

## **Food For Thought – community food production**

We are a group of women (although we are not exclusive) who meet together every week to grow food. We have a roster and each week we go to a different member's house and work in her garden on whatever she wants us to do. We have only been going about a year. As far as possible we work on organic principles, learning as we go. We have called our group Food For Thought.

Some of us have small children who now, after a year of going to 'gardening', know each other and actively look forward to Fridays and gardening.

We started as three women who were passionate about growing food. We met for several months, until slowly we started to grow (the group as well as our vegetables). Once we reached five members, we quickly jumped to the present membership of nine women, with more women interested. Naturally we don't always have nine, but we always have enough to make a significant impact on the garden we are working on that day. We talk chooks and fruit trees and meat, and we work on any of these aspects, as well as the regular vegetable gardening. The host always provides morning tea so the workers have to do nothing but come along.

It is an ancient idea of collaborative effort to produce food, not original at all, but we feel the benefits, which we have discovered are far greater than the time and effort would indicate, are such that they should be highlighted and spawned.

The benefits are:

- We learn from and teach each other
- We inspire and encourage each other
- We provide each other with a large and ready labour supply
- We share our produce
- We have fun while we work
- We develop relationships
- We discuss food in all its facets
- We connect to our natural environment with all the physical and emotional benefits of this.
- Our children learn how to grow their own food
- We discuss and try to find solutions to gardening issues, including those raised by climate change, and
- We grow our own fresh, healthy food

We have a wide variety of experience in the group from women who have never grown vegetables and didn't have a garden before joining the group, to those with established gardens and several years experience. It is very common after a morning in someone else's garden to come home and spend the rest of the day in your own, inspired and enthused by the contact with the group. We are curious, and research to find the answers to our musings. We then share our discoveries.

As far as we can ascertain this type of idea is not actively promoted anywhere else. It is probably happening in other places, at least in small pockets, but perhaps because it is so simple and obvious it is not well known or widespread. We have found a lot of information about community gardens, but we live in a community that has ample land and the benefits of a garden at your back door is streets ahead of the one down the road you have to visit. We bring the community to the home garden.

The model has capacity to be flexible for different groups. A weekend group for workers, a seasonal group that doesn't work through the cold winter months or an after school group with kids in tow, are all possible. It could work fortnightly or monthly, again depending on the needs of the group.

We believe the idea fits the terms of reference of the Inquiry in that it is:

- The most affordable food growing for consumers, (although there are still costs of the infrastructure and ongoing costs associated with growing food.)
- While it reduces the demand for farmers produce, we believe that both systems are able to coexist and that this type of food production aids other markets within the economy, including nurseries, hardwares, farm suppliers, seed savers and recyclers.
- It is clearly more sustainable to grow organic food at home. It reduces transport costs, a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and reduces reliance on and use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides.

We have dreams for our group. The model we want to promote is one that builds in an aspect of philanthropy. We are still talking through various options, but the aim is to provide our labour and expertise to help others less able and privileged than us. We envisage doing this about four times a year. It may be to an elderly person, who has the passion and commitment to vegetable gardening, but no longer has the capacity. It may be to someone with a disability who is isolated who would like to grow food but doesn't know where to start. It might be a school garden. Because we value relationship and community we are moving towards the concept of adopting a garden (rather than a one off 'makeover') working with them for a few years or until they have their own capacity. We will see how this aspect develops.

As is fitting in such a group, our development and direction is very organic and a result of the influence of the people in it.

We intend to set up a web site and produce other promotional materials to encourage and assist other groups to get started. We have talked about writing magazine articles to spread the word and laugh about how we could make a radio program for our local radio station about growing food. We have also discussed having education sessions to learn from experts about preserving food.

It is a wonderful group, that builds social capital as well as producing healthy fresh food. It needs some assistance to take it to the broader community but we believe it has enormous potential.