



A LIVING GROWING DOCUMENT

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# PROJECT PARTNERS



**THIS REPORT HAS BEEN  
COLLATED AND  
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WITH:**

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Moonshine Madness - Graphic Design  
3Peas Consulting- Consultation  
Young Farmers Connect

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**"INFORMATION  
IS LIKE COMPOST;  
IT DOES NO GOOD  
UNLESS YOU  
SPREAD IT  
AROUND"**

**- Eliot Coleman**



As Acres and Acres runs into its 2nd year we wanted to share where we were at as a snapshot and then delve a bit deeper with a series of blueprints about all the parts of our CO-OP We also share stories from our mentors and Members as case studies. Lastly we list resources that we have found helpful and include some documents in an appendix.

## **ROAPMAP REPORT**



As Acres and Acres runs into its 2nd year we wanted to share where we were at as a snapshot and then delve a bit deeper with a series of blueprints about all the parts of our CO-OP We also share stories from our mentors and Members as case studies. Lastly we list resources that we have found helpful and include some documents in an appendix.

The snapshot covers the first Section and includes our backstory that evolved into our mission. We present some simple facts about who we are, our rationale and our passion for local food networks. We show where we fit into local and regional plans and strategies and celebrate our achievements.

Our blueprints may not be blue lines on a white background, but they are details that we hope will support other groups wanting to expand their local food network. We start with some details on our community food system from waste to production to processing, distribution and community. We dive into how we started our CO-OP and share some big lessons learned.

We have actual blueprints for the design of our community worm farm called the worm ranch and introduce talking dirt ee! We share tips on starting a farm, getting funding, engaging with communities, working with volunteers, distributing produce and finding land. For those who love those technical blue line diagrams, we share the prints for our tool library and The Hub which will be home to one of our gardens, a shared office, nursery, community kitchen and washing station.

True to our grassroots nature we share words from our mentors and Members in a series of interviews and case studies. We hope these segments and access to the full podcasts brings our co-op to life for you and gives many more insights to who we are and the characters that sustain us.

Lastly in our resources section we share some of the key web sites we have found helpful. These cover topics from making soil and compost to setting up a co-op. In our appendixes we share some documents such as the north east community food strategy and our survey questions.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

JOSHUA COLLINGS



## It's been a rapid year of growth through unsteady times and we are still alive and thriving...

Through bush fires and the disaster recovery, Covid-19 and floods. We have managed to come out on top and ready to really make a dent on the local area. We have broken new ground, opened up multiple sites, planted seeds in the local ground but also on a national scale.

We have invested in equipment and local jobs in rural North East Victoria. We have inspired 1000's across Victoria and shared openly with Councils, other market gardeners and anyone who wants to participate.

I moved to Corryong to become self-sufficient but since the bush fires I've found myself moving away from that and more into an interconnected world of community sufficiency. It's what excites me most about the opportunity of Acres and Acres.

It's also a fine balance to get it right and though we are not there yet if we keep exploring, testing and reflecting I know we can really set an example of what is possible.



When our beautiful little food swap group started the Acres and Acres Cooperative back in March 2020 it came from many conversations about local food swaps and community. The bush fires made it clear things needed to change and Covid19 really accelerated the idea of food security and resilience. The dream was simply to get some tools to share, to start a market garden in town and then on our own properties.

After plenty of learning and incredible support I can now see the idea is starting to form into something that could be a legacy. Here is a snapshot of some of the things Acres and Acres CO-OP has achieved in the past year.

## ACHIEVEMENTS



- Attended and supported our local Farmers Market
- Hosted 15 farm gates events at multiple locations
- Crop rotations, amendments, cover crops and composting.
- Hosted workshops for community including; pruning, composting, tools.
- Ran volunteer working bees throughout the season
- Sold produce to local businesses and direct to consumers
- Successfully tested Our first P.O.D. (Point of Distribution)
- Raised over \$750k of funding from many funding bodies.
- Purchased tools: walking tractor, seeder and implements and tractor
- Worked with agencies such as Vic health, Into Our Hands, Border Trust, Deloitte, Bush fire Recovery Victoria, D.E.W.L.P., Sustainable Victoria, Gateway Health, Anglicare, June Canavan Foundation, Portland house
- Received over 30 letters of support for the project
- Started 3 Acres and Acres managed farms and built great relationships with land holders such as the Tintalra Hotel.
- Introduced Planting Party's with our first Members supported farm, Wild Horse Garlic.
- Survived Covid19
- Won 2 Awards Vic health community legend and AMP Foundation Tomorrow Maker
- Completed Design of Community Worm Farm System



## BACKGROUND STORY

Acres and Acres CO-OP was established in March 2020 in response to the bush fires that impacted the Towong Shire in January 2020. It was established to support bush-fire affected communities and grew rapidly as a response to Covid19 to create food security and community resilience, minimise food miles, lessening local climate impact and to create employment and training opportunities.

All six founding members of the CO-OP met through the Corryong Food Swap Group that formed 2 years prior by like minded food gardening enthusiasts. The 6 founding members of the Co-op were directly or indirectly impacted by the 2019-2020 bush fires. One member and his family lost everything, including their home and their specialised business equipment. Another was a front-line fire fighter who fought as a CFA member, through the night, then drove through the fire to defend her family, home and property, including livestock, as spot fires flared up around them. Others lost fencing and pastures or were evacuated for several weeks as fire continued to threaten their homes.

These members all wish to help build community resilience and change the meaning of the fires from one of trauma and loss, to one of opportunity and a chance to make positive changes that will build community resilience and wellbeing, create employment and training opportunities and bring people together while sharing skills and tools for the benefit of all.



# ACRES & ACRES

## FROM BEGINNING TO NOW

## OUR BELIEFS

### WE STAND FOR COLLABORATION

To create community awareness around the importance of a local food source by building capacity within the community

### WE CREATE FOOD SECURITY

By establishing a diverse, regional local food source, increasing availability, accessibility and variety of fresh foods in the Upper Murray

### THROUGH AN ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATIVE

Establishing multiple sites across the region in a decentralised model to grow food, distribute through a food co-operative, produce box subscription scheme and access to shared infrastructure.



# ACRES & ACRES RATIONALE

By working together, they are creating a more resilient community with social connections, as they create and implement new local food solutions.

## COORDINATED DISTRIBUTION

Established a food co-operative and a (P.O.D) point of delivery system that will grow to 10 location over the next 2 years.

## COLLABORATION

Work collaboratively to create community awareness around the importance of a local food source by building capacity within the community.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Coordinate and host engaging community food events to bring the community together and launch each project stage.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Establish a diverse, regional local food source, increasing availability, accessibility and variety of fresh foods in the Upper Murray.

## CAPACITY BUILDING

Establish up to 10 Farms sites over the next 5 years across the region in a decentralised model to grow food.

## SHARED ASSETS

Develop a mobile tool library that will enable the establishment of the project's gardens and also will be available for shared use by the community.

## OUR MAIN AREA OF IMPACT Addressing community needs

- \* SMALL SCALE GROWER
- \* FOOD INSECURITY
- \* SOCIAL
- \* LOCAL ECONOMIC
- \* EDUCATION AND

Acres & Acres has grown by bringing together a wide and impressive variety of community members, stakeholders, funding bodies, government agencies, media and private corporations.

From the beginning, we recognised the importance of building a strong foundation for this institution to succeed and be sustainable.

To achieve this we needed strong support, to build on our own knowledge and capacity as a group and connect with funding agencies to support our initial start-up stages. We also needed support to get our message out to drive supply and demand for fresh food in our region.





# WHY LOCAL FOOD

Localising the food economy builds resilience, creates local employment and entrepreneurial opportunities in the food industry. It improves soil, reduces the carbon footprint and the reliance on petroleum based products. Most importantly it builds community and connects the public to their food, creating healthier lifestyles.



The Acres and Acres strategy addresses a number of key learning from the bush fires and that is the absence of a sustainable local food production ecosystem. Existing local food growing tends to be focused on large scale farming with a preponderance of beef and dairy farming. Instead, this area-wide project will build local capability in the rich local alluvial soils to create a local food system based on regenerative and permaculture principles. The focus will be on a diverse dedication to year-round food growing and the ability to share that food with surrounding towns. This will also extend to waste minimisation approaches of creating salable products from excess produce.

## KEY DRIVERS FOR OUR LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY

### LEADERSHIP

Coordinating a collective voice that drives a local food system. Creating a strong regional food identity.

### PRODUCTION

Creating a thriving and diverse agricultural sector, protecting natural resources and changing agricultural practices.

### DISTRIBUTION

A short supply chain that is scale appropriate and that increases availability and accessibility.

### CONSUMPTION

Coordinating a collective voice that drives a local food system. Creating a strong regional food identity.

### WASTE REDUCTION

Creating a thriving and diverse agricultural sector, protecting natural resources and changing agricultural practices.

### RESILIENCE

A short supply chain that is scale appropriate and that increases availability and accessibility.

**“The region has seen a rise in the cost of food over recent times, due to reliance on food supplied by external regions and markets”**

This issue has been heightened by the bush fires recently experienced, physically cutting off supply chains, and making the price of food vulnerable to further price hikes. With the added impact of Covid-19, again the region has been impacted by reduced supplies and variation of food, particularly fresh produce. Acres and Acres provides a collective local response to these issues in both providing food that has been locally grown, harvested and supplied and is fresh, seasonal and healthy.

# NORTH EAST FOOD STRATEGY

**ACRES AND ACRES VISION REFLECTS A  
NUMBER OF THE CORE PRIORITIES OUTLINED  
IN THE NORTH EAST LOCAL FOOD  
STRATEGY 2018 – 2022**



## **FOOD LITERACY**

Food literacy encompasses both the knowledge and skills to plan, select, prepare and consume appropriate types and quantities of foods to meet dietary needs, as well as an understanding of the processes, impacts and interconnectedness of the food system more broadly, which provides the basis for empowerment to support a sustainable, resilient and fair food system (Vidgen, 2014).



## **FOOD SECURITY**

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2009). The concept of food security encompasses a range of elements which include, but are not limited to, sustainable food production, food supply and consumers' access to food.



## **FOOD SYSTEM**

A food system includes all processes and infrastructure involved in feeding a population: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consumption, and disposal of food and food-related items. It also includes the inputs needed and outputs generated at each of these steps. A food system operates within, and is influenced by, social, political, economic and environmental contexts.



## **RESILIENCE**

The resilience of a system refers to how effectively it can respond to shock and adapt to change.



## **SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH**

The social determinants of health are the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age, which are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces including economics, social policies, and politics (World Health Organization, 2008).



## **SUPPLY CHAIN**

A supply chain is the sequence of activities that move food from the producer to the consumer, including processing, packaging, distribution, wholesalers and retailers. A short food supply chain is where a producer sells food directly to consumers, or with a minimum of intermediaries.



# LOCAL POLICY

In December 2021 the Towong Shire released their Strategic Plan for Agriculture Summary outlining a number of key drivers and policy recommendations for regional agricultural and agri-food opportunities.

Acres and Acres Cooperative alignment with local and regional policy provides effective frameworks for collaboration and collective impact.



**ACRES AND ACRES  
CO-OP ALIGNS  
WITH EACH OF THE  
STRATEGIC  
PRIORITIES**

## VISION FOR A THRIVING AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

An agricultural and rural community that :

- Responsibly and sustainably manages and utilises its natural resources;
- Can adapt to meet current and emerging market opportunities;
- Producers and enterprises experience ease of doing business;
- Is collegiate, collaborative and embraces diversity.

## TOWONG SHIRE COUNCIL PRIORITY ACTIONS MATCHED TO ACRES AND ACRES PROJECT GOALS

**PRODUCER PEER LEARNING GROUPS AND NETWORKS**  
**STAGED SUCCESSION PROGRAM**  
**AGRICULTURE DIVERSIFICATION PROGRAM**  
**SKILLS ACQUISITION TARGETED SME, VALUE ADD AND SCALE UP SUPPORT**  
**LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK**  
**TANGIBLE CONNECTION WITH AGRICULTURE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS**  
**CLIMATE ADAPTION FRAMEWORK FOR TOWONG**  
**ACCELERATION OF DIGITAL NETWORK AND CONNECTION**  
**DEDICATED AGRICULTURE RESOURCE WITHIN SHIRE**  
**PROGRAM TO UPSKILL THE SHIRE'S AGRICULTURE CAPACITY**

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1 EMPOWERING THE PEOPLE IN AGRICULTURE: CURRENT, NEXT AND NEW GENERATIONS

- 1.1.** Succession in land management is achievable and supported.
- 1.2.** Agriculture diversification options are clear (business case, pathway, and access to required skills) and supported for a range of production systems.
- 1.3.** The skills and know how that underpin innovation, entrepreneurship and values are supported to enable prosperity across agricultural communities.
- 1.4.** The region can attract current, next and new generations in agriculture and rural industries to ensure a diverse, collaborative and capable workforce for the future.
- 1.5.** Leadership development is supported and integrated to enhance the community's capacity to embrace rural challenges and opportunities both now and into the future.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2 MAXIMISING THE WATER AND NATURAL RESOURCE POTENTIAL TO GROW EXISTING AND NEW MARKETS

- 2.1.** Producers understand (where, when and how) the balance and availability of groundwater resources to drive their informed and deliberate decision making.
- 2.2.** Improve access to and availability of regulated water for agricultural producers.
- 2.3.** Improve water utilisation and efficiencies by producers through informed decision making and ensuring a return on investment for farming businesses.
- 2.4.** Sustainability and climate adaptation practices are clear and supported.

### STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3 A CONNECTED SHIRE - INFRASTRUCTURE AND HUMAN FACTOR

- 3.1.** Reliable digital and telecommunication networks are available and provide effective coverage across all the Shire.
- 3.2.** Transport and built infrastructure support progressive and efficient supply chains.
- 3.3.** Contemporary, fit for purpose land use planning and legislation to support sustainable growth and development of agriculture and rural communities.
- 3.4.** Navigating permits and planning process is seamless – (Ease of doing business).
- 3.5.** A relevant, coordinated and collaborative approach to advance initiatives and advocacy that drive agriculture prosperity and resilience.



# GRANTS & FUNDING

Access to a wide range of funding sources, support and guidance has created the opportunity for Acres and Acres to have the potential to scale up.



|                                                                                                                         |           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>2021 - 2023, Sustainability Victoria</b><br>Community commercial worm Composting System                              | \$49,500  |
| <b>2021 - 2022 , Vic Health - Re-imagining Health</b><br>Market garden, site preparation and development                | \$50,000  |
| <b>2021 - 2023 Bush Fire Recovery Victoria</b><br>Jobs, project development, tools, plant equipment purchase, operation | \$500,000 |
| <b>2020 June Canavan Foundation</b><br>Tool library project development and delivery                                    | \$15,000  |
| <b>2020, Into Our Hands Foundation</b><br>Tools purchase                                                                | \$24,000  |
| <b>2021-2022 D.E.L.W.P Community Mini - Grants</b><br>Events, education training and workshops                          | \$10,000  |
| <b>2021-2022 D.E.L.W.P Grant</b><br>Create a Document - Blueprint                                                       | \$30,000  |
| <b>2020, Commonwealth Bank</b><br>Acres & Acres establishment costs                                                     | \$50,000  |
| <b>2020, Border Trust Grant</b><br>Greenhouse tunnels and protected cropping                                            | \$10,000  |
| <b>2021-2022 Towong Shire Community Grant</b><br>Events, education training and workshops                               | \$5,000   |

**TOTAL: \$750k**

# AWARDS

- Community Achievement Awards:** 2021 Finalists
- Victorian Health Promotion Awards:** Community Legend 2021
- AMP foundation Tomorrow Maker:** 2022

# WHAT IS A COOPERATIVE

A CO-OP is a unique business and organisational structure featuring democratic member ownership and control, internationally agreed and locally legislated principles, and requirements for members to actively support the CO-OP to maintain their membership.

