

# The Conversation

## If you took to growing veggies in the coronavirus pandemic, then keep it up when lockdown ends

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Author

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The COVID-19 pandemic produced a run on the things people need to produce their own food at home, including [vegetable seedlings, seeds](#) and [chooks](#).

This turn to self-provisioning was prompted in part by the high price rises for produce – including [A\\$10 cauliflowers and broccoli for A\\$13 a kilo](#) – and empty [veggie shelves in some supermarkets](#).

As well as [hitting the garden centres](#) people looked online for information on growing food. Google searches for “[how to grow vegetables](#)” hit an all-time worldwide high in April. Hobart outfit Good Life Permaculture’s video on [Crisis Gardening - Fresh Food Fast](#) racked up over 80,000 views in a month. Facebook kitchen garden groups, such as [Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation](#), sought to share information and inspiration.

### The good life

Given the many benefits of productive gardening, this interest in increased self-sufficiency was an intelligent response to the pandemic situation.

Experienced gardeners can produce enough fruit and vegetables year-round to supply two people from [a small suburban backyard](#).

[Productive gardening improves health](#) by providing contact with nature, physical activity and a healthier diet. Contact with [good soil bacteria](#) also has positive health effects.

While Australians have traditionally valued the feeling of independence imparted by a degree of self-sufficiency, psychological benefits arise from the social connectedness encouraged by many forms of productive gardening.

Amid COVID-19, gardeners gathered online and community gardens around the world brought people together through gardening and food. In some areas, community gardens were declared essential because of their contribution to food security. Although Australian community gardens paused their public programs, most remained open for gardening adhering to social distancing regulations.



Community gardens have an important role to play in food resilience. [Andrea Gaynor](#)

## **We always dig deep in a crisis**

Vegetable gardening and poultry-keeping often surge in popularity during times of social or economic insecurity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

These responses are built on an established Australian tradition of home food production, something I have researched in depth.

Yet history tells us it's not easy to rapidly increase self-provisioning in times of crisis – especially for those in greatest need, such as unemployed people.

This is another reason why you should plant a vegetable garden (or keep your current one going) even after the lockdown ends, as part of a broader suite of reforms needed to make our food systems more fair and resilient.

In the second world war, for example, Australian food and agricultural supply chains were disrupted. In 1942-3, as the theatres of war expanded and shortages loomed, the YWCA organised women into “garden armies” to grow vegetables and the federal government launched campaigns encouraging home food production.

Community-based food production expanded, but it was not possible for everyone, and obstacles emerged. In Australia, there were disruptions in the supply of seeds, fertiliser and even rubber for garden hoses. In London, resourceful gardeners scraped pigeon droppings from buildings to feed their victory gardens.

Another problem was the lack of gardening and poultry-keeping skills and knowledge. The Australian government’s efforts to provide good gardening advice were thwarted by local shortages and weather conditions. Their advertisements encouraging experienced gardeners to help neighbours may have been more effective.



*"Call on me  
anytime, George,  
I'll be glad to  
help you!"*



*"This is  
my first  
crack at  
it—I'll  
need your  
help."*

## **Help your neighbour**

**to get the best out of his garden**

Australian government 'Grow Your Own' campaign advertising, 1943. National Archives of Australia, Author provided  
Home food production has also increased during times of economic distress. During the Great Depression in the 1920s and 1930s, a health inspector in the inner suburbs of Melbourne reported, with satisfaction, that horse manure was no longer accumulating:

*... being very much in demand by the many unemployed who now grow their own vegetables.*

The high inflation and unemployment of the 1970s – as well as the oil shocks that saw steep increases in fuel prices – saw more people take up productive gardening as a low-cost recreation and buffer against high food prices.

The urge to grow your own in a crisis is a strong one, but better preparation is needed for it to be an equitable and effective response.

## How To Grow Your Own Vegetables



How to grow your own vegetables... as long as you like endive. *Andrea Gaynor*

### Beyond the pandemic

The empty shelves at nurseries and seed suppliers seen earlier this year tell us we were again insufficiently prepared to rapidly scale up productive home gardening.

