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FABULOUS FOOD
FROM EVERY SMALL GARDEN

MARY HORSFALL

FABULOUS FOOD
FROM EVERY SMALL GARDEN

This book is dedicated to everyone who ever sank their teeth into a tasteless tomato and knew there had to be a better choice; for anyone who ever felt dismay at rising food prices; for everyone who ever wondered where their food came from and what was in it; and most of all, for the children, yours and mine.

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Front cover (clockwise, from top right): Swiss chard; tomatoes (EarthBox Australia); broccoli; native raspberry (Happy Earth).

Back cover (clockwise, from top right): broad beans; no-dig bed in a straw bale; pumpkin harvest;
lilly pilly berries; tank beds.

All photographs are by Rodney Horsfall unless otherwise stated.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements *vii*
Introduction *ix*

Part One All about the garden 1

1 **Why grow your own?** 3
10 good reasons

2 **Where and what?** 15
First thoughts

3 **High productivity from small spaces** 33
Some special techniques

4 **Creating super soil** 55
Soil biota and fertility

5 **Making the most of your space** 83
Plants for places

6 **Getting started with vegetables** 99
Seeds and seedlings

7 **Plant care** 109
Weeding, watering, controlling pests

Part Two All about the plants 131

8 **Vegetables** 133
9 **Fruits** 165
10 **Bush foods** 187
11 **Herbs and flowers** 193
12 **A taste for all seasons** 207
Final words 213

Appendix 1 Suppliers and information *214*
Appendix 2 Bibliography *216*
Index *217*

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about empowerment, empowering you to take back a measure of control of your food supply. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures indicate that about 35% of Australian households already grow some of the fruit and vegetables they consume. If you are one of the 35%, you are bound to find new ideas about how to increase your production. If you belong to the 65% who, according to ABS information, do not yet grow their own food, this is your starting point – a new adventure in taste, personal satisfaction, better health and money saving is about to begin.

Interestingly, a poll commissioned by the Nursery and Garden Industry of Australia (NGIA) in 2008 showed that 63% of those surveyed had a garden planted with herbs, vegies or fruit trees. Perhaps the large difference between the two sets of figures has to do with the amount of food grown and the higher figure on the NGIA survey included anyone surveyed who grew a pot of parsley. The NGIA survey reported that 80% of respondents were attracted to the idea of their garden being a mixture of decorative trees and plants intermingled with edible plants. This book will show how to achieve such a garden easily.

Just about anyone can grow some of their own food. You don't need a huge garden, though, of course, a large area gives you more options and allows you to grow a greater variety of vegies, herbs and fruit. Do not allow lack of space to hold you back; you'll be surprised at how much you can produce from a small patch of dirt. Even the patch of dirt is not essential, as long as you have space for some pots.

Through my work as editor of *Grass Roots* magazine I am fortunate enough to share the experiences of thousands of readers throughout Australia. If there is one thing above all others that never fails to amaze and impress me about this diverse readership, it is the amount of food that people with only small spaces at their disposal manage to produce in those small spaces. With a little resourcefulness, even a sunny balcony, courtyard or suitable rooftop can be made productive enough to supply you with salads and culinary herbs.

In 2003, I began a new garden from scratch on a double block in a country town. High on my list of priorities was a kitchen garden. I had been used to growing the majority of my family's vegies and herbs, and a fair amount of fruit as well, on a country acreage. There, I'd had plenty of space and a good supply of the fertiliser and mulch resources usually available on a small farm, but limited water. In the new location I had limited space and few free resources, but a reliable town water supply, or so I thought at first until an extended drought period led to severe restrictions.

Though not far in distance from the old garden, the new one was subject to significant climatic differences and had a different range of pests to identify and contend with, but the main difference was the space available. I had formed many ideas about gardening in small spaces, especially food growing, even written articles about it. Now was my chance to see how well those ideas translated to reality.

During this journey, changes in the world that had previously barely been noticed in the mainstream media escalated suddenly and came to prominence. A turning point in public consciousness of the vulnerability of our food supply occurred when Cyclone Larry struck northern Queensland on 20 March 2006. Just one of the devastating effects of the cyclone was the destruction of that year's banana crop. When the price of bananas rose to over $12 per kilogram many people who had previously never given the matter much thought suddenly became aware of the possible effects of climate change on the nation's food supply. Not long afterwards, extended drought conditions and higher fuel prices led to steep rises in the price of numerous food items. This is not a situation peculiar to Australia. A variety of climatic, political and environmental circumstances have coalesced to make food shortages and higher prices common worldwide. Alongside this scenario, higher interest rates on home loans in Australia added to the financial burden of many families.

By March 2008, just two years after Cyclone Larry thrust the spectre of food shortages into the national limelight, major Australian newspapers were running stories about rising food prices, citing drought, strong overseas demand for Australian-produced food and increased costs of energy, processing, packaging and interest rates as causes. At the same time, steep rises in food prices worldwide were claimed by the World Bank to be causing increased hunger and malnutrition in Third World nations.

Later that same year a worldwide financial crisis added to the woes of ordinary people trying to balance their budgets and care for their families. Interest rates began a downward spiral, but unemployment soared, as did anxiety about the future for our families, our world and our planet.

It has become obvious that the search for alternatives is no longer a fringe movement. Increasing numbers of people around the world are seeking ways to reduce their carbon emissions, ways to balance their household budgets while still eating well, and ways to maintain a healthier and more satisfying lifestyle for themselves and the small green planet we all ultimately depend upon. Growing our own food is one of those ways.

PART ONE

ALL ABOUT THE GARDEN

The motivations for wanting to grow food at home are many. Everyone will have their own special reasons and priorities. You might be intrigued by some of my top 10 good reasons, particularly if you have never before given the matter much thought.

Your excursion into the wonderful world of fresh homegrown food begins with an exploration of your own space, be it a backyard, front yard, courtyard, deck, verandah, rooftop or balcony. It could be the most rewarding journey of your life.

Having decided where you can grow some food plants and what you would like to try, you will find a plethora of exciting ideas about how to make the most of the space you have, how to improve your soil for maximum productivity, grow vegies from seeds or seedlings and care for your plants once they are in the ground.

Let the journey begin.

throughout the garden. Pull out plants when they begin to look straggly and use them as mulch to have a constant supply of new seedlings germinating. It is frost tender and will die back in winter but will come up again in spring if seeds are left around the garden. Grown in pots in a sunny courtyard, calendulas will provide a welcome splash of colour as well as a salad ingredient.

The flower petals are mildly antiseptic and contain vitamins A and E. They are often made into a cream that is one of the better known natural remedies for cuts, sores, nappy rash and burns. You can easily make your own skin remedy by putting fresh petals into a blender with enough apricot or almond oil to cover and processing until smooth. Store in a jar in the fridge. As a quick first aid for minor burns or stings, rub fresh calendula petals onto the affected area. This useful, cheerful little plant has other medicinal uses for anyone interested in this aspect of herbal lore.

Chives

Allium schoenoprasum

A clump or two of chives takes up little space in the garden and provides a reliable source of a mild onion flavour for cooking and salads. This handy perennial herb is hardy and will happily grow into a clump that can be separated to give you new plants to spread around. The common chives have attractive pink-purple pompom flower heads, which are also edible, having a very similar, though milder, oniony flavour to that of the strappy hollow leaves.