An alternative to other structures such as a partnership, incorporated association or company, there are more than 1,700 co-ops in Australia spread across almost every sector of the economy.

They range from small community-based not-for-profit co-ops to Australia's third largest private business, CBH Group, the giant grain co-op in Western Australia which has a turnover of almost \$4 billion a year. There are dynamic co-ops that have served their communities for over a hundred years and new exciting co-ops leveraging off high-tech digital platforms to deliver for a new generation of members.

The International Co-operative Principles include commitments to be independent, to have concern for sustainable community development, and to support other CO-OPs.

CO-OP are a community and a movement, and it is quite common for co-ops to seek and provide assistance to each other, in contrast to the rest of the economy.

Co-ops also have a strong brand. With members having an equal say in how they are run, co-ops are about member benefit and return rather than investor profit. For example, the CEO of CBH Group each day is focussed on the price per tonne his grower members pay to transport their wheat to port, not quarterly external shareholder returns.

While the 'co-operative advantage' means that services are able to be delivered at a better price than in investor owned enterprises where a premium is extracted, co-ops must of course still be just as well managed and governed as every other organisation to compete and succeed in the marketplace.

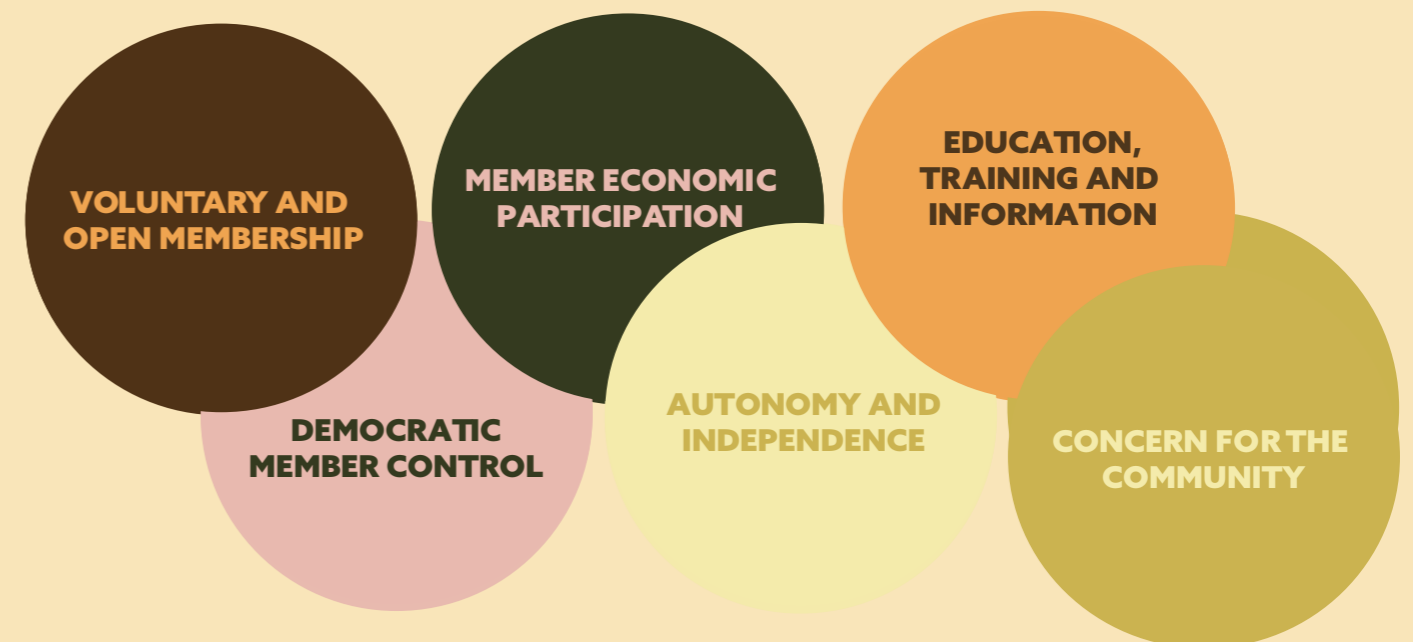
More information about co-ops can be found on The CO-OP Federation website, including the CO-OPERatives in Australia: A Manual publication.

# THE VALUE OF COOPERATIVES



**The value of a cooperatives is their ability to realise the economic, cultural and social needs of a organisation's members and its surrounding community.**

**CO-OPeratives have a strong commitment and focus on strengthening they serve.**



# FARMS AND PRODUCTION

ACRES AND ACRES FARMS FALL UNDER TWO PRIMARY CATEGORIES: ACRES AND ACRES FARMS AND MEMBER FARMS. MEMBER FARMS ARE MADE UP OF KEEN HOME GROWERS, MARKET GARDENERS, ORCHARDISTS, MICRO-FARMERS, PRODUCERS, VOLUNTEERS AND PURCHASERS. AS THE PROJECT HAS GROWN IT CONTINUES TO SERVICE ALL THESE AREAS, WITH ESTABLISHED FARMS NOW STARTING TO JOIN THE CO-OPERATIVE. BELOW ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF MEMBERS AND PRODUCER MEMBERS:

## **Murmungee Basin Produce Farm** **Location : Buckland Gap Road**

Bernie and Flick joined Acres and Acres in August 2021 to share tools, distribution and workshops. They have established a 3 acre market garden and have contributed an exchange of knowledge on compost and irrigation.

## **Christina and James Aston** **Location : Nariel Valley**

Christina and James joined in 2020 after their property Hazelnut farm was burnt out in the bush fires, They have put in an orchard, berries, and plan to do a no till farm including flowers and garlic. The Ashtons will use the tool library, distribution, workshops, worm ranch, composting and the volunteering community.

## **Ben Wolfenden and Kim Jenkins** **Location : Pine Mountain**

Ben and Kim joined Acres and Acres in January 2022 to share farming, tools, distribution, knowledge and workshops. They are just establishing their 1 acre market garden, sowing a garlic crop in March 2022.

## **Posie Farm** **Location: Talgarno**

Posie farm is a flower farm on the peninsula. They are brand new members who we engage in workshops and events and exchange their product and knowledge at farm tours. Posie farms will use Acres and Acres for distribution, marketing and workshops in the future.

## **Mountain Bee honey** **Location: Pine Mountain**

Matt at Mountain Bee Honey is an established producer of bush honey and Acres and Acres will distributes their products. The property contains an orchard and raspberries that will be used in the future. Matt has provided volunteering time, investment and materials into the farms.

## **Khancoban Kitchen** **Location: Khancoban**

Shelly was one of the founding members of Acres and Acres and who started from our original food swap group. Shelly's business is thriving and has been able to use seasonal oversupply for value adding. She has been involved in volunteering, producing, farmers markets, marketing and direction of the CO-OP.

## **Four Mile Farms** **Location: Little Billabong**

Heidi has a pasture raised chicken farm with 1100 birds. This farm was established before joining as an Acres and Acres member and they are now hoping to use the extended distribution channels and cross promotion of products to grow this business. Heidi has participated in volunteering, management, and is a director and board member.

## **Walwa Farm** **Location: Pine Mountain**

Karen and Steve Moved to the area in 2020 and have bveen creating their own little version of paradise. These two keen homesteaders have it all animals, orchards, and a veggie garden. They have particapated in workshops, volunteering, and used the tool library to put in a gigantic pumpkin patch.

## **MARKET GARDEN** **"THE HUB"**



### **LOCATION**

Commenced  
Address  
Area under cultivation

### **CORRYONG**

September 2020  
15 Harris Street, Corryong VIC  
100m2 [ 10 x 30m beds ]

Tenancy  
Infrastructure

Leased (3 years) + Continuous  
Nursery, potting shed, shared washing facility, office, portable tool library, town water irrigation, coolrooms.

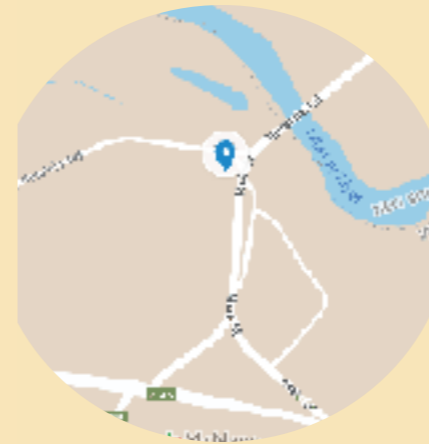
Proposed development

Outside washing station, packing space, shared commercial kitchen, storage.

Crops  
Challenges  
Stakeholders

Seasonal vegetables, fruit trees, herbs  
Urban, local government  
Acres and Acres, Corryong High School, Members

## **MARKET GARDEN** **"TINPOT"**



### **LOCATION**

Commenced  
Address  
Area under cultivation

### **TINTALDRA**

December 2020  
Tintaldra Hotel, 2 Main St, Tintaldra VIC  
1 Acre

Tenancy  
Infrastructure

Leased (2 Years) + Continuous  
Irrigation, 2x shade tunnels, 4 x caterpillar tunnels

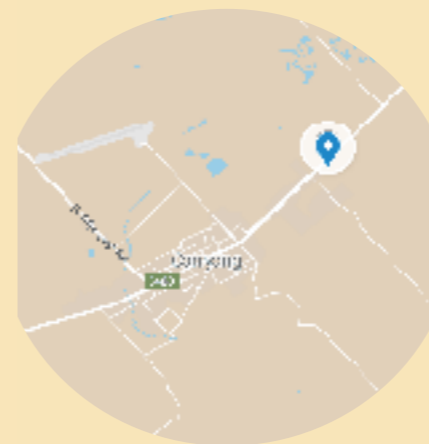
Proposed development

Farm gate stall

Crops  
Challenges  
Stakeholders

Seasonal vegetables, herbs  
Urban, local government  
Acres and Acres, Tintaldra Hotel, Member

## **MARKET GARDEN** **"CRAZY ACRES"**



### **LOCATION**

Commenced  
Address  
Area under cultivation

### **CORRYONG**

August 2021  
1139 Murray Valley Hyw, Corryong VIC  
3/4 Acre

Tenancy  
Infrastructure

Leased (1 Year) + Continuous  
Irrigation, 2 x Grow tunnels, 1 x Caterpillar tunnels

Proposed development

Small Shed

Crops  
Challenges  
Stakeholders

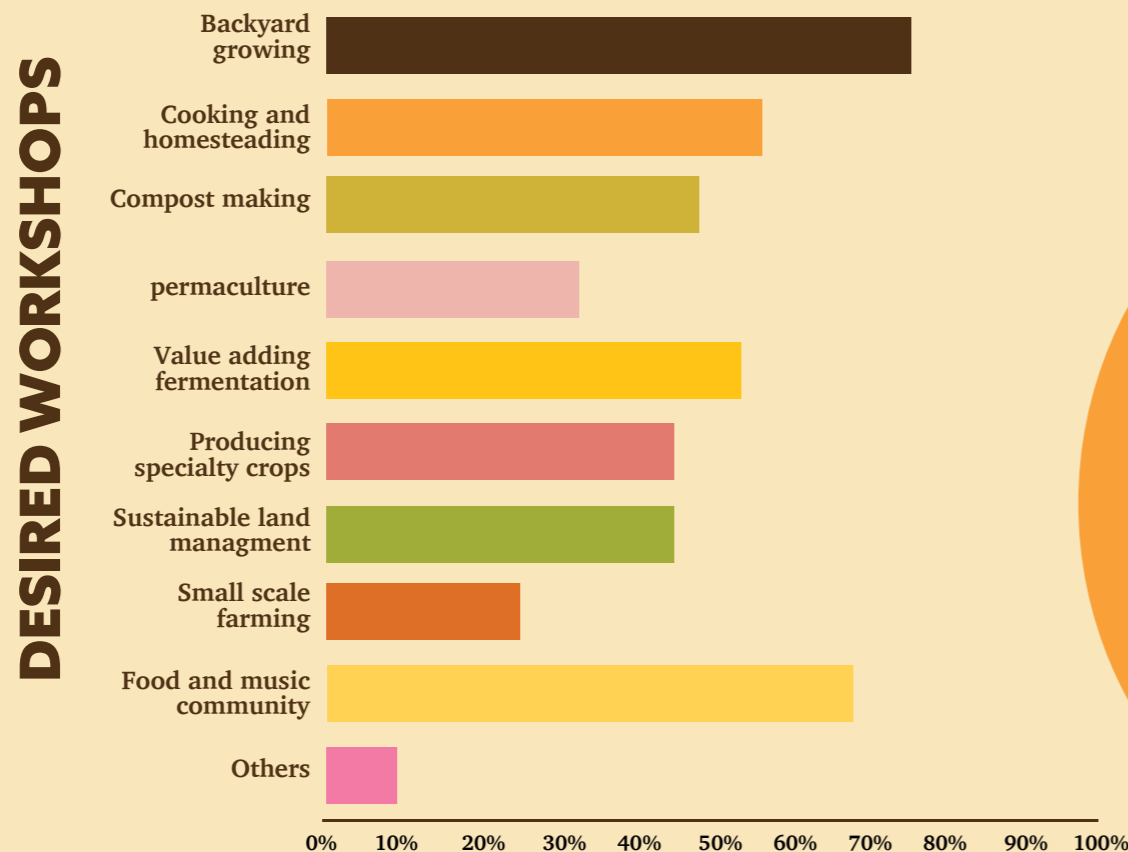
Seasonal vegetables, herbs  
Soil, town water, vandalism  
Acres and Acres, landowner, members

# COMMUNITY SURVEY

The Acres and Acres community survey was constructed to offer the wider users, volunteers, customers and broader community an opportunity to offer input, suggestions and feedback on the Acres and Acres platform.

Over 100 responses were received in the first week and the details are captured here. The survey has been left open for further contributions.