We need to develop more robust local food systems, including opportunities for people to develop and share food production skills.

These could build on established programs, such as western Melbourne's My Smart Garden. Particularly in built-up urban areas, provision of safe, accessible, free or low-cost gardening spaces would enable everyone to participate.

More city farms with livestock, large-scale composting and seed saving, can increase local supplies of garden inputs and buffer against external disruption.

Like other crises before it, COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities in the systems that supply most Australians with our basic needs. While we can't grow toilet paper or hand sanitiser, there is a role for productive gardens and small-scale animal-keeping in making food systems resilient, sustainable and equitable.

Self-provisioning doesn't replace the need for social welfare and wider food system reform. But it can provide a bit of insurance against crises, as well as many everyday benefits.

# Great time to try: starting a vegetable garden

April 13, 2020 6.40am AEST

Author

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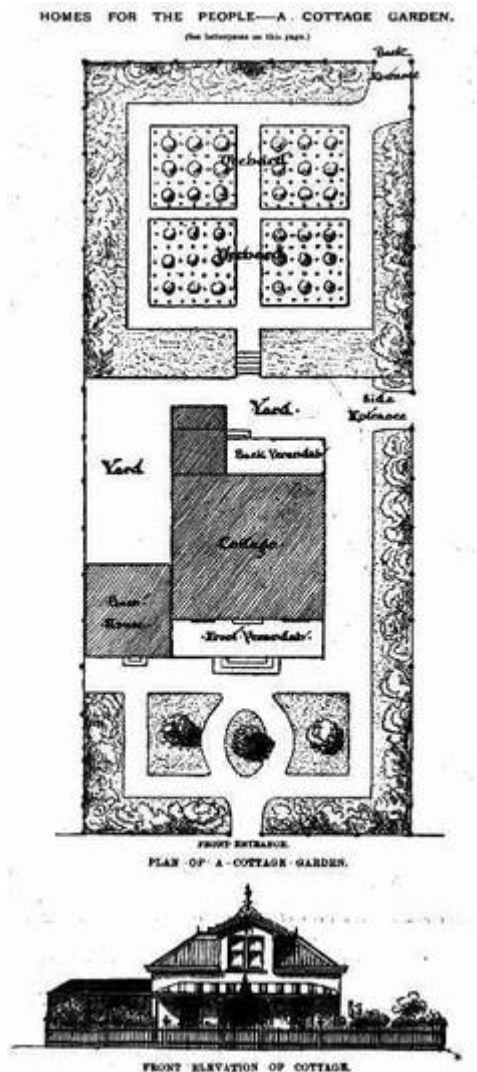
**Rachel Goldlust**

Phd candidate in Environmental History, La Trobe University

*Being in isolation might be a great time to try something new. In [this series](#), we get the basics on hobbies and activities to start while you're spending more time at home.*

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There is a long history of looking to one's own garden or small farm when the weight of economic and political chaos becomes too much to bear.



A suggested 'cottage garden' published in *The Town and Country Journal*, 1891. [Trove](#)

Since the first major depression that hit Australia in 1892-93, there have been calls to get back to the garden as a material response to potential food shortages, and as an emotional salve that lends elements of feeling productive and in control.

Urban food production in the second half of the 19th century soared. It was common to grow a wide range of vegetables on small plots alongside piggeries, dairies and livestock in the crowded inner and outer suburbs.

Small-scale local production was the most convenient way to make sure local communities could get fresh food. But as a deep recession loomed, there were calls to get people onto the land. A new generation of urban workers started to look for security, autonomy and opportunity in rural or semi-rural self-sufficiency.

## Gardening a new landscape

This move towards growing one's own food was based on dire economic need, but it also came to symbolise a turn away from the modern, providing social and spiritual regeneration.



For early suffragists, self-provision was deeply political. Ina Higgins, Vida Goldstein and Cecilia John started a women-only farm cooperative on the outskirts of Melbourne in 1914. Producing food during the first world war was practical and necessary, while also providing social and economic emancipation.