Chives can grow from 20 cm to 50 cm high, making them ideal as a border to garden beds where they will also perform the task of repelling insect pests. They prefer a light well-drained soil and a sunny position, but are very adaptable. Grow them in a pot close to the door so they can be snipped regularly for use in the kitchen. As well as their common use in salads, they are good in omelettes, stir-fries, soups, stews, rissoles, vegie burgers and other cooked dishes.

Garlic chives (*Allium tuberosum*) can grow taller than common chives and have a mild garlic flavour to the leaves and flowers. However, the flowers are white and not as attractive as those of the common chives.

Coriander

Coriandrum sativum

This frost-tender hardy annual is easily grown from seeds. It looks similar to parsley, to which it is related. Coriander grows from 40 cm to 60 cm tall with pale mauve to white umbrella-like flower clusters. Leaves, seeds and flowers can all be eaten. The leaves are often referred to as Chinese parsley or cilantro. There are two broad types: flat leaf and cut leaf. The flat-leaf type has a tendency to bolt quickly to seed, unless leaves are frequently cut to stimulate bushier growth over a longer time. The cut-leaf type (*Coriandrum sativum* 'Delfino') yields more leaves and is slower to bolt.

Coriander likes a sunny spot with moderately rich well-drained soil. Afternoon shade will be appreciated. It can be grown in a small spot or in a pot. The flowers attract beneficial predatory insects, so if you like to use coriander in cooking, grow several plants scattered throughout the garden. Begin to harvest the leaves when the plant reaches about 15 cm tall and snip them frequently to keep the plant going for a few months.

Let plants go to seed (they will of their own accord anyway) and collect seeds to flavour bean dishes, stir-fries and stews. The leaves are often used in Asian, Mediterranean and Latin American cooking and complement chicken, red meat and spicy dishes. The flowers are said to be slightly sweeter in flavour than the leaves and can be eaten raw or very lightly cooked.

A plant with a similar flavour, though belonging to a totally different genus, is Mexican coriander (*Eryngium foetidum*). This grows better in hot, humid climates than coriander and thus might suit many regions in Queensland.

Daylily

Hemerocallis spp.

Daylilies have strappy, iris-type leaves, can grow from 30 cm to over a metre tall for some species and have very showy flowers in a range of pinks, mauves, yellows and oranges. They are reasonably hardy once established and will spread to form quite large clumps, which can be separated to spread around the garden.

If you are looking for a very decorative flower that is also edible, look no further. Flower petals and buds can be eaten, as can the leaves and stalks and even the tuberous roots, not that many people want to dig up their lovely flowers for this purpose. The stamens can be used as a saffron substitute.

Versatile daylilies come in a range of colours.

Grow daylilies as a border where they will flower for months every year during spring and summer, or to brighten up a dull corner of the garden. As a feature plant in a pot it will look stunning. As the name suggests, flowers only last a day, but each plant produces clusters of buds and throughout spring and summer there will be a constant supply of new flowers. It is quite a hardy plant, but will

Petals, flower buds, leaves and roots are all edible.

perform better if planted into moderately rich soil and watered every few days over summer. In a previous garden I had a plant that was given to me; I didn't realise its potential at the time, so put it into a corner where it was neglected. It still grew and spread into a large clump and flowered, albeit with small flowers. Now I have a cheerful border of these stunning flowers that repay my modicum of attention with plentiful large blooms.

The flowers are said to have a high mineral content and contain protein and vitamins A and C. Use flowers and buds raw in salads, or lightly cooked in stews, soups and meat dishes. Cut flowers in the morning when they are at their best; by the end of the day they will be wilting. Young white tubers (if you can bear to dig them up) can be eaten raw, after being well scrubbed. Older brown tubers can be roasted like potatoes.

Dill

Anethum graveolens

This straggly, ferny-leafed annual grows to over a metre tall. The leaves, seeds and flowers are all edible. The flower head consists of many tiny yellowish flowers in an umbrella shape. The flowers attract a range of beneficial insects. The plant is easily blown over by wind so plant it in a sheltered spot or stake it.

Grow dill in a sunny spot in well-drained soil that is not too acidic. Lime acid soil before planting. It is a hardy plant that will thrive just about anywhere and in poor soil, but the harsher the conditions the less leaf growth there will be and the sooner the plant will bolt to seed. Seeds that fall from the plant will readily self-propagate. To save the seeds for use in cooking, gently cut the heads off after the first few have fallen and dry them on a tray. Alternatively, if the seed heads are very dry, hold a container under the plant, bend the seed head over and shake it so the seeds fall into the container.

The leaves can be cut at any stage to accompany fish, lamb, chicken, egg dishes and cooked vegetables or to snip over a spicy salad, but the best flavour is when the flowers are just opening. Whole tiny flowers can be added to salads or the complete flower head included in pickled preserves. The seeds are often used in pickling, but are also a spicy accompaniment to cabbage, cauliflower, cucumber, bread and root vegetables. The flowers have a stronger flavour than the leaves and the seeds are stronger still.

The seeds have traditionally been used medicinally as an aid to digestion and a treatment for flatulence.

Garlic

Allium sativum

Garlic is probably the most frequently used culinary herb, being an ingredient in many styles of cuisine. As well, garlic has long been valued for its many health benefits, including being a natural antibiotic, reducing blood pressure and treating sinus conditions. The bulb is the only part usually eaten, though the leaves can be snipped and used in a similar way to chives or spring onions.

You can grow it from a bulb purchased from a nursery or supermarket, though the latter could have been treated with a growth inhibitor, so it is best to buy bulbs specially for propagation. If you know someone with organically grown garlic, that is a good source. Separate the individual cloves and plant them, root end downwards, about 5 cm deep and 15 cm apart into rich well-drained soil. Decomposed manure dug into the bed before planting will be beneficial. Plant in spring to harvest about six months later in summer.

Each clove will multiply into a cluster, making up a bulb. Harvest when the flowers begin to fade and the strappy leaves start to wither and droop. Pull or dig up the bulbs, shake off the excess dirt, leave them to dry in an airy spot, remove the leaves and roots and store in a cool dark place. Alternatively, plait the leaves together in bunches and hang in a cool airy spot. Either cut the leaves off and store the bulbs when they have hardened, or leave the plaits hanging for decorative as well as utilitarian effect. The bulbs will not keep as long if left hanging in a humid kitchen atmosphere.

Lavender

Lavandula spp.

Though widely known for their fragrant uses, lavender flowers are also edible. The flowers are loved by bees and other beneficial insects, though the perfume of the plant is said to repel pest insects. Lavenders are available in many varieties with different sizes, colours and perfume intensity. There is space in every small garden for a lavender or two.

There are three main groups of lavenders: the Spica Group, known as English lavenders; the Stoechas Group, variously known as French, Italian or Spanish lavenders; and the Pterostoechas Group, which are less hardy than the other two. The species most frequently recommended for culinary use is *Lavandula angustifolia*, commonly known as English lavender and belonging to the Spica Group.

Fragrant, pretty, insect attracting and edible lavender.