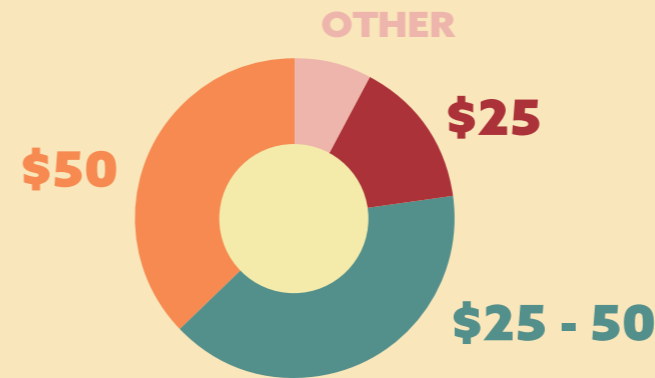
## RESPONDENTS ARE HIGHLY ENGAGED IN WORKSHOP AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES



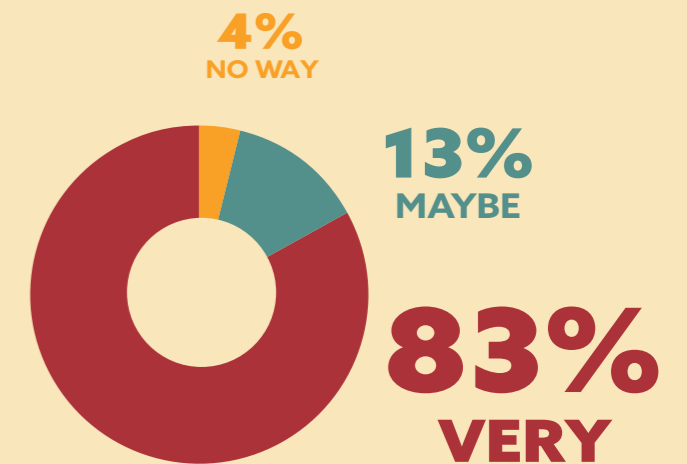
## WORDS THAT CUSTOMERS USE TO DESCRIBE ACRES AND ACRES PRODUCE

**GOOD GREAT FRESH FOOD  
TASTE LOCAL PRODUCE  
SUPPORT QUALITY  
ONE FRESHNESS LOVE FRESH**

### CUSTOMERS WEEKLY AVERAGE VEGETABLE SPEND



### WOULD YOU RECOMMEND ACRES AND ACRES TO YOUR FRIENDS OF FAMILY



**60%**

OF RESPONDENTS STRONGLY PREFER TO ACCESS FRESH LOCALLY GROWN CHEMICAL FREE FOOD AND WOULD PREFERENTIALLY SHOP AT RESTAURANTS, GROCER, CAFÉ OR SUPERMARKET WHERE LOCALLY GROWN PRODUCE WAS AVAILABLE.

### AREAS MOST ENGAGED WITH ACRES AND ACRES

**3691 3700 2642  
3690 3707 2640  
3705 3708 3709**

REPRESENTING AN AREA OF APPROXIMATELY 50 KM RADIUS

# INSPIRATIONS

**CORRYONG FOOD SWAP** This is where it started to get juicy. Six regular attendees of the food swap discussed community gardens and how we could grow more local food. This group formed the initial Co-op and all are still members.

**JO'S MARKET GARDEN** An amazing commercial urban farm in Melbourne that has social gatherings such as speed dating whilst gardening, music events, weekly farmers markets on site, and corporate workshops. They also participated in fundraising events such as a Bushdance at Melbourne music venue the Spotted Mallard.

**FOOD NEXT DOOR** A community Food system that matches under-utilised farmland with landless farmers to support small-scale regenerative farming, growing diverse crops and engaging people from diverse backgrounds to supply food to local households.

**CARDINIA COMMUNITY FOOD HUB** On a visit to Cardina we discovered their project that supported local growers, had their own farm and connected people around local food and healthy eating.

**CORRYONG CNC** A local social enterprise that creates employment through business creation. This aligned with another reading of a town in Portland where the community had purchased back all its shops and infrastructure to keep the money and jobs local.

**LOCAL GROWERS** Pam Noonan, Dee McDonald, Jacqui Beaumont, Tracey Paul, Lysander Tyrell, Shelley Neale, Emma Maskell, Tad Jones; all incredible green thumbs that inspired parts of the project, gave guidance, donated time to seedlings and knowledge and regularly volunteered.

**DIGBY GOTTS** Digby came into Corryong after the fires. Has a background in horticulture and had previously operated a commercial organic fruit tree farm in the top end of Australia. Digby had also done extensive work in Western Samoa working with local communities to establish fruit orchards and promote healthy eating. His knowledge and experience was invaluable. He was in effect a full time volunteer.

## HOW WE STARTED

**“For weeks we were in thick smoke, breathing was hard, our health was failing, we were all getting sick, we couldn’t access good food and I guess it really opened our eyes to what we needed as a community. The community we had was so broken after the fires. Everyone was so broken.”**

**Pam Noonan - Member**



# ONLINE INFLUENCES

## YOUNG FARMERS CONNECT

Around one year into the project we connected with Young Farmers Connect. They provided connection to networks, experts and mentoring. They had links to people, projects and documents that were directly relevant to many of the areas we were working on. We often had moments of discovery where we went from “We are so original. To its all been done before and we can learn from it...”

## THE MARKET GARDENER

With a mantra of “Feed the People. Change the World” the Market Gardener is a treasure trove of resources, and support to help you successfully start and operate your own small-scale ecological farm, and make the world a better place. It also has a vibrant global community of people working on small scale intensive farms.

# FIRST STEPS

Our first step was to start market gardens on land we could access. We wanted to produce food we could give away to support locals in the event that Covid19 caused another food shortage. We experienced a food shortage for weeks following the bush fires and could see it happening again. Where we live is literally at the end of the line, we ran out of toilet paper. Was food next?

To tackle this problem we needed some start up funds for tools, soil and land hire. Almost all grants or funding sources require you to have a formal organisational structure. At this point you need to consider your vision and how you will operate. For us key elements were an inclusive membership model, a strong focus on community involvement and opportunities for connection, ensuring that any returns or profits went back into the community, and opportunities for volunteering and education.

# CHOOSING A STRUCTURE

We considered two structures. Firstly, we looked at a social enterprise structure, and had discussions with the Australian Centre of Rural Entrepreneurship in Beechworth to consider whether it was appropriate for Acres and Acres. Social enterprises generally look to maximize both the social and environmental impact they have together with maximizing profits for owners. As we saw ourselves more like a not-for-profit rather than a corporate type business we decided it was not right for us.

We were introduced to the CO-OP structure by Ben Dunn at Food Next Door in Mildura. Their model seemed to align with what we wanted to do so we called Sam Byrne from Co-op Federation who became an incredible mentor and guide for setup and governance. This was an imperative part to our model, values and principles as an organisation. This provided an inclusive membership based structure and would ensure that any profits generated would be used for the benefit of the community. The actual structure is called a non-distributing co-operative. It means that profits are not distributed to members, but used to further drive our objectives. It is very similar to a not-for-profit but has a membership structure.

# GOVERNANCE

**Acres and Acres is a Non- Distributing CO-OP meaning no profits go to members.**

It runs the same way as any other business venture. It sells its produce, runs events and workshops with an attendance fee, and plans to generate revenue for hiring equipment and tools as well as compost.

It also can employ people, lease premises or land, and purchase assets and equipment and has bills to pay. Initially everything was done by volunteers but as we have grown we employ people to manage the venture; doing the farming work as well as administration, mowing, office, and accountancy. There is a blend of both volunteers and employees. We have had many fantastic volunteers who have worked tirelessly across all facets of Acres and Acres but volunteer burnout is real and as things scale you need to think about having employees to ensure things run professionally. Eventually profits will be reinvested into the CO-OP for future tool purchases, community engagement, and general community projects that align with our values and goals.

We adopted a simple CO-OP formation with three Directors on a Board that meets monthly and Members that meet formally once per year at our AGM. In our first year the members group met once a month. We also do regular dinners, workshops, farm tours, and training sessions throughout the year. Members participate in electing the board and the board is on a rotational basis - only one director position comes up for change every year. Each Director has a minimum three year term.

The Board approves financial transactions over \$1000, participates in organisational decisions, discusses employment, purchases, lease agreements, and membership applications. It's pretty fast paced, but highly rewarding if you are part of it. We also have a board advisors and mentors with deep skills in governance and business management. In particular, Sam Byrne from the CO-OP Federation and Pete Williams, a Chartered Accountant who was formerly a partner at Deloitte.

We also have an external accountant and a lawyer together with a HR Adviser that assist with issues where we need specialist expertise. For example GST, Leasing or Contractual Agreements, or Employee Agreements.

At the core of the project is people who care and that are passionate about their local community and food system. We don't pretend to know everything and what we lack in skills we make up for in enthusiasm, a passion to learn and determination as well as building networks and relationships with people who are inspired by what we are doing and achieving.

# CREATIVE FLOW

**The landscape is ever changing and WE have experienced Fire, Floods, Plague, and even larger world challenges that affect everything.**

That is why having adaptive and fluid style of growth has allowed us to continue and not be stopped dead in our tracks. This comes with some criticism because it is hard to continuously communicate across a whole community with such a small team driving the project. We do have a very transparent and open approach to communication using our website, social media, formal and informal meetings and workshops, surveys as well as traditional media. We have attracted a lot of coverage from TV, radio, and newspapers as they are intrigued by our model. This helps attract like minded people and allows people to research what we are doing. In saying that the end goal is the same. We have consistently pivoted as opportunities arise or new challenges emerge.

# COMMUNITY



**One of our early concepts was to support communities to start their own farms leveraging our tool library and knowledge.**

For example, land adjacent to a community hall or a school. Our idea was, and still is, to support the start up of 10 community farms throughout the Upper Murray and North East. We had a fair bit of interest, but then Covid19 and the constant changes in regulations meant we couldn't build the momentum to create the farms. Community farms need their own local driving force, land and decision makers. Also how they distribute the food, whether it be free or sold, should be up to them. This is now possible but needs local leadership to be the driving force. Due to the fires, lock downs, and other situations outside our control keen volunteers were worn out. However, by establishing our own farms and building a fantastic tool library we have both the learning and knowledge as well as the equipment to once again pursue community farms when communities are ready to come on board.



# VOLUNTEERS AND PAID STAFF

**Acres and Acres ran almost exclusively on volunteering for the first year.** Then Covid19 hit and due to the legislation and laws a lot of our regular volunteers were not allowed to participate or gather and also vaccine mandates caused issues around availability. We had to quickly pivot to ensure we had people available to work on the project. We were fortunate to receive a grant that covered staff wages around the time vaccine mandates came into force. This has allowed the project to continue to develop. Our model is based on both volunteers and paid workers so we look forward to balancing the two and boosting our volunteer network again now that Covid19 restrictions have eased.

It was heartening to see so much interest in volunteering in our recent survey responses with so many skills on offer and people looking to connect and build friendships in the garden. We plan to build on the volunteer structure over our winter growing hiatus. One key lesson is that the move to the employment model does change the nature of the relationship of the project.

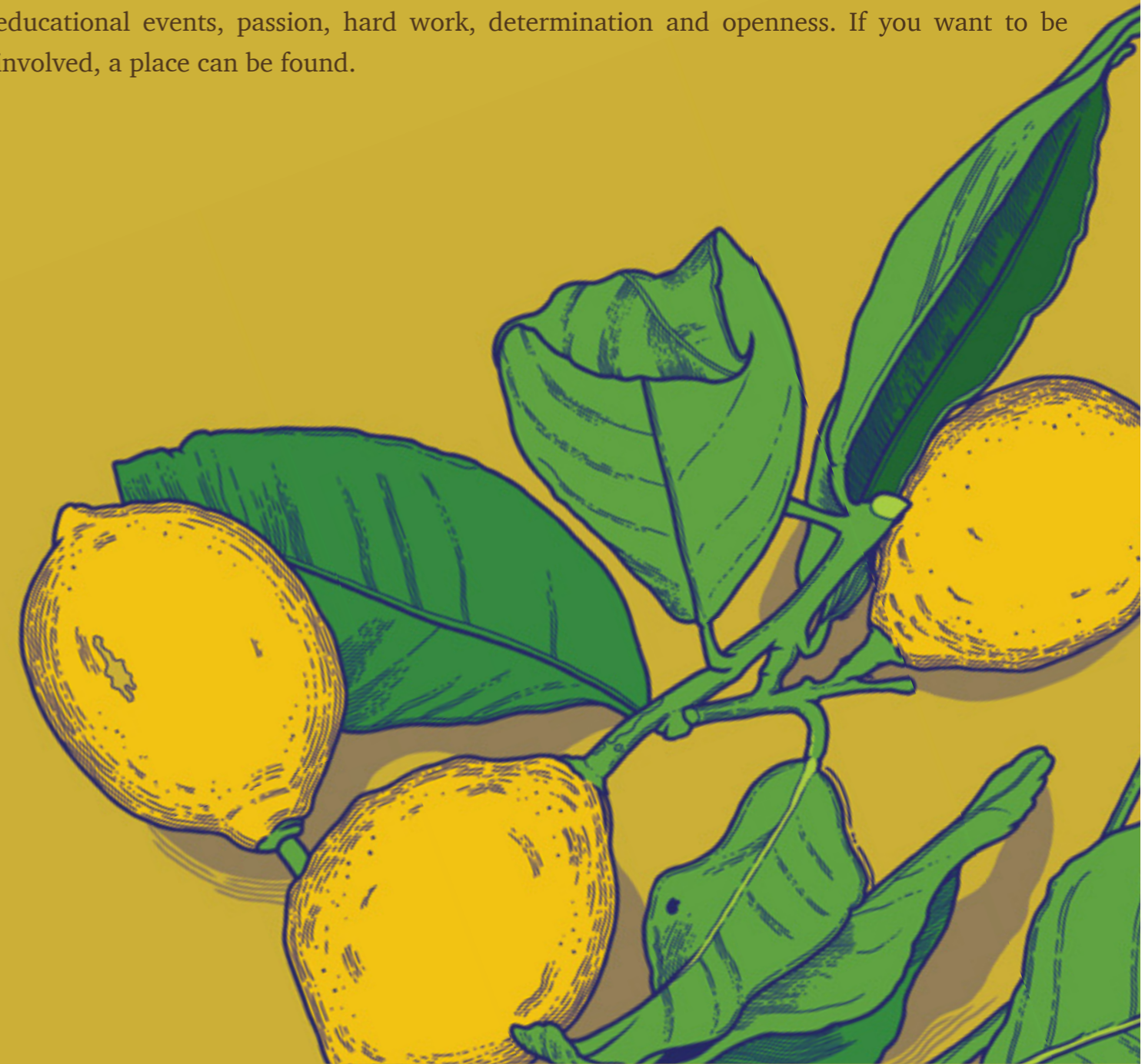
# PUBLIC LAND IN SHORT TIME FRAMES

Our Project grew out of disaster and the need for recovery and resilience. The community had first hand experience of the consequences of food shortages with no access to fresh food. We also knew that fresh food prices will continue to rise and be impacted by climate change and weather patterns. We saw an opportunity for sustainability in the food system however we needed immediate access to land. So members of the CO-OP and community donated land, or gave up parcels of their own land for a small lease rate of \$50 a week. Rather than attempt to build infrastructure on privately owned land we have focused on ensuring almost all of our infrastructure is portable. This includes the tool library, greenhouses, cool rooms and other things. We do have an office which is currently rented for a nominal fee from one of the members. This has made the project possible, but in replicating the project you can't rely only on goodwill for the project to achieve long term sustainability.

# CREATIVITY PROCESS

A creative process has been used throughout the project in things like branding, documenting policies and procedures, designing the tool library, signage, diverse and fun ways to engage with the community as well as what we post on social media. This has really let the project stand out, rise fast and attract plenty of media attention. Through its unique store and concept design it has attracted funding relatively quickly and been celebrated by politicians, locals and foodies alike.

The heart and soul of the organisation is community and its grassroots nature. Only a few hundred dollars have been spent in marketing for printing and it has grown through educational events, passion, hard work, determination and openness. If you want to be involved, a place can be found.



# OUR HEART AND WHERE WANT TO FLOW

## (MISSION AND STRATEGY)

In a nutshell, the heart of Acres and Acres is, building an amazing local food scene that creates connection and opportunities for anyone who wants to participate. We need to be more resilient in so many ways and the project is enabling that outcome. We are much more like a fluid river system, constantly evolving and changing in harmony with the environment and the situations that arise rather than a train running down a set of immovable tracks. Our purpose and heart hasn't changed since we started, but over many drafts, our mission and strategy has evolved into the statement below.