Ina Higgins in the garden at Killenna, 1919. National Library of Australia

Allowing women to escape the confines of home and factory, small farming meant they could transgress expectations of labour, marriage and motherhood and re-interpret production as physically beneficial, morally uplifting and



socially responsible. It allowed women to take control over their own livelihoods in a way that had been previously unavailable to them.

The hippies of the 1970s started the call once more. With a dedication to homesteading-type activities such as craft, food preservation and practical up-cycling, the children of the post-war generation found comfort in the “old ways”.

These were simple, home-based activities that also fulfilled their desire to set environmental limits and take responsibility for personal resource use. Growing food was not only nostalgic but reflected distrust of advertisements and commercial interests and a general rejection of consumerism, labour and materials beyond the home.



Nimbin in the 1970s became Australia's counter-culture capital, with a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency. Harry Watson Smith/Flickr, CC BY

Today there is yet another resurgence in backyard and small-plot food growing, canning, bottling and preserving.

Growing your own food at home may not solve all of your family's food needs, but the practice of picking, preserving and cooking one's own food brings a sense of control and calm.

## **Tips for your own venture into veggie gardening**

### **Observe and interact**

Look at the space you have and the resources at hand. Will you grow in pots or in the ground? Think outside the square: can you use your nature strip, a balcony

or perhaps even a friend or relative's garden (while still maintaining social distancing)?

For those growing in the ground, your time is limited as we head into winter, so start small. Remove as much of the existing grass and vegetation from the garden bed as you can. Dig in some quality compost, such as mushroom compost, to improve soil quality.

No-dig gardens sit above the ground, with layers of organic material forming the perfect growing environment for veggies and herbs as they break down. These can be started with very little investment.

You can look to buy (or build) some raised planter boxes that wick up moisture from a reservoir built into the box. Raised garden beds are great for growing small plots of veggies and flowers. They keep pathway weeds from your garden soil, prevent soil compaction, provide good drainage and serve as a barrier to pests such as slugs and snails.



Planter boxes can keep gardens tidy and well-watered. [Jonathan Hanna/Unsplash](#)

Never reach for a chemical pesticide to solve a bug, weed or disease problem. Build up your soil. Add organic matter, side dress with good compost, use good organic fertilisers. If you pay as much attention to building up the soil in the



garden as you do tending the vegetables, your vegetables will practically grow themselves.

Check on your garden daily. The more time you spend there – even if it is just five minutes early in the morning – the more you learn about it.

### **Look for community**

There are mountains of Facebook groups, blogs, websites and community organisations providing resources for basic vegetable gardening. Find one in your area that is suitable for the weather, soils and conditions, and learn from other's experience.

Local networks will be able to tell you what's best for planting, how to make a garden if you're renting, or even share seeds with you!

### **Even a small balcony box can be rewarding**

So what if your spacing is a little off, or you are a week or two late in planting? Or maybe you've just started with one tomato plant? A vegetable garden doesn't require perfection to produce food.

As a way of getting outside, or into nature, or just having a moment to yourself, gardening may be just the reprieve you're looking for.

# City compost programs turn garbage into 'black gold' that boosts food security and social justice

June 11, 2020 10.18pm AEST

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Almost overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed many Americans' relationships with food. To relieve some of the stress associated with shopping safely for groceries and ensure food security, many people are once again planting "victory gardens." This tradition hearkens back to previous generations who cultivated home gardens during both World Wars.

Interest was high even before the pandemic. In 2014 the National Gardening Association reported that 42 million U.S. households – about 1 out of every 3 – grew some kind of food, either at home or in community gardens.

But home gardening isn't always easy. Poor soil quality will hamper vegetable growth and food production. And many gardeners, especially in lower-income communities, don't have access to resources that can improve the soil.

We are scholars who have analyzed the power of microbes in settings that include forest soils and permafrost, the built environment, and digestive systems and agricultural soils. In our view, the time has come for major public investments in a well-known gardening resource: compost.

Microbes make compost by breaking down organic matter, such as food scraps. Compost improves soil health so dramatically it's often called "black gold." Large-scale municipal composting is a public resource that can reduce food waste, cut greenhouse gas emissions and promote better stewardship of our most valuable natural resource: soil.

