

## POSSUM MAGIC: BEFRIENDING YOUR PESTS

By

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Although I have lived in an inner-city Melbourne suburb for over twenty years, it's only recently that I've really begun to get to know the neighbours.

As one by one the old faithfuls in our front garden - the hydrangeas, camellias and azaleas – have got the chop, and been replaced by dwarf apples, an apricot tree and veggies and herbs galore, the neighbours have become very curious. It's still quite unusual around here to find a flourishing mini farm, complete with compost bin, worm farm and water tank in a front garden, so passers-by tend to stop and chat while I water or weed or pick produce for dinner. And it's weird, but it's my former nemesis – the possums – who I have to thank for this enriched sense of community.

I only started growing fruit and veggies out the front because our furry housemates were making life so difficult out the back. They were ingenious in their assaults on the plants, especially fledgling ones - even using the chicken-wire frames I'd contrived to protect the garden pots as launching pads for their assaults on the hanging baskets overhead. They also specialized in a range of other anti-social activities, like using our telephone wires as a highway, with their exit ramp over our roof, where they revved their engines and did wheelies all night long.

Forget exotic cuisines, when I only grew veggies in the backyard, our menu was simplicity itself, featuring ingredients possums disdain, like mustard greens, radishes, garlic and nasturtiums. It was around that time that I went to stay with my

sister, Jude, and her partner, Brien, who live on a bush block farm north of Bendigo, in Jaara Jaara country.

During the visit, Brien, who is a Jaara Elder, showed me a possum skin cloak that had been made in the traditional way by the women of his family for the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in 2006. The skins were from New Zealand, where possums are not protected.

Brien explained that his ancestors treasured these cloaks for their warmth and durability and handed them down as heirlooms. Like so many Aboriginal possessions, they were multi-purpose, sometimes being used as blankets or mattresses or to wrap babies.

When he flung the cloak over the kitchen table to display it to me, the light reflected the glossy sheen of the fur, which proved irresistible to the touch. But it was the underside that I found absolutely intriguing. A leather burning tool had been used to draw a map of Brien's country, showing the Loddon river, the women's camp, and initiation, hunting and basket weaving sites. Under the fur, up close to the wearer's body, an age-old narrative perpetually unfolded.

Given the way I was feeling about possums at the time, I wasn't a bit sorry for them when Brien explained that it takes roughly fifty skins to make an adult-sized cloak. I even suspect my eyes gleamed.

It was coming back on the train, with time to reflect on the beauty and usefulness of those cloaks and the rich contribution possums have made to the well-being of Indigenous people, that I had my epiphany. I decided that maybe it was time to stop treating them as the enemy. Perhaps they had as much right to live at my place as I did. After all, possums are as territorial as we are. And there was a way forward.

For some reason, maybe it's the street lighting or the passing foot traffic, the possums have always restricted their activities to the back of the house. The front yard has been a totally possum-free zone, so it made sense to start by simply growing the food we both loved out the front.

I have always been impressed with Jackie French's assertion that we should be sharing what we grow with the local wild life. Initially, it seemed harder to apply that admirable principle in an urban setting where space for growing things is much more limited. But as the garden is becoming more productive, it's easier to be generous. I've also developed a few tricks.

These days, out the back, I start off precious things like cherries and figs, which the possums love, behind their chicken-wire shields, and plant other foods they enjoy, like warrigal greens, enticingly in the open nearby. And sometimes I successfully manage to hide new seedlings amidst plants they don't like. Planting thickly, which Jackie recommends, helps with this. As our garden has matured, we are gradually reaching the point where there is food enough for all.

After all, since Australian possums are protected, even if you need to have them removed from inconvenient places like the roof cavity - as we had to do - they have a legal right to settle elsewhere nearby.

Integral to permaculture principles is the idea that we need to make the most of what nature has on offer. What initially seems a nuisance can turn out to be a blessing. Our furry friends have been responsible for enriching our relationship with our neighbours; maybe the least I can do is provide them with some healthy organic meals.