

Formation and History

Goulburn Community Garden, 2010 – 2018: Our Story so far

by David Bollen

Australian gardens have traditionally been one of two kinds, private and public. The first decade of the new millennium saw the advent of a third kind, the community garden. As the name suggests, a garden on these lines would be a co-operative venture of local people, some of whom might not otherwise have the opportunity to garden, with a view to knowledge sharing and community building.

Nostalgia had a part – memories of the backyard gardens of our childhood, the fun of planting and harvesting veggies and fruit, the satisfaction of ‘eating one’s own’. But there was also concern about the present – the disconnect between our immediate environment and food, part of a wider loss of contact with nature, and dependence on the petro-economy to supply food from distant places. Was this sustainable? What price are we paying for ‘everything all-year-round? What had we lost in the process? The community garden offered a chance to regain control, to recover something that had bonded communities through the ages. The time was ripe for the third type of garden.

Locally, the idea surfaced at a meeting of the Goulburn Congregation of the Uniting Church in the Spring of 2010. It would express a Christian duty of care for our earthly home, and make good use of two derelict tennis courts at the rear of the Goldsmith Street site. Rosemary Miller was the initiator and would come to oversee the venture through its formative period. A working party (Rosemary, Sue Hart, Bronwyn Guy and David Guthrey) reported to a subsequent meeting on five visits for gardens from Canberra to Liverpool; it was agreed to take steps ‘to draw in the community’. Contact was made with local migrant groups from parts of Africa and Myanmar, with U3A and the Permaculture Group. An August 2011 meeting committed the Congregation to an expenditure of up to \$2,000 to get things moving.

The next year saw advances in design, onsite works and constitution making. The late Peter Mowle (‘project manager’), Michael Bligh, David Baird and Doug Rawlinson provided valuable advice and help on the design side. Bruce Guy helped with presentations to local clubs and other organisations. Graeme Baird and David Bollen served, along with Rosemary, as Congregational representatives on a sub-committee which produced a ‘Mode of Operation’ document. Anne Bollen, Alaine Cohen, Raina Emerson, Jenny Schwabel and Bronwyn Wicks joined an Interim Management Committee along with Brenton Waldock, Brian Spilsbury, Mick McGhie, Doug Brown and Brian Faulkner from TAFE – the last four, with Ray Shiel, supplying invaluable manpower and practical expertise. Graphic designer Phaedra Stogdale came up with an attractive logo for use on stationery and a banner. Robert Mowle was helpful with a Development Application and the Property Committee of the Church, led by Sid Mawbey, lent active

support. Ideas abounded – private plots for rent, rent-free plots for the community and ‘new settler’ groups, composting bins, communal border strips, a setting for teaching and learning, a facility for meals, play and meditation areas, a fitness path, a fountain. A ‘Food Forest’ on permaculture lines was developed on the western side of the site by Raina, David Baird and others with a drive that put it ahead of the main project. ‘Meet and Greet’ functions were held; an induction programme, a duties of membership statement and a membership pledge were drawn up. A widening circle of volunteers and mostly positive responses to grant application suggested that the Community Garden was an idea whose time had come.

In February 2013, two and a half years down the track, the Congregation gave assent to the Mode of Operation (subject to legal advice, generously afforded by Morris Owen of Johnson and Sendall); the Management Committee followed suit. A later report told of forty signed-up members and twenty-eight plots in production. Substantial grants from Uniting Care and the NSW Government Community Partnership Fund were topped up by further funding from the Congregational groups and gifts of equipment from garden members. The Argyle Garden Club, Gunning Wind Farm, The Goulburn Workers Club, Kenmore Museum and Bunnings afforded generous support. The Garden was given a well-attended public launch on Easter Sunday 2013 with a liturgy conducted by the two parish ministers, Jonathan Barker and Aimee Kent; tributes were paid by Mayor Geoff Kettle and the State Member, Prue Goward. Publicity came from Australia Day stalls and a float in Goulburn’s 150th anniversary parade.