Lavender's natural habitat, generally speaking, is a dry climate with poor rocky soil. So grow them in an open sunny position, preferably in sandy or gravelly, slightly alkaline soil. The soil must be well-drained. Overfertilisation and watering will result in a less intense perfume. Cut off any unused flower spikes in autumn and give the bush a light haircut in spring to keep it in good shape.

For use in cooking, cut the flowers when they first open and strip the tiny blooms from the stem. The flavour complements chicken, duck, desserts, biscuits and cakes. Lavender sugar to be used in meringues or biscuits can be made by blending flowers and sugar in a food processor. Seal in a jar for a week or two, then sieve the mixture and store in an airtight container.

Lavender oil can be used to baste poultry or as a relaxing massage oil for aching legs and backs. Fill a jar with clean flowers. Pour olive oil over until all flowers are covered. Leave in a sunny spot for four to six weeks, shaking every few days. Strain through muslin fabric or a coffee filter to remove the flowers and store the oil in an airtight container in the pantry.

Dry the flowers by hanging bunches of flower spikes in an airy place for a week or two. When dry, strip flowers from spikes and make into lavender bags to perfume clothing drawers and deter moths and silverfish. The easy way to make a lavender bag is to put a tablespoon of dried flowers in the centre of a pretty handkerchief and tie it up with a ribbon.

Lemon balm

Melissa officinalis

Sometimes called simply balm or sweet balm, lemon balm is a fragrant bush that grows to about 60 cm tall. The insignificant white flowers attract bees. It is a hardy perennial if grown in moderately well-fertilised, moist but well-drained soil. The plant might die if roots become waterlogged over winter. Grow lemon balm in a sunny or partially shady spot. Leaves will develop more fragrance in the sun. It is very suited to growing in a pot in a sunny courtyard where its citrus fragrance will be released as it is brushed against.

Young leaves are frost-tender, so plant lemon balm in a spot where it will not be exposed to frost, or protect it for at least the first winter. If grown in a pot, it can easily be moved as needed. After flowering, usually in late summer, cut branches back by about a third to keep a bushy compact shape, otherwise the plant can become straggly. In some areas the plant might die back to bare stems over winter. They can be cut to ground level and will reshoot in spring.

The leaves can be used fresh or dried to make a refreshing tea, or floated in fruit drinks. Lemon balm tea has traditionally been used to relieve symptoms of fever, colds and flu. Snip leaves finely into a fruit salad or vegetable dishes where a hint of lemon is called for to add a mild citrus flavour. Lemon balm leaves can also be used to flavour milk puddings.

Marjoram

Origanum majorana

This hardy aromatic herb can grow to 45 cm when in flower, but without the flower spikes it is much lower. Grow it in full sun in the front of a bed of herbs or flowers, in a small vacant spot or in a pot. It prefers moist, well-drained, slightly alkaline soil, but is very adaptable. Both flowers and leaves are edible and in addition to marjoram's culinary uses,

Marjoram flowers are edible and attract beneficial insects.

Marjoram stems cut for use.

the mauve flowers attract bees and other insects.

The leaves are used either fresh or dried to flavour a variety of foods, including poultry, fish, eggs, vegetables, soups, stews, scones, salads and dumplings. A tea made from the dried leaves is a traditional relief for colds and congestion. The flowers complement chicken, fish and vegetable dishes.

Leaves are best harvested before the flowers form. To keep a compact shape and prevent marjoram from becoming woody and straggly, trim it regularly. For maximum leaf harvest, cut off flower buds as they begin to form.

Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*) is similar to marjoram, but can grow taller and has a more intense flavour and aroma. Use it to enhance meat dishes, pasta, pizza, tomato dishes, zucchini, capsicum and eggplant. Golden marjoram (*Origanum vulgare* 'Aureum') has a slightly milder flavour, but its cheerful golden colour makes it a very pretty ground cover or edging plant. The pinkish-mauve flowers contrast beautifully with the golden foliage and have a spicy flavour.

Mint

Mentha spp.

There are numerous types of mints, though they all look similar. The leaves are varying shades of green, or variegated, and the flavours differ markedly. Depending on the species, mints can grow from several centimetres to over a metre in height. They have a variety of culinary and medicinal uses and the flowers attract beneficial insects. The leaves are the part most commonly used in cooking, but the flowers also are edible and can be incorporated into salads, savoury dishes or puddings.

If grown in the ground, mints can often spread and take over an area, so for a small garden they are best grown in pots. They prefer damp, well-drained, fertile soil in a sunny or dappled shade location. They will not thrive if exposed to full afternoon sun in hot weather, so make sure they are in shade at this time of day. They are shallow-rooted plants so need to be planted into soil containing organic matter, be well mulched and kept watered during hot weather. This is easily accomplished when they are planted into Waterwell-type pots or pots with large saucers.

Peppermint leaves make a refreshing tea.

The most widely grown mint species is probably spearmint (*Mentha spicata*), the one that is commonly used to flavour roast lamb, peas and potatoes or made into mint sauce.

Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) is most frequently used to make a refreshing tea from either fresh or dried leaves. Drunk hot or cold, peppermint tea is said to be relaxing and to soothe indigestion and cold symptoms. This is the one grown commercially to produce peppermint oil.

Eau-de-cologne mint (*Mentha piperita citrata*), also known as bergamot mint or orange mint, has a very pungent perfume and a strong flavour. Use just a little in food, especially Mediterranean cuisine, or add a leaf or two to cold fruit drinks. The dried leaves can be made into scented sachets for wardrobes and drawers and are a good addition to potpourri.

The mints are reputed to repel pest insects, including cabbage moths, but if you try this, keep them in pots among the brassicas or you will soon have a bed of mint. Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*), though being too pungent for most tastes, makes a good herb lawn and repels ants and fleas.

Nasturtium

Tropaeolum majus

This cheerful spreading annual will grow as a ground cover, or, if a supporting structure is provided, will clamber up it. As a ground cover, expect it to grow no more than 20 cm high, but it can spread several metres in a favourable spot. Flowers, leaves and seeds are edible. The flowers are usually shades of bright orange and yellow. Some varieties have variegated flowers or leaves. Cultivars with more subtle flower colours are available, but I have not found them to be reliable. The blooms are loved by bees, so take care when picking and eating them.

Nasturtium flowers, leaves and seeds are all edible.

Used as a companion plant in the orchard or vegie garden, nasturtiums are said to repel borers, white flies and aphids. Allow them to twine up apple trees to repel borers. Grow them among brassicas to decoy cabbage moths, which seem to prefer nasturtiums to your broccoli and cauliflowers. If you are short of space, try growing some nasturtiums in a hanging pot to cascade downwards.

Nasturtiums are easily grown from seed, but can sometimes be bought as seedlings. Plant them in a sunny or dappled shade spot where afternoon shade is available in summer. Moist, well-drained soil is preferred, but do not use too much fertiliser. Nasturtiums are very frost-tender and generally regarded as annuals. Plant them when the danger of frosts is past. They are likely to self-propagate the following spring from seeds in the ground. I currently have a pot of nasturtiums in a sheltered position under fruit trees, which are in their second year and still thriving.

Both flowers and leaves have a peppery flavour which will enhance salads, dips, cheese dishes and vegetables, especially potatoes. The seeds can be pickled as a substitute for capers.