Acres and Acres CO-OP wants to create a network of Market Gardens across the Upper Murray and North East Victoria, to build resilience through the production of fresh produce across the local area. We hope to share knowledge, tools and skills allowing people from all walks of life an opportunity to grow their own business or community income with minimal outlay. Our goal is to use soil regeneration practices and world class innovation to make it financially viable and sustainable for local communities to grow their own food.

When we joined together to start our first garden we didn't have a strategic plan or know where we sat in government policy. At the time this didn't matter, but once we started to seek funding to deliver our mission we wanted to be able to express what we were doing and how we planned to do it in ways that others could understand. While it may sound easy there is a lot of work to do to be able to explain to others what the project is all about. Once it starts to resonate it helps build a broader network of support from people or organisations that are focused on agriculture, food supply community etc.

Once we started to investigate and network we found that Acres and Acres nestled within a broader local food movement. Over the last decade there have been workshops, films, food mapping, farm to plate pilot project, discussions, and strategies developed by groups such as North East CMA, Gateway Health Wodonga, Beechworth Health, Wangaratta Community Food Hub, Wangaratta Community Food for All (see context in Appendices). Much of this work was further compiled and presented in the North East Local Food Strategy 2018 — 2022 Strengthening the local food system in North East Victoria (See Appendices).

Being part of this broader community has gained Acres and Acres mentors, collaborations and more opportunities to learn. By working together, we are creating a more resilient community with social connections, adding to an exciting local food system.



## WHO DOES THE WORK?



Initially all work was undertaken by volunteers with two founding members being paid a small weekly honorarium over the first 6 months funded by a grant. Volunteers in the start up phase met as often as Covid19 allowed, wrote grant applications, started the gardens, marketing and communication, stock seed, crop rotation, grew vegetables, sold vegetables at the farm gate and farmers market.

With funding came project management and paid organisational roles. For example, in Spring 2021 roles expanded to include a lead farmer (4 days/week), operations manager (5 days) and two part-time lead farm hands (3 days each), a book keeper (~1 day/month as on call hourly rate), an accountant, lawyers for templates and agreements, consultants for workshops, agronomists, engineers and local contractors. We are adding an administration person 2 days/week to help with finance and administration and to set up systems so we can work more efficiently.

It goes without saying that starting a community CO-OP requires huge motivation and volunteer input and there is a high risk of leader and volunteer burnout. As we grow our goal is to better support our team with extra roles to take on the significant workload being done in overtime. Most of the funds are for items or workshops, but do not fund job creation and this is a challenge lots of not for profits face. Our goal is to achieve financial sustainability by the end of 2023 and to continue to build Acres and Acres. We would also love to see other communities replicate the model.

# MENTORS

We cannot emphasize enough how critical mentors are to Acres and Acres. We engaged a wide range of mentors and professional support when we started and now as we continue to grow. The professional guidance and support, having a sounding board, the exchange of ideas and experience with a range of mentors has supported our projects and built our capability. Because their role is so important to our CO-OP we delve deeper into mentoring with case studies and interviews.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING, FLOWING AND ADAPTING

A critical part of where we are today was jumping in and creating our first market garden in the heart of Corryong. DOING this opened so many doors for us because it made us;

- Pool our collective knowledge and learn how to do it and work together
- Make mistakes
- Learn which resources we had and which ones we needed
- Find solutions in our research, mentors and each other
- Grow food to share in our community
- Trial methods to share
- Create a beautiful food hub for our community to see

One aspect of this style of operating in the start up phase, communication could be turbulent as we kept moving with change and relied on volunteers. If we tried a way that didn't work, we changed. For example, initially we were going to set up a community market garden on public land, but Covid19 restrictions prevented this from moving forward at that time.

Having regular meetings with Members and the Board kept us grounded in our community goals, but even then it was hard for everyone to keep up! It was a fluid live concept, not a five year professionally planned outsourced document based on forecasts and assumptions.. Researching the kind of organisation you wish to become early on and setting up a structure that gives the community input is key, but allowing your group to adapt and flow is even more important.

# COMMUNICATION

The three parts of communication we wanted to share are;

1. How to reach people in the community?
2. How we continue to engage and represent the community?
3. How we communicate within our organisation?

Starting our garden at The Hub in Corryong and then having food to share at farmers markets and the farm gate was by far the most important communication activity we undertook. So much better than talking about fresh healthy produce is showing it bursting from the earth and having boxes of plentiful colourful vegetables to share at the farm gate and farmers market. The success of this is shown in the survey feedback with most people hearing about us by visiting our garden and word of mouth. Seeing is believing!

Our ongoing engagement with the community aims to continue spreading word about what we offer, sharing learning through workshops, celebrating healthy food at events as well as getting feedback on the directions we take. We've found high engagement in gardens, workshops and events. We have more than 360 enquirers at the moment to join our CO-OP, but have not had the capacity during our growing season to activate this interest. We have a cunning plan for the quieter winter period to sort this out which involves setting up a new membership App.

As well as reaching people with direct face to face communication, we have Members and a public Facebook page, an email list, a website and we talk on the phone A LOT. We plan to add more content to our website, especially to share our blueprint concept for our community food system with links, lessons learned and what didn't work for us.

Meetings, meetings, meetings is the best way to sum up what it is like to start a new organisation! We communicate both within and with outside groups by meeting together. During Covid19 this often occurred online with outside groups, but increasingly now is face to face. It is important to set up a structure that allows for community input on decisions, but also allows day to day workflow.



# CHALLENGES

## COVID F&\$K!NG COVID

Every single decision, every plan has been affected by Covid19. Some events we had to cancel or move six times. Grant funded projects could not be achieved in the original format and had to be re-developed. Communication became nearly impossible because some people only meet face to face, and some are not contactable by social media. Volunteers were not allowed to attend in a volunteer driven project, while markets, and other sales opportunities were cancelled on multiple occasions due to lock downs. We survived by adaptation and determination. For instance after ONE of many of the Farmers market closures we just got all the veggies and went door to door selling them to business. We sold everything in an hour and that is how the community supports each other. This was the beginning of our first veggie box drop.

## BUSHFIRES

Have created huge amounts of pressure and stress on the community with people reacting in ways they normally wouldn't and saying and doing things that they will probably regret in the future. This is seen over and over again in disaster situations. This also has had a huge impact on available volunteers for some organisations and people in the right mindset to be able to work. As well as this it has created rental and home shortages for workers.

## THE STALWARTS

In small country towns there's always a few people that sit in every community group and have the ears

of lots of relatives, social groups and are like the gatekeepers of anything changing. One once said, we like progress, we just don't like change.....Also some say things like, "that project is not for these parts", "we have tried that and it doesn't work here", "you haven't engaged the community" (what they mean is their circle). It's a tough hurdle and you know they have done incredible things in the past but how to get them to pass the baton is another thing. Also there is a lot of politicking that goes on and you quickly grow a thick skin. Don't be scared.

## GRANTS: OPPORTUNITIES AND PITFALLS

Grants can be an amazing opportunity for funding, and the right ones can make the impossible possible. They can also come with unshifting time constraints no matter what natural disaster has arrived or things you can't achieve due to outside circumstances. There can be a lot of paperwork and more work maintaining them and sometimes you may feel that you could have just gone and done it yourself. They are great. But be careful making sure you can deliver, have the time, energy and that they align with your core values.

Another problem is they don't fund positions for realistic project management a lot of the time and rely on huge amounts of volunteering, so if you take it on make sure it's to achieve your goals and align with theirs. A weird discovery is how a grant can also

create community discord. Some local communities don't like grants. In fact they hate them. Any project receiving them can be thrown into the same basket as council / government and so forth. You hear things like it's killing local business and they didn't work for that, or that's my rates and I don't want that. So it may instantly become a conflict point.

Sometimes the money can not turn up on time. Which can throw your whole project out of sync. Be sure to constantly chase them up and stay on top of it. An example of this is one of our major grants was to purchase tools for the season of farming. It came in late so all the tools came late so we missed the first season to use them on the bigger system. Its farming so that's a big deal.

## TOOL PURCHASE

The world is out of whack and our tools came two months after ordering. This is not a normal thing. Also materials, getting contractors, everything has taken longer than it normally would, causing pressure on being able to deliver.

## VOLUNTEERS

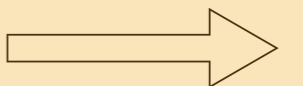
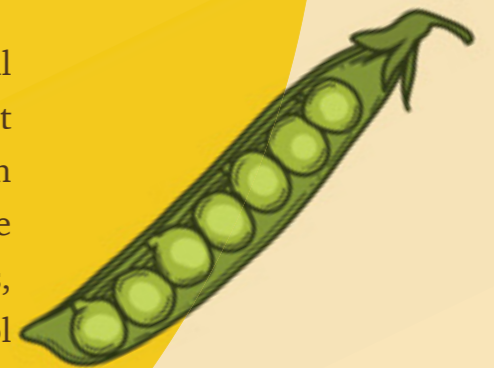
We are incredible. We are the bones of a community. However sometimes volunteering comes with unreliability, and other complications. It's really important to build a culture of understanding limitations, punctuality, organisation and self reliance.



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Acres and Acres engages with the community to attract members, get people excited about the local food system and to educate. We talk to people, A LOT. We talk at farmers markets, at our market garden in the heart of Corryong, visiting community groups and schools. A unique way that we have engaged with the community is through EVENTS.

Acres and Acres events are a mixture of educational and social experiences done in a fun way. For the first year we built them around things we needed to learn and invited the wider community to learn alongside us. Some examples of this are compost workshops, mushroom growing, fruit tree pruning, and tool usage. These workshops were predominately skill based and paid for with grants or ticketed.



# THINGS TO CONSIDER

## TIME OF YEAR

Make sure it coincides with the season for the planting.

## WEATHER

We usually write all weather event and hope for the best :)

## LOCATION

Where is your event being held? What special considerations does it have?

## HOW FAR IN ADVANCE DO YOU NEED TO ORGANISE?

## PUBLIC INSURANCE

Super important, a quick call to your insurance company will help you make sure all is good.

## NEIGHBOURS

Invite them too, but be warned some may reverse onto your garlic at midnight!

## NOT EVERYONE IS GOING TO BE A GUN PLANTER

SO invite WAY MORE PEOPLE than you think you need. Usually about 4 to 1 as a ratio of experienced farmers. Diversity can be a beautiful thing.

## DOES IT CLASH WITH ANY OTHER EVENTS ON THAT DAY?

If so, is yours the better one?

# CONCEPT

To create a concept of an event you need to intertwine what your organisation needs to achieve with what your community or future community will want to achieve. Events are a great way for community engagement to achieve success and can win solid followers for your project if you can provide a good time. On most occasions we try to bring food, music and some form of art into every event because they are the soul foods.

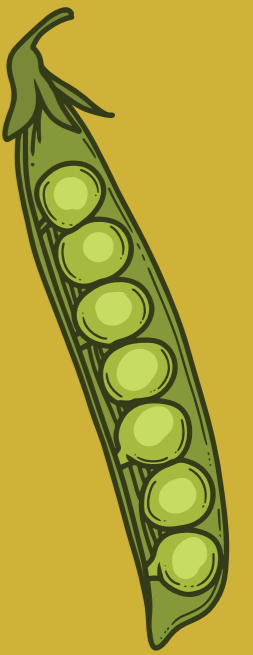
# MARKETING

We start by creating a design containing an image and the necessary information.

**TITLE**  
**DATE**  
**TIME**  
**LOCATION**  
**SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS**  
**QR CODES**  
**ABOUT**

Then upload to Eventbrite or similar ticketing system. This allows us to collect a database for future events. We then upload to Facebook, Instagram and other socials as well as emails to our Member list. The following day we upload to Facebook Groups and pages that align with our event, happenings groups, buy swap sell groups. Sometimes it can be good to stagger this a bit so the response is not overwhelming and Members have a chance to respond.

Depending on ticket sales, we will put up flyers and posters and put them on community notice boards, bakeries, toilet doors, and other places that accept posters. Finally word of mouth. We talk about it and invite people in general conversation to make sure they are invited and welcomed. That's usually enough work for up to 60 people. No money spent on promotions needed (apart from our time).



# BUDGET FOR EVENTS

(MIGHT NOT BE ALL OF THESE IN EVERY EVENT)

**CATERING - IS IT VOLUNTEERING OR PROFESSIONAL?**

**MUSIC (ALWAYS PAY THE TALENT)**

**LOCATION HIRE**

**PERMITS... YOU NEED THEM FOR WIPING YOUR BOTTOM THESE DAYS...**

**SPEAKERS**

**PLANNING**

**MARKETING**

# FEEDBACK

MAKE SURE TO FOLLOW UP AND COLLECT FEEDBACK. DON'T BE OVERBEARING WITH IT. JUST A QUICK FEW QUESTIONS TO LET PEOPLE HAVE A WHINGE OR GIVE YOU A PAT ON THE BACK FOR ALL THE HARD WORK YOU DO.



# PLANTING PARTY

A planting party is like a Tupperware party on steroids and consists of the farmers' friends and growing community coming together for a day or a weekend to do a job that would take a month to do by yourself. Farming used to have many farm hands per farm. Machinery has broken that community connection and it's a pretty solo, sometimes lonely kind of role. These kinds of events bring the fun back into a laborious job.

# MUSIC AND DINNER

Food and music have been entwined since fun began. Our dinners come together with a social educational workshop to create the meal. This consists of 5 to 10 people participating in a not so formal get together preparing something unique out of incredible produce and then having a community dinner afterwards. Great in your little local town halls. We recently hosted one at the newly renovated Thowglahall with folk music from The Mavericks. Sixty people came along and we received fantastic reviews.

# WORKSHOPS

These are dedicated learning experiences with expected outcomes for learning new skills. Cooking, mushroom growing, pruning, permaculture, composting and so forth. It's endless really. You can plan these by a quick poll and finding out what your community wants. Results from our survey showed people were very interested in our ongoing workshops, particularly some of the above. Regional towns are crying out for unique experiences. Every workshop we have hosted has been sold out in days. It is not just locals who will come along as people will travel from nearby capital cities and regions to attend a fun event in the country. Which I guess makes us a tourist attraction... and can also be a funding stream?



