

## GREEN FINGERS



WATER FOR LIFE: Pat Featherstone in the Soil For Life food garden

## NATURE'S BOUNTY

Growing your own vegetables has been a life-changing experience for three local food gardeners who went on to share their gospel in books, writes Hilary Biller

## SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Jane Griffiths

"Having a vegetable garden has really made me feel more connected to the world. It centres me, grounds me. When I'm away I really miss my garden. If I get back late at night I take a torch and go and look at it," says Jane culling a couple of gem squash between her fingers. "It's about a sense of discovery, which is constantly changing."

"Before I'd grown gem squash myself I never knew that they are covered with minute prickly hairs. Did you?" asks Jane passing me one.

We're sitting in her kitchen. The shelves groan with bottles of the bounty from the garden. Creative things like Oriental plum sauce sit side by side with an array of beautifully clear plum jellies and jams.

Next to the stove stands a glass jar of green beans layered between coarse salt. "It's an old French method of preserving that I'm trying out," she explains.

"I never intended to become a gardener," says the film director pushing back a tangle of red curls. "It started with packs of chili seed I got when visiting a friend in California. Back home, I dug up a tiny square of lawn and threw in some compost. It was not just the magical process of watching them grow but the pleasure of dealing with the harvest. They grew so fast and were so prolific, I felt



SQUASHED IN THE MIDDLE: Jane Griffiths shows off some of her produce in her Auckland Park garden

obliged to use the harvest." Jane's "Hot Diggity Chili Jelly" soon became a favourite among her friends. This was the beginning, and every year since she has dug up more lawn in her Auckland Park, Johannesburg garden.

The charm of Jane's garden is

the free form intermingled mass of vegetables, herbs and flowers characterised by tall tripods entwined with greenery that spills to the ground. Jane calls it j0 gardening.

"In a small garden the best way to maximise your space is to grow upwards. Plants such as gem squash,

which normally wouldn't be suitable for a small space, are easily trained up a tripod. It also limits attacks from bugs and insects to ripening."

The ground is well mulched and the soil rich and recycled CDs twinkling in the sunlight are used to keep the birds away.

"My compost is my secret. I store it in bags. It's well rotted," says Jane.

"We (Jane shares her home with former Keith Knowlton) are not self-sufficient by any means. Things like pumpkins and butternut need space so I don't normally plant them. My beans have been prolific this year — and we've had squash, herbs, lettuces, spring onion and tomatoes. I don't sell my produce because it's not worth it but I do preserve it."

"I've learnt a lot from plants. I observe them," she muses. "Not being a professional gardener, I've never learnt how to do it before, therefore I'm not restricted. I've just done what seemed logical to me."

After a brief hesitation, she states: "Starting a vegetable garden is much easier than you think."

Her book, *Jane's Delicious Garden*, published in 2009, started out as a DVD. "When a friend asked me to help with his garden I realised two things — I knew a lot about the subject and there was little information out there for someone starting a suburban vegetable garden."

"Funny, it was the taken power cuts in early 2008 that motivated me to keep writing. I knew with the impending economic pressure that everyone would want a book like this," she remarks.

"It's been so rewarding to have reached so many who are now growing their own vegetables."

● *Jane's Delicious Garden* is published by Sunbird, R505.



JANISWYN DE GLENNON

**FRESH FROM THE FARM:** Emilla Le Roux with one of her much loved chickens, and some fresh produce

## EARTH MOTHER

**Pat Featherstone**

"I've always had a veggie garden. When I couldn't, I grew vegetables in containers," says Pat.

She is the director of the Soil for Life project in the Western Cape — a non-profit community-based project that teaches people how to create their own food gardens. Their head office, tucked behind the Waldoff School in Constantia, Cape Town, is a food garden oasis, a hive of activity on the afternoon I visit.

Rows and rows of rectangular plots, dense with vegetable plants, stretch up a gentle slope. There are brinjals, cabbages, Jerusalem artichokes, tomatoes

nothing to do."

Pat's passion and drive is her love of nature and deep concern for the future of the planet.

