

Organic community gardens sprout up in Illawarra

EMMA SPILLETT July 22, 2013, 4:02 a.m.



Christene Hartley and Denis Bagnall working in Australia's biggest community garden in Dapto. Picture: ORLANDO CHIODO

Community gardens are sprouting up across the Illawarra as more and more green thumbs seek out spots to grow their own produce.

Apartment living, shrinking backyard sizes and a desire to eat more sustainably has driven the trend for shared gardens, which now attract dozens of budding growers every week.

Many community gardens in the region offer workshops, fruit and vegetable swaps, monthly barbecues, worm farms and even cafe facilities.

While many gardens are set up on empty pockets of land, Dapto Community Farm rents plots to commercial and community gardeners.

President Christene Hartley says the group's 70 members grow everything from rosemary to radicchio, selling their leftover veggies to hungry buyers.

The farm, which operates on land attached to Mountain Range Farm, has been running for almost a decade, attracting a wide range of gardening enthusiasts.

"We have university students and an 83-year-old with a walking frame," Ms Hartley said.

"We have something like 27 different cultures represented here. [People] need somewhere to go; a lot of them come from agricultural backgrounds and they're used to growing their own produce so this gives them

that chance."

Along with a large ethnic membership, including Burmese refugees, Italian and Indian migrants, the garden also hosts a group from Greenacres Disability Services.

Gardeners are free to grow any produce - as long as it's cultivated organically.

Ms Hartley believes the range of vegetables, herbs and spices grown on the farm's many plots would be the envy of even the most upmarket greengrocer.

"There are things growing in these gardens that I've never even seen before," she laughed.

"People grow everything from herbs and spices to pumpkins and lettuces; there's just this beautiful smell of lavender and rosemary when you wander through, it's quite a nice experience."

Ms Hartley attributes the growth in community gardening to the rise in apartment dwellers.

She believes many people are keen to grow their own produce but simply don't have the space.

"People are being forced into smaller and smaller homes and they just don't have room for a garden, especially one where they can grow veggies," she said.

"People used to have a quarter of an acre to live on; now they're stuck in flats. Kids used to go and visit grandad's yard and work with him in the garden - now they visit grandad here."

Farm owner Lance Carr says the popularity of cooking shows which promote fresh, local produce are another driver.

We recommend