Parsley, curled

Petroselinum crispum

Parsley must be the most useful and well-known herb. Its fresh flavour complements a wide range of foods, it grows almost anywhere and self-seeds readily, and all parts are edible, though it is the leaves that most people are familiar with. In addition, parsley has a high nutrient value, being rich in iron and antioxidants and a good source of vitamins A, C and E and folate.

This biennial plant can be grown from nursery-bought seedlings or propagated from seed. If growing from seed, never let the soil dry out; cover the bed with shadecloth or similar to keep it moist between waterings. Seed can take two or three weeks to germinate. To speed up the process, soak it in water for 24 hours before sowing or, after sowing, water the bed with hot water from a watering can. I let plants go to seed and cut the seed heads to mulch other areas of the vegie patch. When the seedlings come up, I either leave them in place or transplant them to where I want them. Often, the seeds germinate so abundantly that I use most of the young plants as a green manure, only leaving a few to mature.

A lush bed of self-sown parsley.

In flower, parsley attracts beneficial insects.

Parsley prefers a spot with morning sun and afternoon shade and thrives in moderately rich soil. However, I have found it to be very adaptable and even seen it growing in cracks in concrete. To extend the harvest and keep the plant compact and producing new leaves, cut the flower heads off as soon as they begin to form. Once the plant has flowered, the leaves develop a stronger, slightly bitter taste, but I still find them useful at this stage.

Use the leaves to complement egg dishes, pasta, soups, stews, cooked vegetables, salads, poultry, fish and red meat. Many health benefits are claimed for parsley including maintaining a healthy cardiovascular system and helping relieve arthritis. A tea made from the fresh or dried leaves might assist digestion and benefit kidney stones, though people with kidney disease should avoid consuming large quantities of parsley because it contains oxalates. Both the boiled roots and the blanched stalks can be eaten as a vegetable. Chew a sprig of parsley after eating garlic to sweeten the breath.

Italian parsley (*Petroselinum crispum neoplitanum*) has flat leaves, similar to celery leaves, a stronger flavour than curled parsley, and grows taller and germinates more quickly.

Rosemary

Rosmarinus officinalis

If you are looking for an attractive perennial plant that will survive tough conditions and be useful in the kitchen as well, rosemary is the one. It will thrive and be even more aromatic in poor soil and hot sun and needs little watering once established. Often used as a hedging plant, rosemary can grow as tall as two metres, but is easily kept trimmed to be a more compact shrub and grows well in pots. In fact, it is an ideal pot plant for a sunny courtyard or rooftop where its beautiful spicy aroma will permeate when the plant is brushed against. There are several cultivars with varying intensities of blue flowers. Both flowers and leaves are edible.

A young rosemary plant in the vegie garden.

The plant is hardy enough to use as a hedge. This one is beside a concrete path and backed by a brick wall.

The one 'must' for successful rosemary cultivation is well-drained soil. Plants are very likely to die if the roots become waterlogged.

Use the leaves and/or flowers fresh or dried to flavour roasts, any meat dishes, pasta sauces, eggplant, zucchini, potato, tomato, Brussels sprouts and cabbage. Snip leaves into bread, scones or pizza dough. Rosemary helps with the digestion of rich or starchy food and can be made into a tea to relieve headaches.

An old belief was that rosemary twigs twined in the hair stimulated the memory.

There is a prostrate form of rosemary (*Rosmarinus prostratus*), which is a hardy ground cover or rockery plant and is edible, but the flavour is not as intense as that of the upright plant.

Sage, common

Salvia officinalis

There are numerous species and varieties of sage, many of them having culinary and medicinal uses, but common or garden sage is the one most often grown and used in cooking. Both leaves and purple flowers are edible and the flowers are loved by bees.

Sage grows 60 cm to 90 cm tall and its silvery leaves are an indication of its drought tolerance once established. Light, well-drained soil is recommended; do not over-fertilise or overwater. Sage does not like wet feet and excessive overhead watering can cause the leaves to mildew.

It is an attractive plant, especially when in flower, and will thrive in a pot in a sunny courtyard. Cut back the plant after flowering to keep a compact shape and prevent it from becoming woody and straggly.

Sage leaves, fresh or dry, are used to flavour pork, veal, duck, oily fish, soups, stews, onion, tomato, eggplant, cheese dishes and egg dishes. Snip leaves or flowers into bread, scones or pizza dough. Sage tea is recommended as calming and beneficial for the liver. Used as a gargle, it will soothe a sore throat. Sage is also said to be a memory enhancer.

Clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) leaves were once thought to cure eye infections. Try them fried in batter to accompany lamb or as an appetiser. Flowers of common sage, clary sage and pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) make an attractive addition to salads.

Thyme

Thymus vulgaris

A sage plant close to the house is handy for plucking.

Thyme makes a hardy aromatic ground cover.

There are hundreds of species and cultivars of thyme, the most frequently used for culinary purposes being common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*). The thymes are low-growing, hardy perennial plants, seldom reaching more than 20 cm in height. They have wiry stems from which develop tiny leaves and flowers. The blooms, usually purple, pink or white, are attractive to bees. Plant thyme as a border or edging species along a path, as a ground cover, to fill a small vacant spot, or in a pot. Combine it with rosemary and sage for an aromatic and hardy potted herb garden suited to a sunny courtyard or rooftop.

Thyme prefers sandy, well-drained soil in a sunny location. Do cut it back after flowering each year to keep it compact and bushy. Flavour and aroma will be reduced if thyme is overwatered or overfertilised.

The flowers taste similar to the leaves, but are sweeter. Use both leaves and flowers, stripped from the stems, to flavour stuffing, meat, fish, vegetables, bread, scones, pizza dough, pasta sauces and any dish containing tomato. The flavour can be intense, so a little goes a long way. Thyme tea might help relieve symptoms of colds, sinus conditions, cramps and colic and aid digestion. Thyme is a natural antiseptic.

Some other thymes often used for culinary purposes are lemon thyme (*Thymus* × *citriodorus*), which has a pleasant lemony flavour and aroma, and the variety known as orange-scented thyme (*Thymus* × *citriodorus* 'Fragrantissimus').

A TASTE FOR ALL SEASONS

I belong to the KISS school of cooking: Keep It Simple, Sweetheart. I don't have time to prepare elaborate meals and you won't often find me spending precious gardening or writing time concocting complicated cuisine. Most of our meals are based around what is seasonally available from the garden.

Summer lunches are likely to consist of a salad sandwich or a platter of garden goodies, accompanied by cold meat and some delicatessen treats, served with crackers. Evening meals will usually be based around a fresh salad.

Cold weather favourites consist of a variety of soups for lunch and slow-cooked meals of meat and vegies in the evening. I love anything I can throw in the crockpot in the morning and leave simmering all day.

When you lead a busy life, as most of us do, it is very easy to resort to takeaway meals. That's OK, occasionally, but once you have fresh food available in the garden, healthy meals need not involve too much work. The secret is to be imaginative with what you have. Collect a variety of simple ways of preparing tomatoes, pumpkins, beans, potatoes, zucchinis and any other crops you have in seasonal abundance. Add flavour with your own herbs and variety and decorative appeal with judicious use of flowers.

The following recipes and suggestions might help. They are all gluten-free, and most are low in salt, sugar and cholesterol. I hope you enjoy them, but most of all I hope you enjoy devising your own favourites.