"It's always worried me — even as a child I kept thinking there must be something I could do to teach people to live in harmony with nature."

Her vision is for a food-growing network in the country.

A great protagonist for recycling waste, Pat offers many useful ideas in her book *Grow to Live*. "It's a simple guide to growing your own good, clean food," she says.

"My book started out as a newsletter. I've gleaned so much information over the years from newspapers, magazines, books, radio and

television and wonderful knowledgeable people. I know I had to put it into a book," she explains.

"It's funny how things happen, though. One day I was driving along thinking about doing a book when a literary agent phoned me out of the blue."

"The methods (in the book) have been put into practice through the years, and many gardens have flourished in Southern Africa. Using these very simple, low-cost soil building, water-conserving, rubbish-gardening, environment-friendly techniques, anyone can have a garden," she says. "My ultimate dream is that when one flies into Cape Town airport you will look down and see an oasis of vegetables."

— very unusual for the time," Emilla reminisces. "I remember her wonderful lemonade made from freshly squeezed lemons, which she mixed with sugar and a handful of borage. And eating mushrooms as a child when everyone else considered them poisonous," she laughs.

"I can still smell the perfume of quinces in the late summer. We enjoyed them stewed and served cold for breakfast, warm with custard as dessert and even hot with meat dishes. Food always tastes better in season. On the farm it was not what should we have for dinner but what do you have in the pantry to make dinner?"

Today Emilla and her family live in Durbanville on the outskirts of Cape Town. "We've recently moved into the house and the first thing I did was to plant some vegetable seeds."

Two large compost heaps feature prominently on the front lawn, as do the handful of speckled Venda chickens busily foraging their way around. "They're a unique breed of indigenous chicken that eat grass," she says, scrapping up droppings to add to her compost heap.

Exalting the virtues of good compost is clearly a passion. "The compost will be the foundation of my new vegetable garden. I'm so proud of it. Composting is a way of ploughing back into your garden without having to spend any money," she adds.

Emilla believes permaculture is the way forward. "Grow lots of different things. Sow little but frequently, like planting three lettuce every other week rather than ten lettuces at the same time. Plant seasonally and scratch the ground. The South African manchine is very strong and ultra violet rays sterilise the soil. Mulching will protect the soil," advises Emilla.

"It's through gardening that I've learnt to watch nature closely. You can't just take away from the soil — you have to give back."

● *A Farm in My Heart* is published by Tafelberg, Rens



strange up a gentle slope. There are brinjals, cabbages, Jerusalem artichokes, tomatoes and beans. Under a large arming, old baths have been fashioned into worm farms.

Some men are tending to compost heaps and, in the centre, there is a small nursery covered by shade cloth filled with vegetable seedlings. The ground is thick with wood chipped into mulch. To the one side of the plot a large tamarillo tree makes the perfect canopy for the busier lettuces growing under the tree.

I find Pat in her wooden shed-cum-office under a dense vine dripping with Catawba grapes. "The vegetable garden is not looking at its best. You should have visited a couple of weeks ago," she tells me, speculating to the photographer.

"We've had a fairly good harvest even though the weather has been a little crazy this summer."

They've had a bumper crop of grapes and the brinjals and beans on sale in their on-site shop are picture perfect. It is a large project that employs 12 people. All the produce is sold to raise funds — and they offer courses to the public which are very popular.

Pat is a teacher by profession who has made a career of full-time gardening. "It's been a life-changing experience. I had reached a crisis in my life and my aunt suggested I start a vegetable garden project. What started as something small has turned my whole life around. I've learnt so much."

"It's the most satisfying, lovely work — and so varied, I never have



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● *Grow to Live* is published by Jacana, R205

## THE HERITAGE GARDENER

**Emilla Le Roux**

"It's not part of my upbringing to buy fresh produce. You grow it," says Emilla gazing over a box of tomatoes she has just received from her parents' farm in the Karoo. Her book, *A Farm in My Heart*, written in collaboration with her husband, Francois Smuts, is a story of growing up on a farm that has been in the Le Roux family for five generations.

More than that, it's a practical guide of how to live off the land — from preparing soil, to making