

GOOD

ORGANIC Gardening

grow naturally, eat fresh, live sustainably

MAY/JUNE

ANGELO ELIADES

Permaculture explained

MEGG MILLER

Wandering busybodies
— guinea fowl

JENNIFERSTACKHOUSE

Clever crops: stone pine & tamarind

Vegies: chilli, garlic, rhubarb & wasabi

Ornamental: fragrant frangipani

MELISSA KING

Heritage lettuces

Fruit: cumquats & loquats

CLAIRE BICKLE

Masses of mints

Craft plants to grow & raid

HOW TO

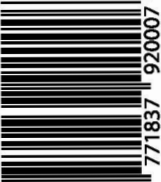
Twist weave a basket

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Beetroot for health | Native bees | Environmental news



THE POWER OF NATURE

A KITCHEN GARDEN,
RESTAURANT AND COMMUNITY
ARTS CENTRE NESTLED IN A
BUSHLAND SETTING ARE PLOT
TO PLATE FOR THE PEOPLE

Words Kerry Boyne**Photos** Lauren Booth & Kerry Boyne

When Lauren Booth and I sit down to lunch at Bellbird Dining & Bar, almost everything on our plates has been grown by her, less than 100m from where we sit. The restaurant is part of the Casula Powerhouse complex in south-western Sydney, where Lauren is in charge of the grounds and a very productive kitchen garden — so productive that it supplies around 65 per cent of what chefs Federico Rekowski and Steven Pham serve up.

Lauren, whose interests include macro photography, fossicking for gold and gems, and travelling Australia, is from a farming background. “When I was a kid, we had a big vegie garden, chickens and some fruit trees,” she says. “When I was about five, I developed asthma and the doctor suggested I change to goat’s milk, so Dad brought home a goat. Frisky was a Saanen and she was mean! Mum still complains about the time she broke into the vegie garden and ate the hearts out of every lettuce.”

Lauren likes to garden the traditional way, without artificial inputs, but uses carefully chosen organic additives. “Techniques such as crop rotation, companion planting, improving soil biology through composting and permaculture, and encouraging beneficial insects are easy and commonsense ways of growing a healthy, pest-free and chemical-free garden,” she says.

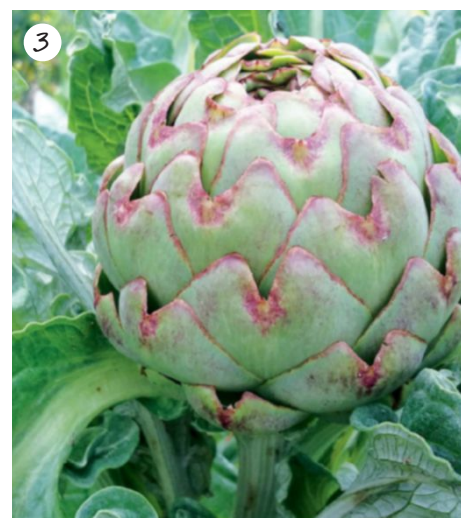
THE BELLBIRD GARDEN

Around 15m × 15m and divided into 12 areas, the garden is mainly raised beds, about 1.2m × 10m. Some are wider to allow space for spreading plants such as zucchini and cucumber. There are enough beds for crop rotation and resting.

There are also several planter boxes of herbs, a wall of pots, citrus trees and a bush tucker garden. “We plan to expand this part of the garden to include more locally used native plants and provide education to visitors,” Lauren says.

When she took it over less than a year before I visited, the plot was a tragic mess. “The garden had been partly constructed but was just a pile of soil, completely overgrown with kikuyu grass and weeds,” she explains. “I didn’t think I would ever be able to turn it into a garden like we have now!”

“The first few weeks were



1 Less than a year earlier 2 Corn grows like crazy 3 Many visitors have never seen an artichoke plant

“HEAD CHEF FEDERICO OFTEN ASKS ME TO GROW A PARTICULAR VEGETABLE. FOR EXAMPLE, I HAVE JUST PLANTED A LOT OF CELERIAC AND FENNEL AS HE LIKES TO CREATE WITH THOSE.”

backbreaking, just digging, digging, digging. However, with help from my co-worker Daniel, we eventually got the soil cleared. Then it was a matter of mulching, keeping on top of the weeds and getting some vegies planted.”

Over summer, the garden produced several varieties of tomatoes, including cherry and heritage varieties, Lebanese cucumbers, ‘Crystal Apple’ cucumbers, zucchini, eggplants, shallots, lettuce, radishes, capsicums, chillies, butter beans, green beans, carrots, corn, Jerusalem artichokes, peanuts, celery and spinach.

During winter, the focus turns to brassicas — kale, broccolini, broccoli, red cabbages and cauliflowers — as well as spinach, globe artichokes and lots of

Chinese greens such as bok choy, pak choy, mizuna and mibuna.

