But with less than a week until the council meeting, there was no time to lose.

The first step was to open up the lines of communication with the council, especially to reassure councilors that gardeners had taken measures to protect against contamination. Strategy-planning meetings were organized across the municipality, to which councillors were invited. The town hall was blitzed with emails and phone calls and a petition was circulated.

When I received several prompt and conciliatory replies from councilors in response to my distressed protest email, I felt a twinge of guarded optimism. But the council's original draconian stance was uppermost in our minds as we approached the meeting, and we were also anxious that only a handful of other protestors would turn up.

It was a thrill to find the council chamber packed. Clearly such a large public presence was exceptional and extra chairs had to be brought in to accommodate the 60 or 70 gardeners attending. The council's offer to bring forward the 'Street Gardens' agenda item was the first gesture of good will – an attitude that was to characterise the whole meeting. All the participants who so desired were given ample opportunity to speak to their submissions, and their wealth of experience was warmly acknowledged by the council. I was relieved and I must confess a bit disappointed that the battle we had expected was looking more and more unlikely to eventuate.

When the irrepressible Glenda Lindsay used her submission time to break into her calypso number *Eat de Street* and the councilors joined in the Mexican wave, it became obvious our prospects were looking good.

Soon after, the council conceded that only two ‘minor’ complaints had been received about community gardens and no cases of people becoming ill from eating street garden produce had been reported. Before we knew it, and with no opposition, the council had dropped its decision to destroy our gardens and instead voted unanimously to foster ‘creative gardening’ across the municipality.

The audience went wild. No doubt this was partly due to the victory for our own individual gardens, but many of us were also thrilled by the whole experience of people power. With little lead time and no hierarchical leadership, a bunch of fired-up enthusiasts had managed to get the bureaucracy to do a 360 degree about-turn, enabling us to save something that is precious to us. It doesn’t get better than that. And we can all sure do with some wins on the environment front.

As Rebecca Solnit, the inspiring San Francisco-based activist, concludes in her book *Hope in the Dark: the Untold History of People power*, there is no point waiting for governments, be they local or otherwise, to initiate change.

She insists that it’s from the margins that new and radical ideas always emerge and get translated into action. And the margins are certainly where you’ll find guerilla gardeners. I’m sure Solnit would appreciate why we didn’t need our bikes and cars after the meeting – we all went home walking on air.

Although on occasion guerilla gardeners have received council support, this tends to be for individual gardens, especially famous ones like the Liz Christy Bowery Garden in New York, which was established way back in 1973. It is much more usual for local government to operate from a position of at best indifference or at worst active opposition to unregistered street gardens.

Yarra council, by contrast, had the prescience in the face of popular opposition to totally reverse its negative stance, and to come out in support not merely of a single garden but of guerilla gardens across the municipality. That is why I believe it rates green stardom.

I imagine it's only a matter of time before you'll be able to sign up for an *Edible Street Gardens of Yarra* walking tour. We can guarantee you a warm welcome at Windmill Foodgarden.