## How compost feeds soils

Healthy soils are living mixtures of minerals, microbes, organic matter, water and air. Unhealthy soils may contain fewer microbes or less organic material.

This makes them less active and less helpful for plants. Poor soils have trouble holding water, and are unable to decompose organic material into usable building blocks for new growth.



Good-quality soil (right) looks, feels and smells different from degraded soil (left). Sue Ishaq, CC BY-ND

Making degraded soils healthier requires feeding the microbes. They need new organic matter – plant or animal tissues – that they can break down and recycle.

In healthy soil, some of that food comes from growing plants that fix carbon from sunlight and pump almost half of it, in the form of sugars, into the soil. In exchange, the microbes provide other nutrients that plants can't acquire on their own.

Soil microbes also feed on old organic matter, like leaf litter and dead roots. And new biochemical analyses suggest that when these microbes die, they become part of soil organic matter themselves.

To make good compost, you mix green plant waste, like vegetable peels, garden leaf litter or straw, with brown organic matter like soil or manure. Then, over weeks to months, microbes turn the mix into compost, which looks just like soil.

This process produces heat as the microbes break chemical bonds in the plant matter, releasing energy. Compost piles can reach internal temperatures up to 170 degrees F. The heat kills potential microbial pathogens that can ride along with manure inputs.



When gardeners add compost to soils, the organic matter in the compost acts like a sponge for water. It also is a reservoir for nitrogen, phosphorus and other micronutrients that plants need to grow.



High-quality compost, like this batch made from horse bedding, looks very much like healthy soil. Gardeners use it to help soil retain water and nutrients and nourish microbes. [Kristen DeAngelis](#), CC BY-ND

## **Access to compost is an equity issue**

If compost is such a great resource, why don't more people make their own? In many ways, healthy soil is a luxury. For starters, it takes time to set up a compost pile, followed by continued maintenance – adding browns and greens at the right intervals, watering the pile and turning it over weekly in summer or monthly in winter.

Composting also takes tools and construction materials that not all aspiring gardeners can afford. It requires access to space, and a friendly regulatory environment that allows residents to create compost piles, which can produce odors and attract pests if they are not managed properly.

Factors like these are increasing interest in municipal composting programs, in which a community collects and processes residents' organic materials. These programs typically accept food and yard waste from restaurants, schools, businesses and local residents, and create a large-scale, professionally run composting facility.

Municipal composting saves money for communities by diverting food waste from landfills. It also promotes sustainability by reducing emissions of methane,



a powerful greenhouse gas produced in landfills when waste breaks down in the absence of oxygen. And combining lots of different waste sources improves the breakdown of organic materials and generates more nutritious compost.

Many municipal programs allot participants a certain volume of compost in return for the waste they provide. And some offer pickup and delivery.

How Tacoma, Washington's municipal composting program works.

## **Growing compost programs**

We encourage people with the necessary time and resources to try home composting. However, creating and supporting municipal composting is necessary to meaningfully reduce greenhouse gas emissions from food waste and increase access to healthy soil.

Composting programs are sometimes available through local community gardens or farms. Many private companies operate local compost pickup services.



All San Francisco residents and businesses are required to separate their waste into compostables (green bin), recyclables (blue bin) and trash (black bin). Food wastes are composted for use by residents and on farms in the Bay area. SF Environment

Among U.S. cities, leaders in promoting city-scale composting services include San Francisco, Seattle, and smaller cities like Burlington, Vermont.

These programs rely on local ordinances that either offer incentives or require restaurants and other large food waste sources to compost food waste instead of sending it to landfills.

Municipal composting needs consumer support to attract and retain funding and other resources. Demands for land, especially in urban settings, can spur city governments to sell underfunded or underutilized community spaces for commercial use – especially if local neighborhoods lack social capital to advocate for themselves.

Promoting community-based food production and recycling waste via composting provides many benefits. It creates jobs, expands access to healthy fruits and vegetables, improves the local environment – especially the soil – and helps mitigate climate change. Best of all, investing in local agriculture helps boost the local economy, especially for those who need it most: people seeking better access to safe and nutritious food.