“Head chef Federico often asks me to grow a particular vegetable,” Lauren explains. “For example, I have just planted a lot of celeriac and fennel as he likes to create with those. We also have a big patch of Jerusalem artichokes, which he is looking forward to getting his hands on!”

Bees and other beneficial insects love Lauren’s work, too. “I have been trying to encourage native bees and we have plans to purchase a native beehive in the near future,” she says. While we are strolling around the beds, we spot both blue-banded and teddy bear bees, and bluetail damselflies flit about like bits of blue gossamer.



1 Spot the teddy bear bee on the eggplant 2 Surplus produce is sold in the cafe 3 The day's beetroot harvest 4 A young Davidson plum in the bush tucker garden 5 A crop of Jerusalem artichoke is underway 6 Summer saw loads pf cherry tomatoes 7 From plot to plate 8 Picked for the restaurant

GARDENING METHODS

Before planting, Lauren prepares the beds with cow or chicken manure in composted or pellet form, as well as blood and bone. "I use a seaweed extract to help promote strong cell growth, which helps the plants survive extremes of temperature. I also make a cow poo tea by suspending a hessian bag of composted cow manure in an old wheelie bin full of water. I dilute it and put it straight on the vegies," she explains.

For pest control, she uses a few organic products and has also made her own. "I inspect the plants every morning, as it's so much easier to treat pests when they first appear. Caterpillars are easily picked off and squashed. I have planted a bird and bee mix of flowers and herbs just outside the garden, as well as lavender within it, to encourage birds, bees and beneficial insects. I have two bird baths, too."

For Lauren, "Compost is gold to an organic garden! When I first started, the bought soil was very sandy with not much organic matter. There were no worms but millions of ants. I have been adding lots of compost and manure. All vegie scraps and garden waste go into a huge compost area and I add cow

manure to help promote decomposition and encourage invertebrates."

Mulching is equally important, with all beds covered in a thick layer of sugar cane mulch. The beds are set up with irrigation, too. "I have experimented a bit with different systems but have found drip irrigation is the most water-wise as it targets just the root zone of the plants," Lauren says.

WHILE WE ARE STROLLING AROUND THE BEDS, WE SPOT BOTH BLUE-BANDED AND TEDDY BEAR BEES, AND BLUETAIL DAMSELFLIES FLIT ABOUT LIKE BITS OF BLUE GOSSAMER.

When she saw Costa make a worm farm from an old bathtub on *Gardening Australia*, Lauren decided to do the same with one she found on a Facebook freebies page. "I'm a bit of a scrounger," she happily admits. "I pick up all sorts of things and recycle, reuse and repurpose them."

COMMUNITY VALUE

Lauren loves the educational and social aspects of the garden. "I have had a lot of people visit and then come back for a second time just to see how the vegies have progressed. I get older people who have been gardeners their whole lives and we swap tips while they reminisce about their gardens.

"I particularly enjoy visits by young kids who are learning where their food comes from and how plants grow, and I let them pick bits and pieces and taste them. In July, I will be running Intro to Gardening classes for kids, during the WOW Festival, where kids will learn about growing plants, plant a seedling in a little pot and take it home to grow."

For Lauren, it's very satisfying to see diners eating the food she has grown. "I'm very proud that the produce goes to the Bellbird Restaurant where Federico and Steven turn it into amazing meals. We've had a lot of great feedback about the quality of the food and I think we provide an exceptional dining experience, with all meals less than \$20."

After my superb lunch, I couldn't agree more. 🍴



LAUREN BOOTH, CASULA POWERHOUSE | GARDENING FOLK



DESTINATION DINING AND ART

Bellbird's kitchen garden is located in the grounds of Casula Powerhouse, a vibrant community arts centre owned by Liverpool City Council. Casula train station is right next to the Powerhouse.

The vision for the garden came from Powerhouse director, Craig Donarski, who plans more garden/

restaurant-based activities such as cooking classes for kids to learn to make a nutritious meal from what's in the garden. Future expansion includes a chicken run (Casula FowlHouse) and a volunteer community garden.

As for the food at Bellbird Dining & Bar, it really is fine-dining standard at cafe prices. Visit casulapowerhouse.com

LAUREN'S TOP TIPS

- 1 Read the Safety Data Sheet (SDS) for any product and make an informed decision whether to use it or not.
- 2 Read a lot! There are fabulous gardening resources available — magazines, books, websites and TV shows.
- 3 Learn the water requirements of your plants and grow those with similar requirements near each other. Automatic timers can deliver the right amount of water at the right time.
- 4 Improve your soil with compost, animal manures, green manure crops, blood and bone, mulch etc. Test its pH and replenish nutrients between crops.
- 5 Try something new! Look for interesting heritage varieties such as Turkish eggplants or Oxheart tomatoes.
- 6 Let some plants go to seed. The flowers will attract bees and other beneficial insects and you can save the seeds for next year.