## COMMUNICATION

Whats your story?  
 Website  
 Social Media  
 Blog  
 Media  
 Community Newsletters  
 Newsletters  
 Business Connection Pack  
 Point of Delivery Pack  
 Flyers  
 Newsletters  
 Word of mouth Campaigns

Grants  
 Social Media  
 Sustainable Table  
 Seeding Grants  
 Philanthropy  
 Private investment  
 Angel Investment  
 Bank Awards  
 Competitions  
 Community Buy in  
 FRRR

## CHOOSE BUSINESS MODEL

Social Enterprise  
 Coop  
 Business  
 Partnership  
 Company

## FUNDING

## DISTRIBUTION

Farmers Market  
 Cafe / Restaraunts  
 Green Grocer  
 Food COOPS  
 Veggie Bodes  
 Community Groups  
 events

## TOOL LIBRARY

Purchase Package one  
 (general tools)  
 Set up Structure  
 Online Booking store  
 volunteer /worker

Volunteer Forms  
 Onboarding Package  
 Training Schedule  
 Job Description Templates  
 Event template  
 Land Lease Agreement  
 Contractor Agreement  
 Membership Process

## DOCUMENT TEMPLATES

# OUR FIRST YEAR

## ENGAGE CORE REPRESENTATIVE GROUP

Food Swap  
 Community Garden  
 Young Farmers  
 Established farmers  
 Mentors  
 Food Is free Movements  
 Universities

## NETWORKING MENTORS PARTNERS

Accountant  
 Lawyer  
 Agronomists  
 Machine Engineers  
 Grant Writers  
 Bookeeper  
**ADVISORS**  
**BUSINESS PARTNER**

Soil makers  
 Seed suppliers  
 Irrigation specialists  
 Farm Supplies

**COMMUNITY**  
 Community Leaders  
 Community Groups  
 Local Businesses  
 Individuals  
 Volunteers

## AGENCIES

**GOVERNMENT**  
 Council LGA  
 Local Politicians  
 Agricultural officers  
 Agricultural Minister

Gateway Health  
 Agriculture  
 Wellbeing  
 NDIS  
 Centerlink  
 Resillence

## TRIAL SYSTEM

## SOFTWARE

Tend  
 Miro  
 Connect up  
 Shopify  
 Open Food networks  
 Facebook  
 Instagram  
 Meta business Suite  
 NP Google Suite  
 Accounting Software

Find Land  
 Soil Test  
 Amend Soil  
 Plant Crop  
 Manage Crop  
 Havest Crop  
 Distirbute  
 Rinse And Repeat



# COMMUNITY FARM SYSTEM



# WHAT IS A FOOD SYSTEM AND SUPPLY CHAIN

A food system includes all processes and infrastructure involved in feeding a population: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consumption, and disposal of food and food-related items. It also includes the inputs needed and outputs generated at each of these steps. A food system operates within, and is influenced by, social, political, economic and environmental contexts.

A supply chain is the sequence of activities that move food from the producer to the consumer, including processing, packaging, distribution, wholesalers and retailers. A short food supply chain is where a producer sells food directly to consumers, or with a minimum of intermediaries.

# ACRES AND ACRES COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEM

Over the last two years the ideas that guide our actions and projects solidified into our vision for our community food system. This is a closed loop system and circular economy model. The concept of Acres and Acres is that every module can be developed independently, but can grow to come together as a holistic approach to food and community. We adopted a holistic approach because it was so costly to source the individual things. eg. compost, seedlings, food.

Below we outline the five modules within our Community Food System; Waste, Production, Processing, Distribution and Community. We go into more detail on these in separate sections.

# WASTE

## Turning Waste from a problem into a solution

When we started, we had poor soil and the only way to improve it quickly was by importing LARGE amounts of organic matter, compost, vermicast and worm tea, from outside our area at high cost and we couldn't control the quality we received. Around the same time, a trip to the local refuge sparked an outrage about the amount of food waste that is not separated from the general waste. It was also about this time, China pulled the plug on taking our recycling and waste products from Australia and waste started to become more of a mainstream focal point.

We needed long term solutions for soil creation and nutrient creation that didn't cost the earth and were close to our food system. Our thoughts focussed on what waste was available locally and how to break it down.

Some of the methods we looked at were a Goterra black fly composter, a rocket composter, S.P.I.C.E Composting, Vermicast, and so forth. After hundreds of hours of research and a few disasters like purchasing high quality, high cost - worm casting with plastic in it, compost arriving still hot and weird smelling, our search for a solution deepened!!

We found a grant from Sustainability Victoria that aligned with our message and needs for community engagement, waste reduction, a super high quality output we could potentially sell and use ourselves. Here we enter the world of WORM FARMING (See our whole section on worm farming). We partnered up with Lee from Island Biologicals and Ed who lives in the next valley and has deep expertise - the rest is history. Below we talk about other waste options we investigated, as some of these may suit your needs better.

# PRODUCTION

Food production was central to our system...it is the crux of why we got started. Initially the founding members wanted to grow a community market garden so there would be food available to share in a crisis. We started a Co-op market garden with work from founding members and volunteers. We needed to learn, practice, trial tools and approaches and do it ourselves in our local area so that we could support members to start farming food. We brought in mentors to run workshops and used software called (TEND) to set up crop rotations and run the farms. We also used a training system called The Market Gardener. Our big idea is to create 10 up to 1 acre sized market gardens throughout the Upper Murray and the North East over a 5 year period. The trials of running 3 different farms simultaneously has shown the strengths, inefficiencies, and improvements needed to be made for a sustainable model. We are still testing, still making mistakes and have lots of learning to do. If you're not doing those things you're not growing.

# PROCESSING

## Community kitchen

One aspect of processing is the conversion of raw food ingredients into other saleable products such as ferments, jams, meals, etc. We wanted to include food processing within our closed loop so that our community could access these products locally. It also gives the community another work and business opportunity by removing the start up costs with the setup of a certified community kitchen. Our goal is to have this kitchen functioning by 2023.

## Nursery

Our community nursery is another processing facility that was needed to create our closed loop system. We have established a greenhouse for growing seedlings to use in our gardens. We also plan to sell seedlings and plants direct to the community by September 2022

## Marketing and Administration

Other aspects of processing that we are building resources to support are marketing and office administration facilities. These will be accessible to members. Currently it is located in the heart of Corryong.

# DISTRIBUTION

The idea of distribution in our closed loop Community Food System is that it is local and regional within the north east. Our goal is a short supply chain that is scale appropriate and that increases availability and accessibility for our community. At the moment we sell our vegetables in a weekly box, at farmers markets and at our farm gate.

# COMMUNITY

—To Acres and Acres, community is everything. Our model champions volunteer engagement for social connectivity. We are focused on fair prices for farmers and healthy well priced food for people from all walks of life. Acres and Acres runs workshops within the local school, has relationships with local food businesses and attends farmers markets. We are soon to make the Tool Library available to our local community. By 2023 we will also have a Community Nursery and Commercial Kitchen. Finally, our Worm Farm is based around community engagement and taking food waste from the community to turn into compost. We also host events such as planting parties, educational workshops, longtable dinners, cheap night, cooking workshops, tool usage, soil making, marketing and sales



# DISTRIBUTION BREAKDOWN



There are many ways of selling produce and something that needs to be considered is shelf life, food miles, people power and market saturation. As we support local farmers to grow produce we are mindful of the need to create or build a local distribution network.

## FARMERS MARKETS

A farmers market is a gathering of local producers and usually also crafters, who sell what they make. It's a great way to build relationships with other farmers, create a database of loyal followers and make a bit of money. You will need to go to multiple markets to be able to continually sell your produce if it is your only source of distribution. Farmers markets are really really good for new customers and databases.

Challenges: people selling the same product, weather dependent on success, unpredictable turn out, other event clashes, some are not regular enough to create a sustainable income, Setup / packdown is time consuming.

Positives: Fun, can have great sales, building a database.(make sure to create a database) and people get to choose what they want to purchase.

## FARM GATE

Farm gates are a small stall setup selling directly from the farm with well priced produce and direct connection to the farmer.

Challenges: relying on customers to come to you, time to build a following, keeping it fresh for a longer period of time if in a road stall, can be hard to pull over depending on location, needs cash most of the time or a money transaction system.

Positive: direct farmer to customer engagement, an experience, no food miles, you know where your food comes from.

## RESTAURANTS / CAFES / BAKERIES

Building relationships with these guys can be tricky, but super rewarding. Educating about seasonal purchasing and weather dependent shortage can be challenging for set menus. They want high quality, low price, and reliability. This can be hard in your first few years. So make sure when you engage you're educating them on where you are at. In small regional towns most will want stock standard all year round, however, over time, as you build relationships you can start to create menus specifically for them. Totally worth doing.

Challenges: engagement, produce reliability, wholesale pricing, short of time.

Positives: Continuous regular purchasing, great turn over, advertising your product.

## GREEN GROCERS

A tough market to crack for some reason as they sometimes don't see the benefit in purchasing from local growers and instead choose reliability over seasonality, fresh, chemical free available food. By choosing wholesale markets their food has traveled long journeys and touched many hands. This situation has been the case in my area and many others I have spoken with. They see local growers selling directly as competition rather than the opportunity of collaboration.

## ACRES AND ACRES VEGGIE BOXES

We started creating veggie boxes, one because we saw lots of other growers doing it and because it appeared like a great way to spread the bounty and have less waste. Selling veggie boxes also met our goal of being part of a local food system. We are starting to engage with other local farms that have produce to sell so we can share this distribution network.

An Acres and Acres veggie box is a box of produce grown on our farms and sometimes with extra items produced by our members like seasonal fruit or eggs. It currently is a set box at \$35 containing about \$50 worth of produce if you purchased from a supermarket and \$80 if you purchased from an organic high street produce shop. It contains a selection of seasonal fruits and vegetables - about 10 varieties. It is available once each week and we harvest most items the same day as delivery. Feedback from our recent survey shows that 60% of respondents would like to choose their vegetables and are interested in buying other products like nuts, dairy and meat.

## LOCAL DELIVERY

In 2022 we started offering local delivery of our veggie boxes to Corryong, Walwa, Tintalra and as far away as Tallangatta and Bethanga. We charge a \$10 delivery fee. In our survey around half of the 46 respondents said yes delivery made a difference to them buying from us. We run this once each week.

## P.O.D.

A P.O.D. is a Point of Distribution and refers to a location that receives 10 or more veggie boxes each week as a collection point for buyers. Bethanga store is a P.O.D. for our veggie boxes. If we can attract more P.O.D.s in our delivery network it will boost customers while reducing the delivery times. It can give customers more time for pickups depending on hours for the P.O.D..

We have 5 new P.O.D.s wanting to start in the next growing season- 5 x 10 boxes each = 50 boxes x \$45 = \$2250 without add ons or larger box purchases and you can start to see how this model can work. We pay a small amount to our POD partners and it is great for them as it brings people into their shops and extends their product range.

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

In the future we would like to start subscriptions for our vegetables. This is a novel way to sell produce, where buyers invest ahead of time. This means we can grow the right amount of fruit and vegetables with minimal to zero waste.

## SELLING PLATFORM

Some options for selling platforms include the following;

- Open Food networks
- Shopify
- TEND
- Square
- Facebook
- Instagram

And many more



# VOLUNTEERING



Volunteering is a vital part of Acres and Acres. It was part of how we started with dedicated individuals devoting their time. It is a crucial way that we engage with the community and volunteers are how we can continue to grow and thrive. Volunteers bring diverse skills and experience to a range of roles as well as being hands on in the garden. Involving volunteers in our co-op enriches our team and it's fun!

## HOW WE FIND VOLUNTEERS

We started by finding people with common interests from our food swap group then put it out to gardening groups and eventually on social media news, web site, and word of mouth and we went to a lot of meetings to show what we were doing. It's a small town so we know lots of people already. We've always had a high interest from volunteers. Covid challenged this, but still had huge interest.

## WHAT DO VOLUNTEERS WANT?

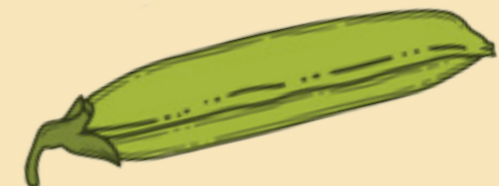
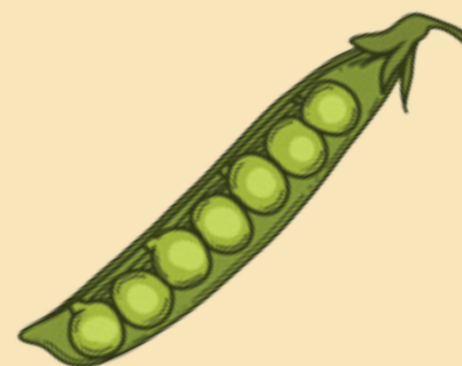
Each volunteer is unique in what they are seeking and what they bring to the co-op, but some common wants are social connection, fun, to support the community, healthy activity and growing fresh veggies. A lot of stories and things are worked through when your hands are in the soil, next to each other and people can work at their own level.

People were attracted to volunteering with us for so many reasons. Some of our volunteers want to work in the garden, while others contribute legal skills, mentoring and coaching. Many volunteers join us to expand their friendship circle with like minded folk or to gain skills in market gardening. For some it is a way to gain training that will lead to paid employment opportunities.

We use the entry survey to capture what each volunteer is seeking and as we grow our volunteer program we aim to be able to meet these varied interests.

## LEGALITIES

Make sure you understand any legal requirements and put in place what is required this could Workcover, Public liability and Insurance to cover your land and people. If you can find someone with a contact who is a lawyer you may be able to get some free advice.





## **ACCESSIBILITY**

Do your best to make it all accessible so that people from all walks of life can still participate. In a community garden, beds are often raised and aisles aren't wide enough to allow wheelchairs and mobility scooters. We are looking to build some parts at The Hub garden with raised garden beds and the green house will have widths and tables at proper heights for accessibility.

## **WHAT JOBS VOLUNTEERS HAVE DONE**

Volunteering covers a wide variety of jobs including but not limited to, planting, driving, compost making, gardening, weeding, harvesting, greenhouse work, earthmoving, administration, mowing, office, networking, converse with agency and government, in kind support, grant writing, mentoring and governance. It is all about matching skill sets to appropriate tasks and creating opportunities for them to explore interests in why they are involved.

## **WHERE DO THEY COME FROM**

At a guess about 100 different people have contributed as volunteers from all around Australia. They have traveled from Melbourne, Sydney and Bonnie Doon. Sometimes holiday makers give a day or two, but the majority are loyal locals. At our recent garlic festival 23 volunteers came to share the fun and planting.

## **HOW WE WORK WITH VOLUNTEERS**

Working with volunteers takes time and systems to manage. Firstly you need to set up a secure database for volunteer details. We designed an online form with personal details and questions about their interests, what they want to get from it, skills and experience. We also have an online booking system ready to go to streamline the experience. This means we can set the locations and opportunities well in advance and people can slot in where it suits them. It also spreads the volunteering over the week instead of having everyone at the same time. We also have a paper form as backup.

The volunteering form needs to make sure obligations are explained and signed off. Four points we recommend including on your form are:-

**THIS IS NOT A PAID ROLE**  
**WHAT'S EXPECTED**  
**PRE-EXISTING MEDICAL PROBLEMS**  
**SAFETY EQUIPMENT NEEDED.**

We give volunteers a basic level of training to operate on the farms. It takes skill and time to manage volunteers (just like any staff). We have found during our busy growing season that sometimes existing staff were so busy there was no capacity to start up new volunteers. We would like to have

a part-time person with experience managing volunteer programs. We want to offer the best possible experience for volunteers. They are the lifeblood of a community.

## **CHALLENGES**

### **RELIABILITY**

### **TAKING RESPONSIBILITY**

### **MISCOMMUNICATION**

### **AMOUNT OF ORGANISATION REQUIRED**



# TOOL LIBRARY

## WHAT IS A TOOL LIBRARY?

As the name suggests, it is a collection of tools available to be borrowed by members. The types of tools and terms for borrowing tools is decided by each community. Examples are starting to grow globally of not only tool libraries, but also see “library of things” on Wikipedia. We can learn from each other, so we don’t all need to reinvent the wheel. In Australia there are tool libraries in Brisbane, Adelaide and the Northern Rivers. Tool libraries also popped up in Cobargo and Flowerdale after their bushfires.

## HOW WE GOT STARTED MAKING OUR TOOL LIBRARY

After the 2019 bushfires many families lost their tools as well as their homes. At this time food and fuel shortages highlighted our communities dependence on food from other regions. It reinforced our beliefs about the benefits of growing more food locally. To do this we needed tools, and so the idea for the community tool library was born.