Adjust all quantities to suit your own needs and tastes and substitute ingredients according to what you have available.

Tomato paste

The summer months see our kitchen abundant with tomatoes. There are bowls of them everywhere. My favourite way of preserving those we do not immediately eat or give away is to make a paste that can be frozen to use later in the year for soups, casseroles, risotto and pasta sauces.

Process any quantity of fully ripe tomatoes in a blender. Pour into a saucepan. Bring to the boil and keep boiling briskly, stirring frequently, until the quantity is reduced by about half and the paste is as thick as you want it to be. Allow to cool. Pour into freezer containers. I use a variety of sizes, from ice cube trays for times when just a hint of tomato flavour is wanted, to about 500 mL for soup. Put in the freezer when cool. If you need to reuse the containers, transfer the frozen contents to plastic bags.

Totally herbaceous tomato chicken

This meal developed on a day in summer when I had planned to have roast chicken for dinner. The day started off cool, but was hot by afternoon and I was reluctant to have the oven on to cook the chicken. I decided to cook it on the gas hotplate. It could just as easily have been done in a crockpot and left to simmer all day. Note that zucchini will fall apart if cooked for too long.

Ingredients

1 roasting chicken, about size 17 (1.7 kg)
6 small onions, peeled
2 large carrots, peeled and cut into chunks
1 medium red capsicum, cut into chunks
2 cloves garlic, finely diced
1 generous handful chopped herbs: parsley, basil, marjoram
Generous slurp of tamari
150 mL red wine
500 mL tomato paste, as above
1 medium zucchini, cut into chunks
1 tbsp cornflour, approx.

Method

Lightly grease a heavy-based saucepan with olive oil. Put chicken in. Tuck onions, carrots and capsicum around the sides. Mix garlic, herbs, tamari and wine into tomato paste and pour over chicken and vegetables. Bring to boil over medium heat. Turn heat to as low as it will go and simmer, covered, for about 1¼ hours, turning chicken once during that time. Add zucchini chunks, stirring them into sauce. Simmer a further 15 to 30 minutes. Test chicken to see if it is cooked right through; if not, simmer a further 15 minutes. Taste sauce and adjust flavouring to suit. Thicken if necessary with the cornflour mixed to a smooth paste in a little water.

Let chicken rest for 15 minutes before carving. Serve chicken and sauce with vegies over basmati rice.

Zigzag tomatoes

This way of serving tomatoes is much easier than it looks and never fails to impress.

Ingredients

Allow 1 or 2 tomato halves per person, depending on the meal
Lettuce or rocket, shredded
Basil or mint, chopped
Chives, chopped
Vinaigrette dressing
Yellow nasturtium flowers or calendula petals

Method

Cut tomatoes in half by using this method: Hold tomato in your left hand (if you are right-handed) with the top facing up. At the halfway point insert the point of a small serrated knife at an angle of 45° and push it halfway through the tomato. Withdraw knife and make the next cut so it forms a ‘V’ with the first. Continue all the way around the tomato until you have two halves cut in a zigzag shape.

Serve tomatoes on a bed of shredded greens. Sprinkle them with the chopped herbs and dressing. Decorate with yellow nasturtium flowers or calendula petals.

Taste of summer basil pesto

When basil is plentiful, make it into pesto, which can be used as a dip, a salad dressing or flavouring for other dishes. If you have rocket in abundance, use it instead of basil.

Ingredients

2 cloves garlic
1 packed cup fresh washed basil leaves, roughly chopped
50 g pine nuts
100 g Parmesan cheese, grated
2 anchovy fillets, optional
Olive oil, as needed

Method

Place all ingredients in a blender, using just enough olive oil to make a paste. Process until it reaches the desired smoothness.

Fresh pesto, bean and carrot salad

For this recipe, use any quantities to suit yourself. You could just as easily serve it hot in the winter, perhaps substituting broccoli florets for the green beans.

Ingredients

Carrots, diced
Green beans, sliced into 2 cm lengths
Basil pesto, as above, without the anchovies if preferred
No-fat yoghurt
Basil, finely chopped
Spring onions, finely chopped

Method

Cook carrots and beans together in boiling water until just tender. Drain. Make a dressing from pesto and yoghurt with twice the amount of yoghurt as pesto. For example, 2 tablespoons of pesto to 4 tablespoons of yoghurt. Combine herbs and dressing. Stir through vegetables, cool and refrigerate.

Sensational summer salsa

In late summer I often have a plentiful supply of fresh tomatoes, cucumbers and capsicums. This simple dish is easy and very refreshing. Use quantities to suit yourself, but you need roughly 1 part cucumber and 1 part capsicum to two parts tomatoes.

Ingredients

½ cup capsicum, diced
½ cup cucumber, diced
1 cup tomatoes, diced
A few basil or mint leaves, finely chopped
A few nasturtium leaves, finely chopped
Balsamic dressing, enough to moisten

Method

Combine all ingredients about half an hour before serving for flavours to mingle. Serve spooned over cold meat or as a side salad.

Very vegie hotpot

Use whatever vegies you have available.

Ingredients

2 cups tomato paste, as above
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 small hot chilli, finely chopped
2 tbsp parsley, finely chopped
2 tbsp spring onion, finely chopped
1 tbsp basil, finely chopped
1 cup green beans, sliced
1 cup carrot, diced
2 cups corn kernels
1 red capsicum, diced

Method
Preheat oven to 180°C. Gently heat tomato paste with garlic, hot chilli, parsley, spring onion and basil. Simmer 2 minutes. Put chopped vegies in a casserole dish and pour hot sauce over. Cook 1 to 1½ hours, stirring occasionally. Serve with boiled new potatoes, mashed potato or rice.

So sweet pumpkin soup

This is a favourite winter lunch. This quantity makes enough to last two people for several meals.

Ingredients
1.5 kg pumpkin, after peeling
750 g yellow sweet potato, after peeling
1–2 large onions
3 sticks celery
3 cloves garlic, more if you love garlic
1 tsp mustard powder
1 tsp sea salt
1–2 cups coconut milk, optional

Method
Cut pumpkin, sweet potato, onions and celery into chunks. Roughly dice garlic. Put vegies into a large saucepan and just cover with water. Bring to the boil and cook until tender. Strain liquid from vegies, keeping it in a separate container. Process vegies in batches, with each batch just covered in enough of the cooking liquid to bring it to the consistency you prefer. Return to the heat, add mustard and salt and adjust seasoning to taste. If you want to add coconut milk, replace some of the cooking liquid with it during the blending process. If you prefer a spicier taste, add a hot chilli to the vegies or some sweet chilli sauce to the blended soup.

Creamy easy potato salad

The fresh herbs give this salad a flavour boost; if you have your own potatoes available, it is even better, and you can be sure it contains no gluten if that is an issue. If you use commercial mayonnaise, which I do, read the label to ensure there are no wheat products used. For variety, add walnut and/or finely diced celery or apple, substitute finely chopped dill leaves for the herbs in the recipe, or use an olive oil and vinegar dressing to replace the creamy one given below. If you have plenty of eggs, gently stir quartered hard-boiled eggs through the finished salad.

