



TIM BARKER



the green path

Climate change is a global problem, but what can be done in our own backyards? Will Wright asks if the growing trend of permaculture can lead society to a more sustainable way of life. Photographs by Peter Weaving

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If you're thinking about creating a more ecologically sustainable backyard, talk to Adam Grubb.

The Northcote resident is the co-ordinator of Permablitz, a group that designs permaculture gardens and organises teams of volunteers to quickly make them a reality.

Grubb says permaculture promotes sustainable living and land use, but it can be misrepresented as a niche form of organic gardening.

"It did start out like that, but it has evolved into a more diverse, complex way of working with nature, rather than against it, with minimal effort and resources."

The idea behind permaculture is to build self-sufficient settlements and minimise society's reliance on mass production and distribution. Plenty of mulch is used, so less water is needed. Any surplus food is shared with family, friends and neighbours.

Groups such as Permablitz have transformed many backyards across Melbourne. Since last year, Permablitz's membership has risen from 300 to 1200. Volunteers gather to quickly plant, mulch and landscape to transform a backyard into a sustainable garden.

"It works on a reciprocal basis, so we organise for people's backyards to be blitzed after they come three times to other blitzes," Grubb says. "People need to show commitment. You meet good people, have a good feed and end up having a really good day."

Grubb organised a permablitz at his own property, where he grows corn, pumpkins, tomatoes, basil and lettuces.

"We have really fresh, healthy food where you know where it comes from," he says. "We use sub-surface irrigation and a lot of mulch and organic soil-building strategies. We collected newspapers and horse manure, and we used onsite bricks for garden edges."

About a year ago, TMT production designer Rachel van Uden's backyard in Eltham had a permablitz.

In preparation, van Uden (pictured, opposite page) and her partner, Brent, removed the grass and six "weed" trees, including a 15-metre pine, but they left a small lemon tree to grow.

A retaining wall was built to split the backyard into two levels, making the land easier to turn into a garden.

Over one weekend, Permablitz volunteers made a permaculture garden comprising fruit and vegetable seedlings, native species and a pond.

Van Uden's garden has a range of delights such as strawberries, beans, carrots, parsnips, zucchinis, beetroots, potatoes, corn, garlic, basil and thyme.

"It's the best feeling ever to get food from your garden," she says. "We're like children getting lollies – our food tastes so much better than that from the shop. We only just recently harvested a massive amount of garlic – big fat ones that were really good. We've got heaps of potatoes in the cupboard, and we've never tasted potatoes like them. The flavour is just really intense and creamy."

Van Uden is sometimes overwhelmed by the constant work to maintain her garden, but she does not regret doing the overhaul.

"Sometimes I freak out and think we've done something crazy, but it will become easy later on," she admits. "It's pretty much been my life for the past year, but I love it – I never want to do anything else."

The recent four-day heatwave certainly took its toll on gardens. In van Uden's garden, once magnificent nasturtiums – creeping plants with bright blood-orange flowers – disintegrated. Most of the garden survived, however, thanks to sun shades and tank water.

Three days later, a quick downpour of rain provided light relief to thirsty plants.

"The rain only lasted about three minutes, but we got four millimetres and about 500 litres in the tank, which isn't really a lot, but it's something," van Uden says.

Grubb believes that climate change, rising energy prices and the global economic crisis are encouraging people to grow their own food.

"There's a sense of autonomy and pride you get from growing your own food and being able to share it with neighbours and friends," he says.



Kaz Preston's garden has had a permablitz



Nature plus nurture

The permaculture movement was founded by Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1970s. Derived from the term "permanent agriculture", as well as "permanent culture", permaculture is a system of garden and agriculture design that aims to mimic the self-organising nature of ecosystems. For example, instead of using pesticides to deal with a bug infestation, a permaculture gardener might introduce another animal, such as an insect or lizard, that preys on the pest. Although it began as an agricultural design system, permaculture has also come to mean a philosophy or way of life built around principles of sharing, responsible consumption and respect for nature. According to Mollison: 'The only ethical decision is to take responsibility for our own existence and that of our children.'