

SWEET GREENS

STORY: CATHERINE STEWART FAILDM MHMA

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Although I've been gardening since the late 1980s, when it comes to vegetables, I'm the one with a big loser 'L' on the forehead. Oh, I've put the odd tomato plant into the garden or plonked some runner beans in a polystyrene box, but the results were pretty woeful. Thinking I could leave vegetable growing to the safe hands of those gumboot wearing, staking and double-digging veggie enthusiasts, I concentrated on the flowering and foliage plants I've always enjoyed growing.

But a funny thing has happened with vegetable growing; it's become the new black. When did the trials and tribulations of protecting your spinach, or methods of organic seed-saving turn into dinner party conversation? How did 'knowing your onions' become a literal necessity?

I went to Bunnings the other day (I can't help it, I just love going there) and looked at the seedlings and seed packets for sale. Did you know that the ratio of flower seed packets of pretties like marigolds, daisies or sweet alicie to vegetable seeds is about one to eight? In seedlings it's about one to five.

I hesitate over whether this is A Good Thing, as I think that vegetable growing is probably one of the hardest types of



1. Swiss Chard (*Beta vulgaris*) is a type of beetroot that does not develop a bulbous base. It is a popular Mediterranean leafy vegetable with high levels of Vitamin A, K and C. Young leaves are so tender they can be used for salads but as they mature are better cooked as a substitute for spinach in pasta dishes, soups and legume stews. The coloured stems can be tough while the white stems are good for eating.

2. Recently updated *Organic Vegetable Growing* by Annette McFarlane. It covers a wide range of edible plants from well known favourites to less familiar ones. There is a comprehensive A to Z listing with everything useful about growing and using them.

3. Vegetable growing: it's become the new black.

gardening. We could argue that getting anyone to grow any plant is essentially good, and considering how long food obsession is lasting in the national psyche, to get people to think about growing it as well as just eating it is also good. However, I worry that if we seduce new recruits into gardening with the promise of a bounteous harvest for their garden-to-table ambitions, perhaps we are setting them up to fail, especially if we add the other must-do element of today's vegetable gardening - organic. In my own meagre experiments with food production, I've found a garden with even one or two rapidly growing vegetables to be a pest and disease magnet even beyond roses and citrus.



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4. Abutilon – one of the many floral edibles including day lily, hollyhock, chicory, nasturtium, borage, zucchini, marigold and viola

5. Borlotti Beans – a species of the common bean *Phaseolus vulgaris*.

Of course if vegetables are going to populate today's backyards and balconies, we want them grown without gardeners resorting to environmentally unfriendly chemical pesticides and man-made fertilisers. The thought of recklessly revisiting a 1960s-style use of sulphate of ammonia and organophosphate insecticides would make all of us in the landscape industry shudder. So as a landscape professional, what are you going to do when your novice gardener client wants a huge vegetable garden mandala as part of the design?

No sooner had I started to ponder this question when serendipity intervened with a freshly minted copy of Annette McFarlane's recently updated book *Organic Vegetable Growing*. Given Annette's garden cred via radio talk-back in Brisbane, regular contributions to *Organic Gardener* magazine (BTW - an excellent mag) and a website brimming with helpful advice based on personal gardening experience, I surmised that veggie newbies would naturally be impressed. But would they be able to put it into practice and could she teach me a thing or two as well?

In organic vegetable gardening, chemical pesticides and fertilisers and using genetically modified seed are out, while working with natural resources of water, soil, air, and animal and plant wastes are in. True to its name, organic methods and ethics permeate every part of the book, so the more you read, the more natural it seems to think that way about everything. Defining 'vegetable' in its broadest culinary sense also means the book includes a very wide range of edible plants, from traditional vegetables like carrots and cucumbers through to bush tucker plants. Now this section is heart-warming and encouraging stuff for me, as I can already grow several of these less 'vegetably' plants, and now I know what to do with them as well. Suddenly I feel more a success than a failure - now that's a clever author. Annette has also included a lot of non-native edible ornamental plants like bamboo, cloves, curry leaf, cassia, peanuts and tamarind, so there's a wide climate coverage. And check out the tamarind recipe called 'Son-in-law Eggs'.

Then we move onto edible fungi, flowers and weeds - I had no idea you could eat abutilon, day lily, hollyhock or chicory flowers. Now even my ordinary garden starts to take on a whole new look, and instead of pretty flowers and annoying weeds, I'm seeing decorative salads, spicy greens, soups and even a coffee substitute. (Note to self, do remember that some plants are friends, not food).

The fat part of the book is an A to Z of vegetables, from A is for Amaranth Spinach, through to Z is for Zucchini. Unlike some more coffee-table garden books which have a cursory 50-100 words on each plant, entries here are truly comprehensive. For example, arrowhead (duck potato) has about 800 words covering when, where and how to plant, time to harvest, plant group, ease of culture, detailed description, varieties, propagation, harvesting, problems, preparation and use, storage and seed saving. Beans run rampant for six and a half pages.

6. Know your micro-greens from your mini-greens? *Organic Vegetable Growing* will arm you with answers to all those curly questions from clients.

7. Borage (*Borago officinalis*) is an annual herb grown for its many culinary and medicinal uses as well as its beautiful blue edible flowers. The flavour of Borage leaves is akin to cucumber and they are often used in salads and soups.



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The plant list is particularly strong for those gardening in warmer climates, where many of our traditional vegetables struggle in the heat or drought. Peruvian parsnip (*Arracacia xanthorrhiza*) substitutes for the regular cool climate parsnip, or you can try yacon, yams cassava and sweet potato. Most importantly, you'll know what they taste like and how to use them as well.

As I'm not yet wholly converted to vegetable growing, as I flick through many of the familiar names (asparagus, beans, beetroot) I'm tempted to not read all the detail but a clever little 'Do you know' box drags my attention back. Beetroot - Did you know? "*Grown for their abundant leaf harvest, silver beet and Swiss chard are selections of beetroot that fail to develop a bulbous base*". Well blow me down, no I didn't know that. Before I realise what's happening I'm reading that I should plant 12-15 beetroots at a time to ensure continuity of harvest and that beetroot is susceptible to boron and manganese deficiencies in alkaline soils. Damn it Annette, I'm hooked.

So if you want to know your micro-greens from your mini-greens (believe me, for this year's Christmas party table-talk, you do), which wattles to harvest for seed, and that a mangel wurzel is not something you ride on at the school fete, you need this book. If you want to be able to answer all your client's curly questions, you need this book. And if you want to move yourself from 'L' for loser to 'E' for expert vegetable grower, you definitely need this book. Now, lotus flower tea anyone?



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8. *Phaseolus lunatus* – one of the very tasty legumes known as lima bean or butter bean.

Bean, abutilon and book cover photos courtesy of Annette McFarlane, ABC Gardening Australia and Green Harvest.