Ingredients
20 whole small new potatoes (chats) or small ‘Kipflers’, or 5 halved medium-sized red-skinned potatoes such as ‘Desiree’
½ cup low-fat mayonnaise
½ cup no-fat plain yoghurt
2 tbsp finely diced herbs: basil, mint, parsley, spring onions
1 tbsp pine nuts

Method
Scrub potatoes and put them in a large saucepan, cover with water, bring to the boil and simmer until just tender. Meanwhile, make the dressing: mix remaining ingredients in a small bowl or jug. Drain cooked potatoes, tip them into a bowl. If you have used halved ‘Desirees,’ dice them to the required size, leaving skin on. Stir through the dressing so potatoes are generously covered. Cool and refrigerate.

Aromatic rosemary potatoes

The smell that wafts through the kitchen when this is cooking is sensational. Use more rosemary if you love it, but it can be overpowering.

Ingredients

4–6 small new potatoes or 'Kipflers' per person, scrubbed
2 cloves garlic, finely diced
2 sprigs rosemary, about 5 cm long, leaves stripped from twigs and roughly diced
2 tbsp olive oil, approx.

Method

Preheat oven to 200°C. Lightly oil a medium-sized casserole dish or baking tray. Place potatoes in dish. Combine garlic, rosemary and oil and pour over potatoes. Stir through so potatoes are well coated with oil. Cover and cook until tender, stirring once during the cooking time. This will take 45 to 60 minutes. If you prefer potatoes to be browned and slightly crisp-skinned, leave the lid off the casserole dish and turn the oven to a higher setting for the last 10 to 15 minutes of cooking time.

Broadly beany

This easy and tasty way of cooking broad beans works just as well with zucchini when it is in abundance. For variety, add tomato paste and/or basil pesto to taste.

Ingredients

1 large onion, diced
2 cloves garlic, finely diced
2 cups broad beans, shelled
2 tbsp parsley, finely chopped
1 tbsp olive oil, approx.

Method

Preheat oven to 180°C. Stir-fry onion and garlic in a small amount of olive oil until onion just changes colour. Put all ingredients into a medium-sized casserole dish and mix well. Cook about 30 minutes or until beans are tender.

Chock-full-of-goodness frittata

Use any vegetables you have available, allowing about a cup per person. This will serve four and you probably won't need much else. Include the cheese if you aren't concerned about cholesterol.

Ingredients

1 large onion, diced
2–3 cloves garlic, finely diced
1 cup corn kernels
1 cup peas
1 packed cup chopped Asian greens or silverbeet
3–4 sticks celery, diced
6 large eggs
600 mL milk, or combination milk and no-fat yoghurt
Generous slurp of tamari
2 tbsp parsley, finely diced
200 g grated tasty or low-fat cheese, optional
olive oil

Method

Preheat oven to 180°C. Stir-fry the onion and garlic in a small amount of olive oil until the onion just changes colour. Lightly oil a large casserole dish and layer the vegies in it, pressing them down, but not too firmly. Beat eggs and milk/yoghurt together with tamari. Stir in parsley and cheese. Pour milk and egg mixture over vegies. Cover and cook until frittata is firm in the middle, about 1½ hours, uncovering for the last 15 minutes to brown the top. You can sprinkle the top with extra cheese and let it melt and brown over the top if cholesterol is not a concern.

Brassy brassica pasta

This makes a filling meal for four and is especially delicious when you have your own broccoli and cauliflower. For a variation, add chopped cooked chicken or bacon to the vegie mixture and heat through. Of course, use ordinary pasta if you are not gluten intolerant. To flavour the vegies use any of the suggestions below. The incorporation of broccoli cooking liquid depends on how moist you like your pasta.

Ingredients

1 pkt gluten-free pasta
1 cup broccoli florets, lightly cooked
1 cup cauliflower florets, lightly cooked
1 medium onion, diced
2 cloves garlic, diced
2 tbsp parsley, finely chopped
Olive oil
100 mL broccoli cooking liquid, optional
Generous slurp of tamari, or 2 tbsp basil pesto, or ½ cup tomato paste
½ cup low-fat fetta cheese, diced into 2 cm cubes

Method

Cook pasta as per directions. Cook broccoli and cauliflower. Stir-fry onion, garlic and parsley in a little olive oil. Tip cooked vegies into pan with onion and garlic. Add enough cooking liquid to moisten. Slosh in tamari (or desired flavouring) to taste. Stir this mixture through cooked, drained pasta. Add fetta just before serving and stir through.

FINAL WORDS

I am not a pessimist, but neither am I blinded by unrealistic optimism. Financial crises come and go, and so will this latest one, perhaps having taught us all some lessons about living within our means. I do not think oil is going to 'run out' any time soon. However, despite the drop in price at time of writing, caused by a world financial slow-down, it will inevitably become more difficult and expensive to access. My son Bradley says, 'the Stone Age didn't end because the world ran out of stones'. It ended because people discovered new ways of doing things, new technologies. Perhaps the Oil Age will not end because the world runs out of oil, but because of new and better technologies.

I believe there will be new technologies, but there is also bound to be a transition period of adjustment and social inequalities along the way. Inevitably, this will have flow-on effects on food production, as will the ongoing effects of our changing climate.

My message is: take back the power, grow as much of your own food as you can, and you and your family will be in a better position to adapt to changes, whatever they might be.

APPENDIX 1

Suppliers and information

Aquaponics
www.backyardaquaponics.com.au

Bokashi Bucket
Tel: (02) 9591-1699
www.bokashi.com.au

Dwarfing Rootstock Fruit Trees
Kendall Farms
Tel: (07) 4779-1189
www.kendallfarms.com.au

Daley's Fruit Tree Nursery
Numerous food plants suitable for tropical and subtropical areas.
PO Box 154 via Kyogle 2474
Tel: (02) 6632-1441
www.daleysfruit.com.au

EarthBox Australia
Tel: (03) 9378-4700
Email: cd@earthboxaustralia.com
www.earthboxaustralia.com

Eco Bag Industries
PO Box 3100
Victoria Point West, Qld 4165
Tel: 1800-638-628
www.ecobagindustries.com.au

Fruit salad trees

Fruit Salad Tree Co
'Willow Creek'
Gulf Rd
Emmaville, NSW 2371
Tel: (02) 6734-7204
www.fruitsaladtrees.com

Hydroponics information

Australian Hydroponic and Greenhouse Association
www.ahga.org.au

Western Australia
www.hydroponicsolutions.com.au

Hydro Masta, a Sydney-based company
www.hydromasta.com.au

Open-pollinated seeds

Bay Seed Garden
PO Box 1164
Busselton, WA 6280
Tel: (08) 9752-2513

Digger's Club
Heronswood
105 Latrobe Pde
Dromana, Vic 3936
Tel: (03) 5987-1877
www.diggers.com.au
Email: orders@diggers.com.au

Eden Seeds
MS 905
Lower Beechmont, Qld 4211
Tel: (07) 5533-1107
www.edenseeds.com.au

Gourmet Gardens
PO Box 1892
Esperance, WA 6450
Tel: (08) 9071-6512

Greenpatch Organic Seeds
PO Box 1285
Taree, NSW 2430
Tel: (02) 6551-4240
www.greenpatchseeds.com.au
Email: enquiries@greenpatchseeds.com.au

Kings Seeds
PO Box 975
Penrith, NSW 2751
Tel: (02) 4776-1493

New Gippsland Seeds and Bulbs
PO Box 1
Silvan, Vic 3795
Tel: (03) 9737-9560
www.newgipps.com.au
Email: newgipps@bigpond.com

Phoenix Seeds
PO Box 207
Snug, Tas 7054
Tel: (03) 6267-9562
Email: phnxseed@ozemail.com.au

Yilgarn Traders
333 David Rd
Waggrakine, WA 6530
Tel: (08) 9938-1628
Email: yilgarn@midwest.com.au

Seeds and organic gardening supplies (including Chinese water chestnuts)

Green Harvest
PO Box 92
Maleny, Qld 4552
Tel: (07) 5435-2699
www.greenharvest.com.au
Email: inquiries@greenharvest.com.au

Seed Savers' Network

For information about seed saving and to see if there is a group in your area, the first port of call is the Seed Savers' Network.