The tool library started as a way to support local gardens to step up production for the potential crisis of Covid. As we all watched toilet paper run out on the shelves, we asked what if fresh produce is next? We already had a 3 week shortage of fresh produce after the bushfires. And then a report on the ABC said that food prices could rise upto 500% in the next few years. Two years later we can see this is already happening in lots of ways and has only been heightened by disasters like, flood, fire, plague, overseas conflict and relations with China.

The tool library started with a Market Garden training course package we researched and purchased from Activevista, a company that supports small scale growers. The idea was to be able to share the tools between the community, and anyone that became a member, for a rental fee to cover maintenance and management costs. As the idea of the project grew and we started aligning with new farms so did the ideas of the tool library. It started to form into three zonings: tools you need every day, tools you need weekly and tools you need sometimes that save huge amounts of human hours. These seem to coincide with distance to travel. eg. Tractor is not needed all the time on a small farm and is harder to move, But can save 100’s of hours so it is worth an hour's travel.



# OUR FUTURE GOALS

- Open the tool library to members and members for hire
- Create training opportunities for tools to encourage more use
- Have a peer to peer option as part of the tool library
- Makes some items accessible for hire via contactless hiring

## FUNDING AND MEETINGS

Funding for the tool library came from grants, donations of tools and time. Hundreds of hours were spent researching, designing and meeting before our tool library took shape.

## A SNAPSHOT OF OUR TOOLS

The best way to understand our tool library is to think about how often you might use a particular tool for gardening/farming. We do have tools that you might use daily like shovels, but the innovation in our tool library is in the bigger tools that gardeners and farmers might use at establishment, or once a year. Some of the tools we have in our library are;

- a tractor with a bucket, slasher and tilling/bed-former
- large car trailer with ramps to move tractor, mulch bales, etc.
- a tip truck that can be driven on a car license (moving mulch soil).
- electric tractor - Handee

When we started we had no address or land lease so we built a tool library trailer that was mobile. It could hold all the smaller tools and be used for different purposes of the project like setting up to sell vegetables at farmers markets and farm gate. Features of the trailer we designed to hold our tools are;

- Gantry to lift heavy equipment so everyone can load and unload.
- Fold up side for transporting seedlings on shelves or to be used at farmers markets to hold produce.
- An area for walking tractor, single plow, mulcher, rotary hoe and power harrow.
- A section for hand tools, power tools, storage buckets and amendments.
- Paper Pot planter and other planting tools.
- Two fold down benches.
- Battery storage for charging tools.



# COMMUNITY WORM FARM

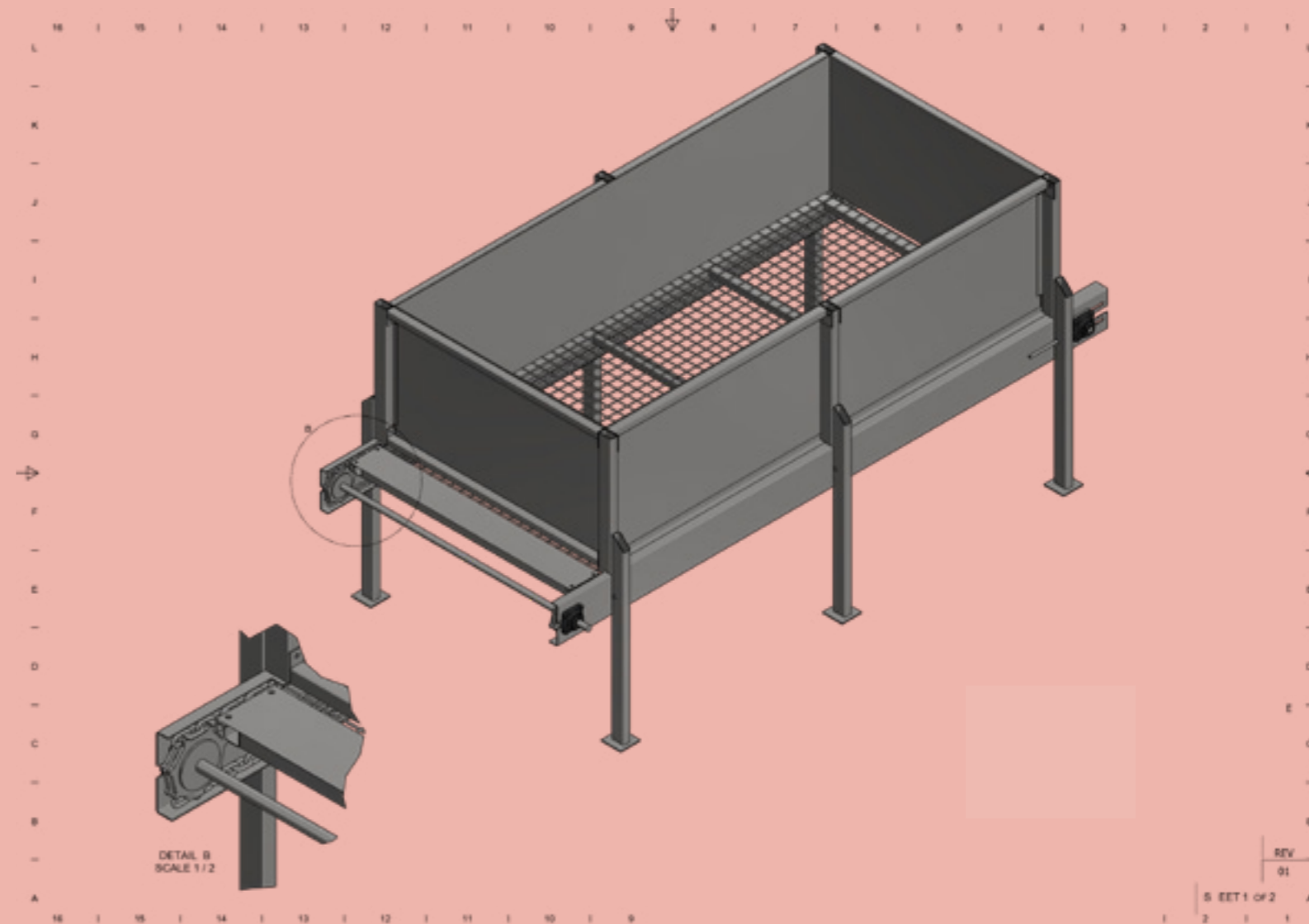
## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY WORM FARM?

You guessed right, it is a larger scale worm farm worked by thousands of worms that convert food scraps from multiple households and businesses into compost and worm tea. Our facility is commercial scale so that we could process more community waste and then use and sell worm tea and castings. It involves the local community and takes their food waste. And this educates the community about how much waste is being taken from landfill by their actions.

## HOW WE GOT STARTED MAKING OUR COMMUNITY WORM FARM

In 2020 we went to buy worm castings for our market garden and found the cost high and the product was full of plastic. At the same we took a visit to the local tip and observed large quantities of food waste mixing with plastic waste. Why not pull food out of that? We searched for the best way to dispose of food waste. How do we get directly into houses to remove their food scraps and make soil? We needed a fun, interactive, educational and cheap option with beneficial outcomes. We came up with our Worm Ranch as it was the best option for the scale of our town and for community engagement. It was slower than the other two options that we researched (See Making Soil), but had higher quality outputs. Our marketing campaign is called Let's Talk Dirt-ee.

**OUR GOALS FOR THE ACRES AND ACRES COMMUNITY WORM FARM ARE TO REMOVE 10,000 LITRES OF FOOD SCRAPS FROM LANDFILL PER YEAR AND CREATE COMPOST IN THE WORM FARM.**



# WORM RANCH

We are also making equipment! When looking at the problem we asked how do we make a bin that is low effort, accessible to all and a cost effective design that can be flat packed for shipping in the future. We found a few opportunities that nearly suited this but none ticked the box. There were some great innovations, but we think we have taken it to the next level.

Our worm ranch is currently being manufactured. It is a 1.2m x 2.4m flow through bin systems that can harvest the casting by either a battery powered drill or a small motor with a single button touch. The first version will be made of steel with perspex wall inserts and is expandable depending on size needed. At full functioning it can process about 50kgs of food waste a day.

An automated watering system will be added and we are also looking at insulation solutions to keep the worms super happy.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND MARKETING

We are developing the following aspects for community engagement:

- Community Engagement app that works with QR codes and shows how much waste they are taking from landfill as an individual and as a community / project. Give facts about worms and compost
- Marketing campaign called - Let's Talk Dirt-ee
- Reminder to participants by SMS or app to put out bins for collection
- Special rewards card system that gets participants to engage within the Acres and Acres product range.
- Aligned with school- 2 high school students want to do the same process at their school for their VCAL project.

We hope this engagement creates a closed loop from purchase of food to compost and back into the store with rewards for community members. We want to build a loyal following and engagement with all aspects of the food system.

We also see opportunities to engage with accommodation and hospitality businesses as well as local hospitals.

**50 COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS**  
**1 X ACRES AND ACRES STAFF MEMBER**  
**VOLUNTEER 1 DAY A WEEK**



## JOBS INVOLVED

**BINS SWAP** - On standard Council waste pickup days, once each week, community members will put both their worm farm bins out on the street, one with food scraps and one empty straw bin. Acres and Acres members will collect bins and swap with fresh ones, one containing straw and the other empty to be filled with scraps and a mixture of the straw provided.

## STACK COLLECTED BINS

**ADD APPROPRIATE BIN AMOUNT TO COMMERCIAL WORM FARM**

**WASH OUT BINS IMMEDIATELY**

**HANG BINS ON DRYING RACK**

**CHECK BREEDING WORMS**

## EQUIPMENT NEEDED

Acres and Acres commercial worm bin (see our awesome design!)

100 x 20 ltr buckets

Carbon rich medium

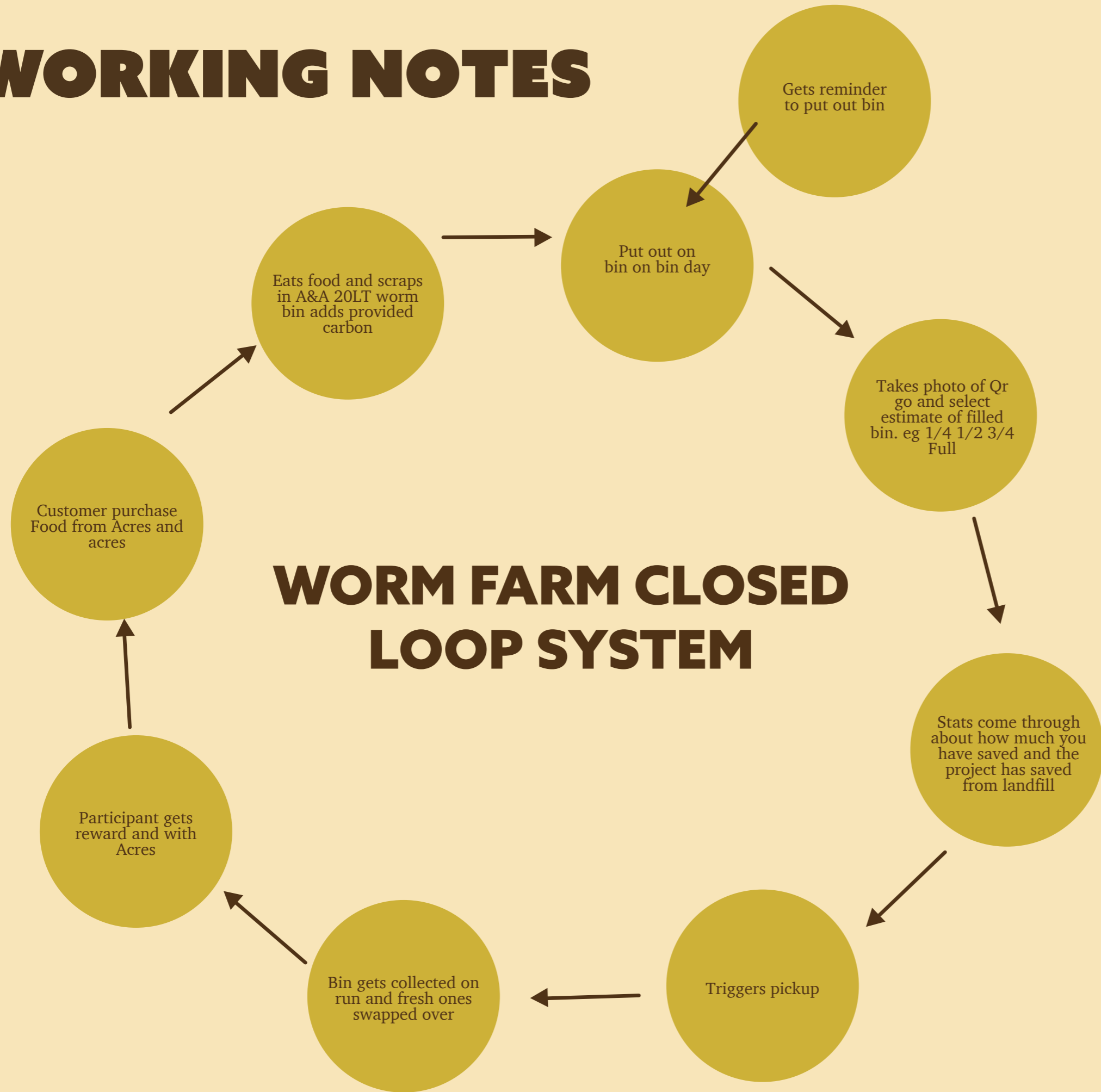
Worms

## CALCULATION ESTIMATIONS

**20 LTRS X 50 MEMBERS = 1000LTRS PER WEEK**

We are also aligning with our local school - with two students doing the same thing in their school as a Year 11 and 12 project. We hope our design will be adopted by other schools and hospitals. Every worm farm system duplicates the amount of waste. For example, four worm farms would remove 4000L of food waste each week, that is 200,000L each year

# WORKING NOTES



# LAND



With skyrocketing price of farming land, the initial investment for agricultural equipment, and the average farmer being 59 In Victoria it's no wonder there's so much current concern about how we not only sustain our food production while improving the quality. It's nearly impossible to purchase agricultural land unless it is accessible through being passed down by a previous generation.

What if you are a first gen-farmer or come from a culturally diverse background and have come to Australia with loads of farming skills but no access to land? Acres and Acres hopes to explore and support opportunities for young farmers in the future. Opening new farming opportunities for newcomers is critical if we are to have a diverse and thriving ecosystem.

Acres and Acres CO-OP currently does not own land so we have explored other options to find places we can grow food. The options we have explored, or would like to, are: leased, crown land, local government land and partnerships on privately owned land. Land for new farms needs to be urgently looked at by governments and communities to increase local decentralised food production. There are many people keen to grow food, but access to land is often an impossible hurdle and shouldn't be dependent on your last name or how much money you have. Farming supports EVERYONE and it can be more vibrant and exceptional if it's driven by equality and diversity.

## DIFFERENT LAND OPTIONS

### LEASED LAND

We established two market gardens on privately owned land. With a small lease of \$30 to \$50 rent a week. This was a quick and easy way to start. These 2 gardens are maintained and run by the CO-OP and all profits go back into the CO-OP. It was a relatively simple process to do.

This model can be a fast option and we found we can easily access leased land in the

Upper Murray; there is no shortage of private land available to lease. There are massive farms everywhere and it's not hard to get a ¼ to 1 acre of land. We have had about 10 offers of this type of land and have started a third market garden on leased land at Tinpot Hotel, Tintalra.