The Mode of Operation provided from a Management Committee. At a pot-luck dinner in March 2014 members expressed a strong preference for a mid-year election. Thus an Annual General Meeting, the first, was held in June, chaired by Bronwyn Wicks. Rosemary’s comprehensive report on four busy years was received with thanks and acclamation; her relinquishment of the chairperson’s role met with expressions of regret. The following were elected to the Management Committee: Brian Spilsbury (Chairperson), Mick McGhie (Secretary), Irene McGhie (Treasurer), Anne Bollen, David Graham, Diane Picker, and Pat St George (Committee Members). The Congregational Representative, as provided by the Mode of Operation was David Bollen, with Sid Mawbey being the alternate.

The new team took to its task well but, faced various organisational challenges. Open house for passers-by, Graeme Baird’s ideal, was a victim of health and safety and public liability issues. Child safety legislation provided a stumbling block to juvenile membership. And were Garden Members covered under the Church’s public liability insurance? Conflicting advice, local and from head office, occasioned a sheaf of correspondence, the final ruling being they were not and never had been. The only way around this way to become an incorporated body, a process quickly set in train. A \$20 million public liability cover was thus obtained, to the relief of all.

Having thus come to the notice of the Church's property office, there was a sequel, the Mode of Operation, the local definition of the partnership between the Garden and the Congregation, was deemed unsatisfactory. In its place a Draft Licence Agreement was proffered to be signed on the Congregation's behalf by the Executive of the Goulburn Combined Church Council. It was a landlord/ tenant document with a number of unwelcome provisions. The Congregation, despite having been the initiating body, was left out of the account, its link with the Garden unacknowledged. Negotiations stretched over 18 months. The Executive took a sympathetic part (David Guthrey, Chairperson, Margaret Hall, Secretary and Sue Hart, Treasurer) and a mutually acceptable outcome was finally achieved. A testing exercise, it took a toll on the local operation's sense of ownership, its idealism and buoyancy, but it did not destroy the will to partnership. A subsequently signed Memorandum of Understanding, a prologue to the License Agreement, affirms the original bond between the Congregation and the Garden.

A steady-as-you-go routine emerged, helped with Brian's three year term as Chairperson. Committee meetings, open to members, were held regularly, mostly in the Garden, always with refreshments. Opening hours were 10:00 – 12:00 Thursday, Friday and Saturday; a Committee Member was always on hand, members and their guests signed on and out. The Spring and Autumn Equinoxes, the Winter's Solstice, and year's end timed the main get-togethers, usually with educational talks and instrumental and choral music (from the U3A *a capella* singers), again with refreshments. The U3A held a number of courses on site; the Permaculture Group held monthly meetings in the Food Forest.

Signs of the Garden's place in the Goulburn scene were the Council's subsidised sponsorship of educational talks and the Judges Special Prize in the 2015 Lilac Time garden competition – not the last such. Likewise participation in a Goulburn Connects event – 'We gave away lettuce and sold \$167 worth of seedlings. A number of people were interested and lots of flyers were given out'. Shortage of funds was no problem. The balance of over \$12,000 reported in the same minutes was mainly capital works grants money but revenue from bed renting made the Garden self-sustaining day to day. A Federal Government grant of \$1,300 provided for six members to do a First Aid course and purchase a kit. Members were kept informed by a regular newsletter, Cynthia Dolan serving as editor.

What of the Garden as a human community? The Mode of Operation aimed high – 'a harmonious place accessible to everyone to build friendships and promote health, well-being and sustainability', with members pledged to 'promote harmony, care and consideration, loyalty, honesty and respect for all'. Resignations and severances, perhaps inevitable in a voluntary organisation, are part of our story. Members had to be reminded of a duty of care for communal areas. The wider community have not rushed

to the Garden – there have been surplus plots. Special needs groups have been in contact but have not become firmly associated. Yet fallings-short here and there have been offset by the dedication of a core group and stable, energetic, indeed creative, management.

Over its first eight years, the Garden had given Goulburn a new facility – a friendly place for sharing, doing and learning more about things that bear on the welfare, physical and spiritual, of us all.