PO Box 975
Byron Bay, NSW 2481
Tel: (02) 6685-6624
www.seedsavers.net
Email: info@seedsavers.net

Soil analysis

SWEP Analytical Laboratories
Specialising in soil analysis for organic systems.
PO Box 583
Noble Park, Vic 3174
Tel: (03) 9701-6007
www.swep.com.au
Email: services@swep.com.au

Wet Pot
61 Charteris St
Paddington, Qld 4064
Tel: (07) 3217-5383
http://wateringsystems.net/
Email: wakelingmark@yahoo.com.au

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INDEX

animals 36–8
  fish 39, 41
  goats 38
  guinea pigs 37
  poultry 36–7, 38
  rabbits 37
  sheep 38
aquaponics 39–41, 89, 97, 116, 125
  indoors 53

balcony, courtyard, rooftop 20, 22–3, 42, 72, 165
  body corporate approval 23
  council approval 23
  food crops for 94–5
  hydroponics/aquaponics for 97
beneficial insects 29, 35, 88, 121, 122, 126, 128, 129, 143, 198, 199, 201
blossom end rot 163
Bokashi 65, 72–3, 154, 180, 187
  uses for 73
borage 35
bush food, growing & using 187–92, *see also* bush tucker
  apple dumpling 187
  Australian finger lime 84, 187
  broad leaf palm lily 88, 188
  Davidson plum 27, 188
  large kangaroo apple 84, 188
  lemon myrtle 28, 84, 189
  lemon-scented tea-tree 28, 189
  lilly pilly 120, 189
  midgenberry 27, 88, 190
  mountain pepper 28, 84
  muntries 27, 28, 87, 88, 120, 190–1
  native ginger 84, 87, 191
  native raspberry 191
  prickly currant bush 27, 84, 191
  sweet apple berry 87, 90, 97, 188
  warrigal greens 26, 27, 33, 87, 88, 97, 120, 192
  yam daisy 87, 192
bush tucker 12, 16, 23, 26–8, 84, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, *see also* bush food, growing & using
  antioxidants in 28
  drought tolerance 28, 120
  edible leaves 27–8
  fruit producing 27

carbon/nitrogen ratio 59–60
  nitrogen drawdown 60–1
clumping bamboo 35
compost 35, 65–70
  cool 67
  easy 67
  hot 67
  less work 68
  lime, dolomite, wood ash 68
  micro-organisms in 68–9
  mini heaps/bins 69–70
  nutrients in 66
  rotating bins 68
  speeding up 70
  tea 73–4
  what can go in 69
crop rotation 93–3, 95
  hints & options 95
  how to 94
  plant families 93–4

deciding what to grow 24–31
  be realistic 24
  crop selection 24
  food preferences 24
diversity 29
dwarfing fruit trees 34, *see also* fruit, dwarfing rootstock

Earthbox® 21, 42–3
earthworms 34, 35, 41, 47, 48, 49, 58, 59, 70, 73, 75, 109, 128
  castings 72
  vermicompost 70–72

fertiliser
  Bokashi 72–3
  compost 65–70
  compost tea 73–4
  fish emulsion 63–4
  for fruit trees 83, 84–5
  for pots 77–9
  from fish 39, 40, 41
  from poultry 86
  green manures 75–6
  green weed tea 74–5
  homemade 5, 65–76
  humus 79–80
  in planting hole 85
  manures 37, 38, 64–5
  manure tea 74
  mulch 79
  mycorrhizal fungi 60

  nitrogen 7, 9, 39, 58, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64–5, 67, 68, 75, 76, 80, 84–5, 86, 131, 146, 150, 151, 168, 172, 176, 179
  organic 65
  overuse 65
  phosphorus 61, 63, 66, 72, 64–5, 66, 72, 84–5, 128
  potassium 61, 64–5, 85–5
  seaweed emulsion 39, 62, 63–4, 65, 67, 70, 77, 85, 96, 106, 129, 146, 154, 184, 185
  vermicompost 62, 65, 70–72, 76, 77, 78, 106, 153, 154, 172, 179, 187, 190, 195
flowers as food 16–18, 19, 193
flowers, growing & using 193–206, *see also* flowers as food
  calendula 195–6
  daylily 197–8
  lavender 199–200
  nasturtium 202
food among the flowers 16
frogs 29, 123
frost protection 84
fruit 24–7, 35
  berries 26
  cacti & succulents 26
  compact cultivars 26
  dwarfing rootstock 25–6
  for pots 96
  tropical 27
  vines 26
fruit, growing & using 165–85
  acerola 165–6
  alpine strawberry 185
  apple 166–7
  apricot 167–8
  babaco 168–9
  banana 169–70
  blackberry 183
  blackberry hybrids 183
  black currant 183
  black sapote 171
  blueberry 171–2
  feijoa 172–3
  goji berry 173
  grape 174–5
  lemon 175–6
  passionfruit 176–7
  pawpaw 177–8
  peach 178–9
  pineapple 179–80
  plum 180–1
  raspberry 181–2
  red currant 183
  strawberry 183–5
  white currant 183
fungal diseases 127–8
  fruit trees 127
  sprays against 127–8
  vegetables 127

garden ponds 29
green manure 35
grey water 112–5
  cautions 114–5
  from bathroom 114
  from kitchen 114
  from laundry 113–4

hardy food plants 119–20
  bush tucker 120
  fruits 120
  vegies 120
herbs & bush tucker among the shrubs 23
herbs, growing & using 193–206
  basil 193–4
  bay tree 194–5
  bergamot 195
  calendula 195–6
  chives 196
  coriander 196–7
  dill 198
  garlic 198–9
  lemon balm 200
  marjoram 200–1
  Mexican coriander 197
  mint 201–2
  parsley 203–4
  rosemary 204–5
  sage 205
  thyme 205–6
homemade fungicide sprays 129–30
  bicarbonate of soda 129
  compost 129
  milk 129
  seaweed 129
  vegetable oil 130
homemade insect control sprays 128–9
  chilli 129
  eucalyptus 128
  garlic 128
  molasses 128
  oil 128
  pyrethrum 129
hydroponics 41–2, 43
  indoors 53
  nutrient strengths 42
  plant combining
  Verti-gro® system 42

indoor productivity 51–53
  aquaponics/hydroponics 53

  mushrooms 52
  sprouting 51–2
  wheatgrass 52

lateral branches/growth/shoots 163, 167, 168, 171, 172, 179
lawn 23–4
  design ideas 90–91
  herbs 88
  productive possibilities 89–90
  replacing 88–91
  vegie patch over 91–4
lizards 29, 123
location 15–16
  fruiting plants 15
  overhanging trees 15
  vegies 15