It does have its challenges such as the cost of inputs to start a market garden versus the length of the lease. For a short term lease, the costs of improving soil quality and setting up access to water may not be worthwhile. It takes a lot to regenerate the soil for good growing. So if you want to test to see if it's your kind of thing this could be a great way to dip your toes in the water.

### MEMBERS LAND

Most recently, in April 2022 we started a market garden on a new members farm at Pine Mountain. We hosted a weekend workshop, and together with 23 volunteers, we planted ½ acre of garlic. This was such a fun way to start a new market garden, cooking, camping and sharing music. It was a buzz to chat as we cracked garlic, planted and mulched. Everyone worked so hard, but with the group effort it was amazing. As new Members farms come on board we are exploring profit sharing agreements, payment for staff time and equipment from the Co-op and also bartering options.

Members farms are likely to be a longer term commitment and so the investment in building soil, water infrastructure and fencing is worthwhile. However, each Member is unique and it is important to work through how they want to grow, prepare the soil for planting, which equipment they need to use, the relative time investments of the member and the Co-op, cost and revenue sharing agreements, and other things that may arise depending on the unique situation of each garden. There are so many options for how to learn together and grow together; each new farm creates new learning and knowledge. This is how a local food system can thrive.

### BORROWED 'FREE' LAND

Free land can be a problem because if there isn't an agreement there is less stability and it can be canceled any time. Free land has all the challenges of leased land with set up efforts potentially outweighing the duration of the arrangement. We found this to be the worst option so just highlighting it here as a warning. Always have a contract or at the very least an agreement.

## **CROWN LAND**

There are huge amounts of Crown Land which are a potential resource, but these are often managed by neighboring farmers and are not accessible for new farmers. The potential opportunities are amazing with vast amounts of Crown land administered by DWELP and North East Water. It is potentially the best opportunity for immigrants and 1st gen farmers. Many countries around the world have farm land as a community trust. Some benefits of this are, land management responsibility reduces for the government, best practice agreements can be made on the land and managed, and people who want to farm and cannot afford to buy are able to grow food.

The challenge is, it's a very hard process, borderline impossible, unless you already own the block next door.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT LAND**

Like Crown land, access to local government and community land is very hard. We recommend starting with a leased or member arrangement when you are getting off the ground. It is a big process to meet with the community, government and work through the paperwork and agreements. It is an option we might pursue in the future as we see it as a great way for community halls, schools or sporting clubs to generate income. You need a forward thinking local government and a willing community group to make it work.

Community leaders need to be receptive and it can be hard to present new projects to them. We found it hard to get past the gatekeepers of long established community groups to even have the opportunity to put the idea forward. It can be a real challenge to launch new ideas in traditional established communities without the help of outside support. It would be fair and equitable if community land for growing food was available in every community. Ideas like land for nature trusts are emerging and growing food aligns with governments that strive to be innovative, sustainable and excellent.

## **HOW TO GET ACCESS TO LAND**

Look around your local area for a few pieces of land that suits your growing needs. This could be a friend, neighbour, community owned land, schools, or local government. On a small scale farm most things can be improved and adapted to, but make sure you have great water opportunities and uncontaminated soil. Put a shoutout on social media. As

you talk to more people, more options will emerge and you will be in a position to choose one that is the least difficult to get going.

You will find more opportunities for short term farming than you could imagine. Once you have found your new plot do a lease- these are easily accessible from your local real estate agent or a template from the internet. Make sure to let the person know they will be eating for free ;)

An open communication with the owner of the land will allow for longevity of the project. Make sure to discuss infrastructure, tool usage, access to the land, noise, water and anything else that might affect them. Regular meetings or email are a good idea as well.

It's good to let them know that land can be returned back to how it was if they want at the end of the lease and that your style of farming will only add to the quality of the soil. A lease with a long option, but able to break with short notice is what you want. Also remember it takes time to put your first crop in and get the soil right. All these things can be negotiated for your starting dates. Let them know that it takes a few months to establish before you will be able to actually sell anything. Most people want to support farmers, especially if you can share a bounty. It's a great symbiotic relationship.

- LAND CHECKLIST:**
- WATER**
- LOCAL GOVERNMENT**
- PERMITS REQUIRED**
- NEIGHBORS**
- INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS**
- ZONING**
- SOIL QUALITY**
- RAINFALL**
- WEATHER**
- SEASONAL CONDITIONS**





# HOW TO START A FARM

## ABOUT

One of our Co-op's goals was to support the community to establish 10 x 1 acre market gardens by 2025.

We were seeking buy-in from the locals, but we needed to show what could be done and so we started with a veggie market garden about ¼ acre in the heart of Corryong. We then took the learnings from our first garden and added more learning as we set up two x 1 acre farms at Tintaldra and on the edge of Corryong. And now we are partnering with members to start their own farms.

Our approach is not an exact method or formula and has endless possible adaptation depending on what you want to grow, space available and so forth. What we are attempting to do is show you how we went about it and where we got information from. Don't be scared, you can only fail, which happens all the time in the garden so best to get used to it! We needed to learn from our first gardens to develop our approach before we could apply it with our members.

## LEARN

There are so many resources and how to on YouTube. Some of the ones we learnt from are; The Market Gardener, Curtis Stone, Richard Perkins and Charles Dowding. As you go down the rabbit hole you will discover more and more incredible resources to create rich soil, bioferments, understanding your plants and ways to work within your community.

Better yet, get involved, volunteer with your local community gardens, go to food swaps and offer a hand at market gardens in your area. The one thing they won't tell you is to go away. There are some amazing growers out there who are happy to share their pearls of wisdom.



## LAND

There are so many ways to access land. You don't need to own it though owning it does increase the longevity and makes it more secure. Our first ¼ acre market garden, The Hub, was established on land owned by a founding member. Similarly the next 1 acre garden, Crazy Acres, was set up on land owned by a founding member while the Tintaldra Tinpot Garden land is owned by the local pub. In our land section we go over forming lease agreements, etc that may be needed to farm on land not owned by a co-op.

## COSTS

Our costs with starting a 1 acre farm were; land, creating healthy soil, access to tools, seeds, weeding or weed management, labour time and water infrastructure. Some ways to minimise these are; create your own soil, swap seeds, have access to tool and equipment libraries or share tools, and trade veggies to access volunteer time.

## SOIL PREPARATION APPROACHES

How long it takes for preparation depends on how much soil you have, what you're growing, your local council, water, irrigation requirements, quality of soil and the speed at which you want to produce. Your speed can depend on whether your garden is dependent on profit, food security or resilience.

The two methods explained here to prepare soil for a market garden are what we used to get started.

# NO TILL / NO DIG

**Positives:** Keeps soil structure intact, quick, weed free, saves A LOT of time on weeding and maintenance. Low cost on equipment required.

**Negatives:** Costly, large amount of soil and mulch required to begin if you don't make your own, huge amount of input. Approx 15 wheelbarrows of soil per 25m x .75m row then times that by how big many rows are going to be in your garden.

No till suits small scale community home gardens. So If you have money to spend on mulch, soil and or you need to set up fast, (food security/ seasonal deadline). If you have lots of friends with wheelbarrows and no access to a tool library containing walking tractors or tractors this is the one for you.

We did it for the 9 rows (25m x .75m) in our first season on the ¼ acre farm, at 15 Harris Street. It was very expensive.

## LOW TILL

**Positives:** Quick setup, cheaper than No Till if you have access to tools or a tool library, only compost required or soil amendments, less inputs required.

**Negatives:** Costly Investment in machinery, more skills required in setup, damaged soil structure. If planning far enough ahead you can combine cover cropping with low till to add a green manure crop after tilling and before you sow seeds for vegetables.

# HOW TO NO TILL AND LOW TILL

## SIZE OF GARDEN

standard rows are 75cm and 45cm walkways for intensive growing if you have the space go wider with the walkways, it will make them more accessible and possibly all accessible to people and easier for wheel barrows, carts and wheelchairs. The cost will go up slightly for plumbing and you will only get 3 rows in a standard poly tunnel instead of four so these are things to consider when planning out your space. Intensive gardening requires resting beds in between certain crops so you will need to take this into consideration. If you had plenty of space and money the ideal would be to have multiple fields set up to rotate seasonally, resting with cover

crops and crop rotations. It makes it much easier for planning but costs a lot more for setup. This could be something that your team works towards. One of Acres and Acres gardens is set at 20 x 30m beds. It is this size because it maximises the garden within the available land. 30m is as long as we would go before breaking into a new field.

## COVER GROUND WITH CARDBOARD (FOR NO TILL)

Make sure it is overlapping and don't be stingy. This is used to smother the weeds to create a weed free garden. Remember, you will have to measure the ground and find a source. Bigger the card board the better and cardboard with less tape and stickers makes the job easier. Some great places are bike shops, electrical goods suppliers, supermarkets. Supermarket boxes are the most work as they are small and have lots of tape. All these options are free. For the fastest, most costly and efficient results buy massive 50m rolls of cardboard, roll them out and weigh down each end.

## SOIL

You either have to make it or buy it in. Firstly work out how much you need by multiplying the length of your row by the width by the height of your beds that will give you the soil formula per bed. Then times that by how many rows you're going to start with. eg. 30M L x .75 W x .1 H = 2.25m<sup>3</sup> per row x 13 rows = 30m<sup>3</sup>. That is 1 truck with a dog trailer. Depending on your location and quality of soil / compost that will cost you between \$900 and \$3000 per 13 rows. Quality is of utmost importance. Ask your local market gardeners- they will readily share terrible stories as well as good ones. There are lots of amazing online groups around Australia that will share their contacts. See resource list.

## SOIL TEST

This is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT- DON'T SKIP IT! It's super easy and with the right test you will know if there are any bad guys in your soil, the mineral balance, what amendments you will need and what you can grow in that particular soil. A pH test is also very important and can be done easily and regularly. To do a soil test just contact one of the links in the Appendix and they will tell you what you need to do and how to do it. You will then need an agronomist to decipher the results. Try to find one that is not linked to certain products so you get independent feedback and make sure to let them know you are chemical free. They will talk you through lots of options.

## MULCH

You can then fill the walk paths with mulch. You could use wood chip or sawdust. Mulching your walk paths will keep them weed free, create a new source of nutrients and you're basically soil making for the future ;) Mushrooms and mycelium love it as well. So it's like living compost. Putting cardboard under your mulch in walkways can also be a good idea

## IRRIGATION

The options are endless and depend on your crop, cost input, and the level of labour you can put in. We started with hand watering because we were not set up properly and then we moved to irrigation from a local hardware. Finally we installed an automated watering system controlled by bluetooth. This is very effective, saved a significant amount of labour at minimal extra cost at set up time at one of our members farms that was a little more established than us. Some options are hardline, drip tape, overhead, sumo sprinklers, bluetooth timers. It depends on your water supply, location to water supply and how big your garden is. All three of our gardens have a similar setup now, but they have different parts depending on if water comes from town water, dam, or river. Things you will need to think about are pumps, electricity, budget and people availability. We highly recommend thinking about the optimal irrigation system and installing it before you put a crop in. Contact your local agstore and they usually have a plumber onboard that can plan it out and even install it for you. Plumbing was the toughest part to get started and is worth outsourcing at least for the first time. No water, no crop.

## WHAT TO GROW

Firstly you need to find out what your community is going to eat and buy from you, Some ways of doing this are: walking into your local grocery store and seeing what is on their shelves, go to farmers market and see what they are selling, do a survey and ask people what they want (especially the ones that are going to be involved in the garden). Also look at your travel miles, what your soil can grow and your growing location and time of year. You could start off with the top 10 and then diversify into some specialties depending on what you love and what meets your style of growing. If you are doing this alone or within a community farm, people will have different skills and personalities that might suit different crops.

*Example- We personally love growing garlic. It is right for our climate, needs lots of attention at certain times of the year but not all year and has a long shelf life. This suits our area's location, huge market potential as only 20 percent of garlic in Australia is grown here and EVERY import from overseas is chemically treated against disease. It's also a great crop to create celebrations and workshops and I love community gatherings and getting friends together. Plus it is possible to make a great profit and is so important to food.*

## SEEDLINGS / SEEDS

Where you get your seedlings or seeds is next, you could purchase large trays of seedlings from your local nursery and it's possible to preorder trays. The cost does add up, but a great option for at least your first year. Growing from seeds is very much worth it but you will need to set up a potting shed, nursery and have temperature control / watering systems which can be costly depending on scale. We have a hotroom which we quickly built on the side of our building and a grow tunnel potting shed that is nearly finished. You can just do it on a bench. As you go through your setup journey, efficiency and flow makes everything more enjoyable and quicker. Having your own set up also saves the cost of seedlings and wages. A continuous lesson is the better your setup the happier everyone will be... I wish we had had the time to get this going before starting.

## PLANTING

So there are hundreds of options and it's absolutely dependent on what you are growing. Something that has vastly sped up our process are Paper Pot Planters -these little machines can plant over a 100 seedlings in minutes. Jang Seeders can speed up the process as well. These items are great for a tool library as they are not used every day and have huge time and labour.saving outcome.



# WILD HORSE GARLIC



On April 22-24, Acres and Acres hosted a garlic planting workshop at Pine Mountain, overlooking the Upper Murray River near Walwa. Twenty-three people took up the offer of great fresh food, music, free camping with views of the mountains and river and a chance to socialise, as we cracked and planted garlic. Waking to the sun rising over Pine Mountain, Australia's biggest monolith, sharing a coffee and pancakes, listening to amazing musicians sing as they strummed guitars and watching our children play was all part of the weekend garlic workshop.

It was a wonderful weekend and at the end of the 3 days we had planted more than 10,000 cloves of garlic from two varieties, Tasmanian purple or turbins and Spanish Rojas in 13 x 50m rows. We made new friends and finished the weekend energised and looking forward to our next food adventure.

## SOIL PREPARATION

Months ahead of planting we collected soil samples from the proposed garlic plot and sent these to Schweppes in Lismore. Ideally we may have added depleted minerals or compost to the soil in advance, but the natural flooding disaster interfered with the lab processing our samples. We chose to go ahead without adding to the soil until we get the soil results. We did test the pH. The site is elevated above the river floodplain and surface soils are a medium grey colour with some sand in the texture, falling to clays below. The land has carried agisted cattle for a decade and past managers added superphosphate and sowed rye and clover grasses. Since Kim and Ben bought the farm in April 2021, they rested the pasture until Spring 2021 and then agisted cattle to help manage weeds and stimulate germination of summer grasses. The pasture was rested again from January to April 2022 apart from light grazing by a small flock of wiltipol sheep.

We planned to grow a cover crop ahead of planting garlic, but did not have time to fit it in this year. We are sowing cover crops in our next plots now, ready for spring crops and next year's garlic.



The week prior to the weekend we prepared the ½ acre plot using our low till tool behind the tractor to lightly till the soil and break up the vegetation. On Friday morning we lightly tilled the soil again after rains compacted the top and used the newly created bed former to create raised beds. On Saturday morning a flat rake was dragged over the beds to flatten the planting surface. We then rolled a planting grid impression over the soil, marking out the spacing (15 x 20 cm) for planting gloves. This gave 4 lines only each planting bed row. After this in some rows we used a wooden planting dibbler with 4 dibblers in a line to make impressions for the garlic.

