

ONE GOOD TURN(IP) DESERVES ANOTHER: FOOD SWAPS

By Sue Jackson

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My first encounter with food swaps was when I emerged from my yoga class one Saturday morning a year or so ago and glanced over at the adjacent reserve.

At first I had no idea what was going on as I watched some laughing people in fruit-decorated aprons struggle in a gusty wind to string a banner reading *Yarra Neighbourhood Orchard* between two trees. Before long, others started arriving and began unpacking luscious-looking greens and fruit, which were duly weighed and displayed on a market table or in baskets on the ground.

None of the participants looked like farmers, so where was all this food coming from? After all we were only five kilometres from the Melbourne CBD. Noticing that no money was changing hands, I eventually realised that what I was observing was a food swap.

My next conundrum was: 'How do people know what's a fair exchange for what they bring?' One thing was clear, there was no way I'd ever have enough in my tiny garden to justify participation. Yet as I watched the tea and nibbles circulate and the party atmosphere heighten, I found myself thinking: 'Perhaps by the next swap...'

Sure enough, despite my daughter's protest about the despised bay leaves - 'You can't take those!' - I clipped some and added them to the mint, parsley and rosemary from my garden and the surplus lemons from a neighbour's, to discover that while my basket wasn't actually 'brimming', it was at least respectably full. At the last moment I added

some empty glass jars that I had noticed participants collecting. Thus armed, I braved the next monthly Yarra Urban Harvest food swap.

Well, I was nearly mobbed for my bay leaves; they were obviously in short supply that month. I could hardly wait to tell my daughter. And I was bowled over by the freshness of the produce, much of which had obviously been picked that morning. There were also items with limited shelf life, like zucchini flowers, that I had never even seen in the shops, or only at great cost.

I was amazed to discover the extraordinary variety of food that can be grown locally. Macadamia nuts are just one example. Clearly, there is huge climatic variation and soil types within our small metropolitan area. Two gardeners had brought along American Beauty grapes. One variety was black, soft, fragrant and tasted like it was about to spontaneously ferment into wine, while the other was paler, crisp and refreshing, with a strong under taste of strawberry. Who needs Bordeaux, Marlborough and the Barossa when there are such marked regional differences within a few inner-city kilometers? I left my first swap agog with all that I had learned.

Nothing has changed; at a recent swap I was selecting fruits for marmalade, when a Chinese neighbour alerted me to the throat-soothing properties of salted kumquats. Another neighbour, recently returned from Northern India, had discovered kumquat chutney there, flavoured with staranise, ginger, chillies and limejuice. I could hardly wait to get home to give it a go.

Since I've caught the swapping bug my view of what actually constitutes food has shifted radically. Swappers of European background have opened my eyes to the value of 'Horta'. These wild greens, like thistles, amaranth, chicory and dandelions are

everywhere for the picking if you know where to look, and I can attest to the zing they add to meal times.

Glenda Lindsay, one of the founders of the Yarra swap, introduced me to the delights of fresh herbal teas, especially her signature lemon verbena and honey brew. Goodbye to packaged teas! And recently I have been experimenting with lavender's unique flavouring ability; my lavender scones take many an encore.

My gardening has also undergone a make-over since I took to swapping. Because I am keen to produce a surplus, I've embarked on a crash course in growing big harvests in small spaces. I have become a devoted student of Karen Sutherland, a Melbourne edible gardens advocate, whose own garden is a veritable cornucopia.

Out have gone our ornamentals, replaced by edible plants of every persuasion. There is food everywhere at our place now - in pots, window boxes and on the front verandah, vertically, in the shade and even in the dark. Recently, I managed to grow so many tall and luxuriant broad beans that our front garden looked like the film set for 'Day of the Triffids'.

I still have a long way to go though - something that was brought home when I lucked on a talk by the eminent Cuban permaculturalist, Roberto Perez. He described how residents of Havana are ingenious at transforming every inch of urban space - balconies, bathtubs, pathways and rooftops -- into miniature farms, with dwarf fruit trees, vegetables and even tiny fertilizer-providing animals, like guinea pigs, rabbits or chickens. An amazing seventy percent of Havana's vegetables are now produced within city limits. Way to go!

If you are lucky enough to have a food swap in your area, don't despair if you don't seem to have enough surplus in your garden for sharing. A handful of chillies, a few stalks of rhubarb, even a bunch of bay leaves: small offerings are always welcome. And of course the beauty of the smallest contribution of all – saved seeds – is that they grow into something bigger. As to my worry about equity: because it is easy to undervalue your own offerings, most people have to be persuaded to take more food. And everyone loves to see their produce going to a good home.

These days, I hang out for the first Saturday of the month when I get to talk about my favourite topics – gardening and food – with people whose eyes never glaze over. Although we all live locally, if it wasn't for the food swap, we might never have met. It is wonderful to have finally found my tribe.