marigolds 35, 86, 124, 195, *see also* flowers, growing & using
mulch 10, 16, 23, 31, 34–5, 38, 42, 43, 44, 59, 60, 61, 62, 67, 70, 71, 72, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 84, 85, 86, 94, 96, 103, 104, 109, 120, 127
  and pH 58
  lucerne 127
  mound, moat & 84
  sheet 88, 109, 110–11
  water under 116
multiple uses 34–6
  borage 35
  clumping bamboo 35
  dwarf fruit trees 34
  fruit trees 35
  marigolds 35
  native shrubbery 35–6
  peas & beans 35
  pumpkin vines 34–5
  vegetable crops 35
Mycobacterium vaccae 11
mycorrhizal fungi 60, 80

narrow strips 87–8
nasturtium 86, 87, 202
nitrogen drawdown 60–1
nitrogen fixation 75
no-dig beds 45–9
  best yet 48
  how to make 46–8
  planting out 48
  tank bed 49
  what to use 46
nutrient deficiencies 63

part of the picture 29–31
peas & beans 35
permaculture 33–9
  animals 36–7
  multiple uses 34–6
  perennial species 33
  poultry & vegetable dome 38
  swales 38–9
  zones 33, 36
pest control 120–9
  birds & beneficial insects 121–3
  codling moth 125–6
  coloured sticky traps 126
  companion planting 124
  crop rotation 121
  earwigs 125
  frogs, lizards, spiders 123–4
  fruit flies 125, 126
  fungal diseases 127–8
  healthy soil 120
  helpful insects 121
  homemade sprays 128–9
  organically acceptable commercial 126–7
  physical barriers 124
  pluck & squirt 121
  poultry 123
  slugs & snails 125
  timing 120–1
  traps 125–6
pH 47, 57–8, 61–2, 68
  and mulch 58
  in pots 77
  managing 57–9
  vegetable tolerance to 93
plants for birds & insects 29–31
pollination 5
pots 20–1
  care 95–6
  climbers in 97
  concrete 20–1
  Earthbox® 21
  fertilising 77
  fibreglass & clay 21
  food crops in 94–5
  fruit trees for 96
  glazed clay 20–1
  hanging 21
  pH in 77
  plastic 20
  practicalities of 78–9
  reusing 20
  stackable plastic 21
  tall plants in 97
  terracotta 20–1
  vegetables for 97
  watering 119
poultry 35, 36–7

  for pest control 86, 123, 165
  manure 64, 85, 86
propagating mix 104, 105
  homemade 105
propagator 105–6
pumpkin 34–5, 155–7

rare & unusual foods 28
reasons to grow 3–13
  blandness & obesity 4
  carbon sink 8
  chemical content 7–8
  children 12–13
  ecological footprint 9–10
  economy 4
  environmental health 8
  exercise 11
  feel-good factor 11
  food miles 10–11
  freshness 5
  greenhouse gas emissions 9
  heirloom varieties 4
  human health 8
  increasing food prices 5
  nutrition 5–7
  organic 4
  salicylates 3
  stress & health 12
  taste 3
  time lapse 3
  toughness 3
  unripe harvesting 3
  variety 12
recipes 207–12
  aromatic rosemary potatoes 210–11
  brassy brassica pasta 212
  broadly beany 211
  chock full of goodness frittata 211–12
  creamy easy potato salad 210
  sensational summer salsa 209
  so sweet pumpkin soup 210
  taste of summer basil pesto 209
  tomato paste 207–8
  totally herbaceous tomato chicken 208
  very vegie hotpot 209–10
  zigzag tomatoes 208
replacing a tree or shrub 83–4
replacing flowering annuals 86–7
rocks & logs 29, 123

seedlings
  growing your own 104
  in propagator 106
  propagating mix for 104, 105
  transplanting 106–7
seeds 99–104
  care of seedbed 103–4
  direct sowing 102
  F1 hybrid 101
  in dug beds 102–3
  in egg cartons or newspaper 107
  in Jiffy Pots 108
  in no-dig beds 103
  lifespan 101
  open-pollinated 4, 99–101, 163
  outdoor or indoor sowing 101–2
  planting 104–5
  selecting to save 100
  soil temperature for germination 102
soil improvement 55–81
  acid or alkaline 57
  biota 58
  Bokashi bucket 72–3
  bury waste 70
  carbon/nitrogen ratio 59–60
  compaction 80
  compost 65–70
  compost tea 73–4
  drainage 80
  fish emulsion 63, 64
  green manures 75–6
  green weed tea 74–5
  homemade fertilisers 65–76
  humus 79–80
  managing pH 57–8
  manures 64–5
  manure tea 74
  mulch 79
  mulch & pH 58
  mycorrhizal fungi 60
  nutrient deficiencies 63
  nutrients 61
  organic fertilisers 65
  seaweed emulsion 63–4
  vermicompost 70–72
soil structure 56–7
  gypsum 57
  improving 56–7
soil texture 55–6
  clay 55
  loam 55
  sandy 55
  silt 55
square foot gardening 50–1
  plant spacing for 51
superfoods 6

tiny spots 87

uses for plants 31

vegetables 99–107
  for pots 97
  hybrid 99
  open-pollinated 99–101
  planting 92–4
  preserving the past 99
  replacing a lawn 91–4
  rotation 93–4, 95
  selecting seed to save 100
  shade strategies 98
  tolerance to acidity 93
  top 10 for nutrients 133
vegetables, growing & using 133–64
  Asian greens 133–5
  beans 135–6
  beetroot 138
  broad beans 137
  broccoli 139–40
  buk choy 133, 134
  capsicum 140–5
  carrot 141–2
  Ceylon spinach 161
  Chinese mustard 135
  Chinese water chestnut 143
  choy sum 135
  cucumber 144–5
  lettuce 145–7
  mizuna greens 135
  onions 148–9
  pak choy 133, 134
  peas 150–2
  potato 152–5
  pumpkin 155–7
  radicchio 147–8
  radish 158–9
  rocket 147
  silverbeet 159–61
  spinach 161
  spring onions 150
  tomato 161–4
  tree onions 150
  watercress 147
  Welsh onions 150
vertical growing 18, 20
  green walls 20
  lattice 18, 20
  metal fences 18
  peas & beans 35
  reinforcing mesh 18
  rotary clothesline 18
  verandah posts 20

warrigal greens 27, 192
water 112–20
  bales 117
  choose hardy plants 119–20
  collection 113–14
  dripper irrigation 119
  dripper & seeper hoses 118
  Eco bags 117–18
  grey 112–15
  innovative watering 116–19
  juice bottles 117
  leaky buckets 117
  pipe method 116–17
  self-watering plant guards 117
  Smart WaterMark 118
  sun & wind protection 115–16
  tanks 112
  watering pot plants 119
  Wetpots® 117
  wetting agents 118
weeds 109–11
  control 109–11
  edible 109
  in no-dig beds 110
  in pot plants 110
  sheet mulch 110–11
  solarising 110
wicking beds 43–5
worm farms 70–72

zoning 33, 36