## HOW WE PLANTED OUR GARLIC

Our approach to planting garlic drew on research from The Garlic Book, a garlic workshop attended by a member and experience of the team growing garlic as well as notes shared with us by Don from El Dorado Garlic and Chillies where we bought our four varieties of biodynamic garlic. The evening before planting we cracked garlic around the fire, listening to music and chatting. On our first evening we were all recovering a bit from the rush to get ready for the weekend after busy weeks and in the darkness we did not separate the cloves into large and small. Also many of the turbins were already shooting and we decided to separate into shot and unshot cloves. We planted these into shot and unshot sections to see if it makes a difference. The experienced punters bet that it wouldn't and almost 2 weeks later we suspect they are right!

After cracking the garlic we placed the cloves in water with either seasol or worm wee and soaked them for no more than 12 hours. The time limit was to limit triggering them to shoot before they were planted.

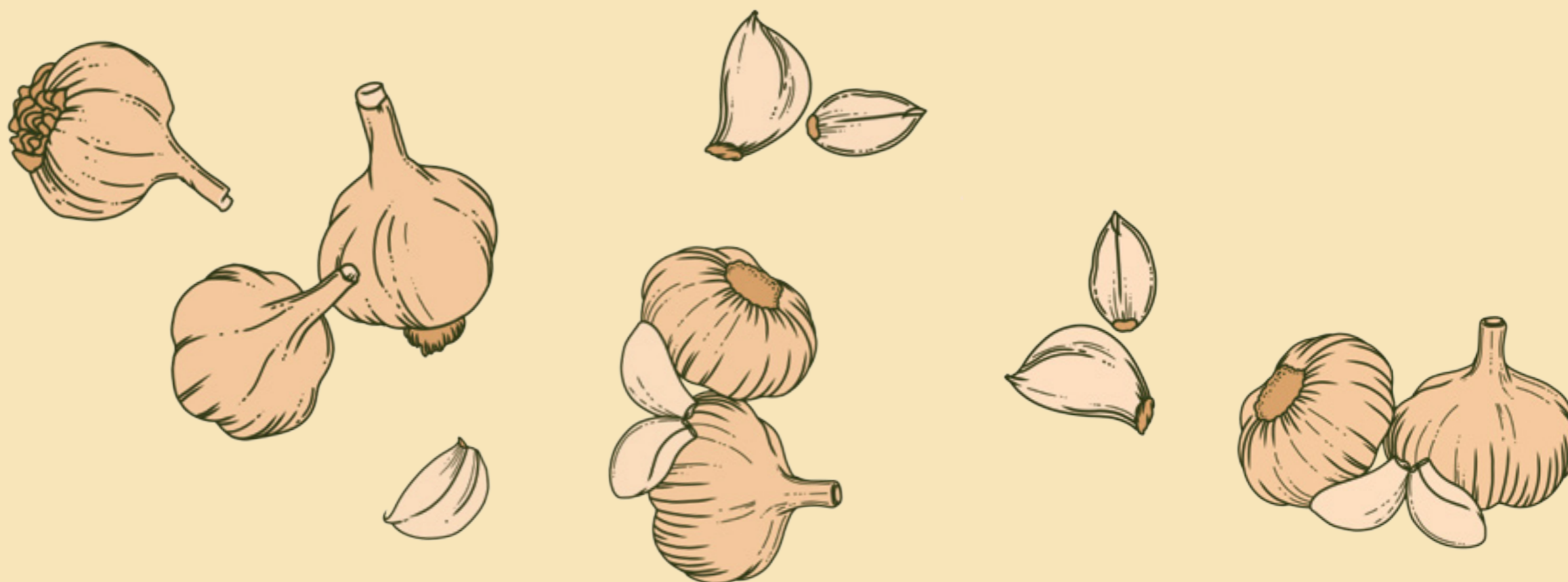
Garlic was planted with the shoot end facing upward about and then covered with soil (about 1-2 cm). We then watered the planting beds, giving them a good soaking. We do not have irrigation water set up to our farming area yet and so we set up an IBC cube on a trailer with a 50 m fire hose and fire pump and used this for watering. We did debate putting in drip watering lines, but time, money and reassurances from other local garlic growers that they leave it up to nature with some hand watering if needed helped us make the decision to leave it this year.

Lastly we spread mulch over the planting beds to a thickness of about 10-15 cm, using clover hay on most rows and lentil straw on the first few rows. Don had advised us that he puts his mulch, often a wheaten straw with no seed heads, through a mulcher twice to FLOOF it up so that it creates a light, non-clumped texture for the garlic to shoot through. We did try mulching our lentil straw, but it didn't work like Don's. So in the end we spread it and spent lots of time FLOOFING in situ!

We are super excited to see all the shooting garlic in the rows. Like a horse race, the turbins are off to a breaking start, with some Roja's seen lurking beneath the mulch. Melbourne Market is making a late start and the silverskins are yet to be planted. We are hoping that come harvest time we can reward all our wonderful volunteers with a garlic wreath for Christmas.

## ONGOING MANAGEMENT

We are placing wood chip mulch in the minimum 45 cm gap between each row. Another option is to make the gaps the width of your lawnmower and keep these mown. This was our original plan, but we opted to mulch and create soil as we managed weeds. So far the garlic is racing away and the weeds are slower. We are seeing a few clover shoots from the clover mulch. It's been a dryish autumn so not sure what weeds we will face through winter and spring! It is important to keep the garlic beds weeded and we anticipate a fair workload over the coming 9 months.



# MAKING SOIL



Below we share details on four other options for making compost that we researched before leaping into worm farming. We have also trialled S.P.I.C.E composting and have plans to do more of this.

## GOTERRA

This is an incredible machine that crosses black soldier flies and machinery to break down tons of food waste daily. This could be an option for the future but needs management, Council engagement, and a space to hold food waste. Potentially it could remove all food waste from landfill in the Upper Murray. With this system, Goterra owns the machine, saving users \$100K, but then they harvest the dried maggots and Fras (maggot castings) to sell.

**Positives:** Fast / Full solution providing a commodity at the other end. Minimal maintenance required by Acres and Acres

**Negatives:** Trying to work with the local government takes time. We were not going to receive the end output for improvement of soil.

## ROCKET COMPOSTER

Can process a HUGE (50-650 L/day) amount of waste with solar and a source for power in a very short period of time- 24 hours. It is suited to suburbs and small towns.

**Positive:** Quick Waste reduction

**Negatives:** Need to work with it on dedicated land for waste. Need staff to manage. Must be continuously fed.

## WINDROW COMPOSTING

We were introduced to the idea of windrow composting and one of our team members had experience in doing this. It would allow for high quality material to be made with local input and a tool that could possibly be shared with our members in the future.

**Positives:** huge amounts of material created. Quickly turned farm waste into a usable product and possibly sellable as well.

**Negatives:** Machine is costly, can't find one that suits our tractor's horsepower or enough flat land to make it on. The machine is not easily portable.

## COMPOST S.P.I.C.E

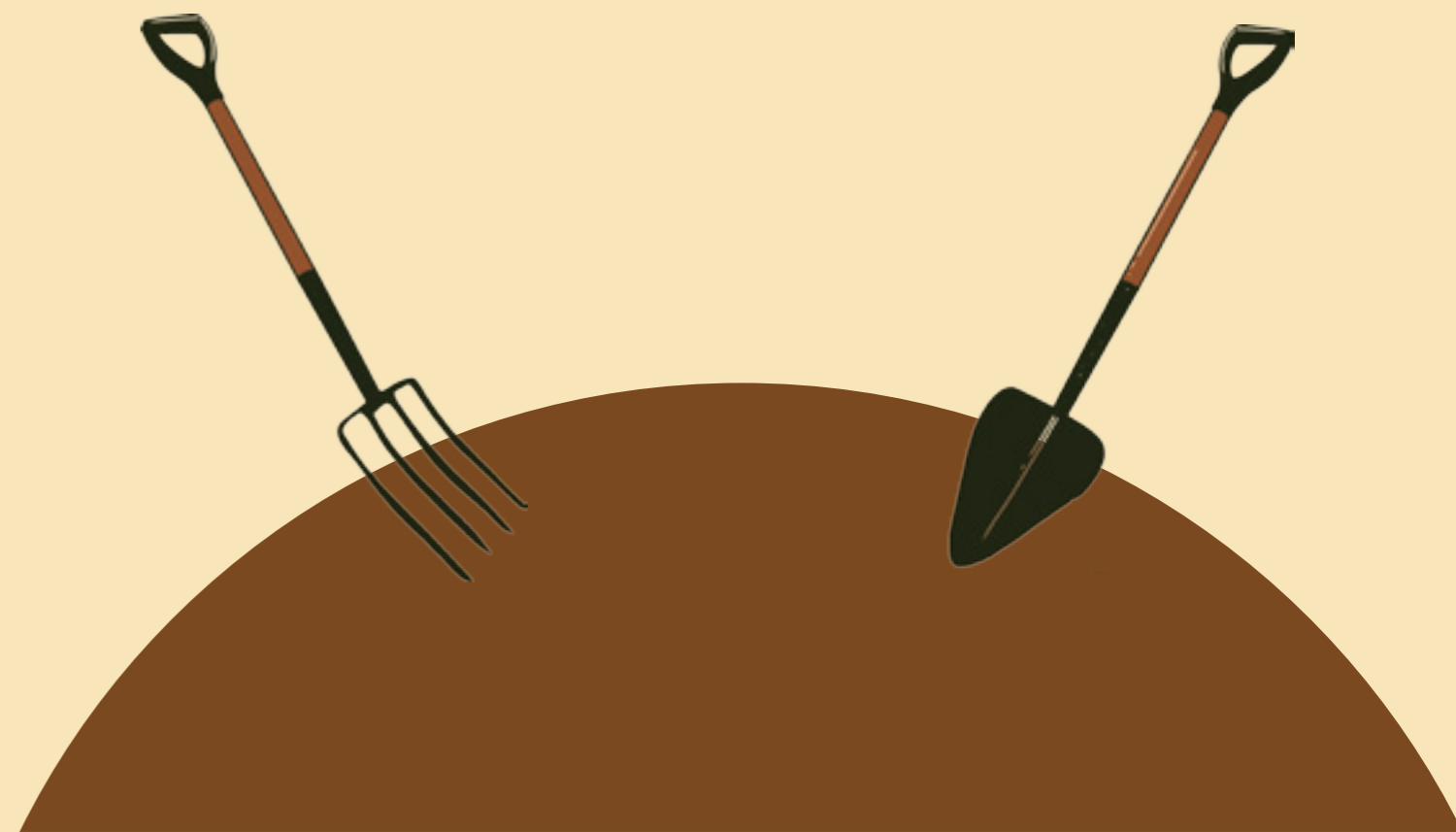
The SPICE method was introduced to us by Gerry Gillespe and we have had workshops trialing the method. The method has been used by large scale farmers, Councils, and compost makers all over the world. This is our chosen method for the future for the below reasons. Go to our Appendix to learn how to do this method as well.

**Positives:** Can be made by hand or with a tractor. It is no turn compost for easy maintenance and can use a LARGE range of local inputs. It is fairly fast, 12 Weeks, Uses minimal water compared to WIndrow, is based on creating beneficial soil microorganisms for plant development, and is pretty easy. Uses off the shelf products.

**Negatives:** Takes 12 weeks, learning curve.

## WORM FARM

we have a separate section dedicated to our Community Worm Farm.





# FUNDING

## HOW TO ATTRACT FUNDING

Firstly, you have to decide; what are your goals? What is unique to your situation? What are you trying to achieve? Who does it benefit? How are you going to go about it? You've got to find your story.

After you identify your problem and your story, find funding bodies that align with your structure. Use any connections you have and call everyone. No matter what source of funding, agency, crowdfunding or whatever you must create a live happening story that builds excitement.

We created a simple document of our vision and called it a project summary.

We made phone calls aligning with funding bodies and agencies. Our project aligned with health, food sustainability, low income, agriculture plus bushfire recovery and resilience - these are six different topics we aligned with. This natural alignment made it possible to get funding. It's about connecting things together. If you can't find local support from local government (often time poor) go a little wider, keep developing and shifting your concept till it hits the mark. There will be plenty of roadblocks, just take a step to the side, do a little pivot, look at a way to use it to your advantage and move on, reflect on the move to make sure the destination is still in sight.

Agencies want to connect with you and help you achieve your goals that align with their programs. They have incredible people who know how to activate things. You can find groups like this who will write grants for you, know how to do it and can work on a shoestring budget. Gateway Health has played this role as well as Bushfire Recovery Victoria and Into Our Hands. Sometimes they have helped write grants. They all know each other and once you are talking to them they all start telling your story for you and networking for you in natural conversation. It's like creating a wave! They've got things they've got to do - if you align with them, they will support you.

It's critical to build relationships with people administering the grants. We call the grant minder and talk to them about our story and grant. This helps them understand and see your passion. It's hard to get across in applications, so having a meeting or talking is good. Always attend any grant presentations and make sure they clearly know what you are trying to accomplish.

As we started applying for grants, we gathered 30 community support letters for the project in general. In the early stages the project does fluctuate, so it helps to have a few letters that are really targeted to that specific grant. Good ways to get community letters - try a wide audience - who will benefit - an individual who eats, a grower who will benefit, a local member like Helen Haines, both political parties is a good idea, Council, local community groups, schools (if links there), make it a broad way of engaging. There are plenty of templates for these support letters.

If you want to quickly turn around support letters to meet a tight deadline and want them to process it fast then you can write a template so they understand what you are going for. Then they write a paragraph for themselves about what their understanding is and what it means to them. Then they sign it. It should be on their letterhead.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF FUNDING

There are two styles of agencies to connect with for funding. Firstly, agencies like Gateway Health are *support bodies* for projects in their area of interest.

The second style of agencies are *funding bodies*, including Bushfire Victoria, Sustainable Victoria and Vic health. One of their key functions is to invest in good ideas and the grants cover many different focal areas. To be successful you need to hone in on which community needs you are meeting and look for a grant that aligns with your project. Grants come with a whole heap of research for you to align with. So if you can cross your idea with the research there is potential for a great outcome. Something to keep in mind with grants is while they bring an awesome boost to the community, they have inflexible deadlines and often inflexible budgets.

Another type of funding is *philanthropy*. It can be corporate like banks and finance foundations, or awards. It has a different feel, as they fund innovation a lot. They all have different means and reasons. There are now quite a few Grant Finders and some for specific topics. Pete Williams, one of our members developed one for Bushfires very early on which was extremely helpful.

We've found philanthropic funding to be a great source of funding, with less rules and timelines not driven so much by financial budgets so there is less pressure. They tend to seek the best outcomes rather than just pleasing the financial rules of an organisation. They like to invest in your cause and it's purely about your thing. They don't want anything out of it apart from supporting something great happening in a community. Examples include; June Canavan Foundation, Border Trust and Into Our Hands. We also found corporate ones like the Commonwealth Bank and also the AMP Foundation very easy to deal with.

group which has what is called a DGR1 status. This means they are a registered Donor Gift Recipient with the Tax Office, and many foundations and philanthropic groups have rules that mean they can only give to groups with that status. It is really good to align with a DGR1 group early on, in our case Into Our Hands and the Corryong CNC have DGR1 status so if we need them we can work together to access philanthropic funds.

Crowd funding is a lot of work. It has reward systems embedded in it and you need to make sure the rewards don't outweigh what you will gain. A great feature of crowd funding is you get to engage with the following and find new people to engage with your project. So it can be a good form of social or community engagement.

Community fundraisers can be a great way to raise funds and bring a community together. These could be events like a bushdance, music, card games. Make it fun. There were so many ways that people raised money through the bushfires - it was amazing to see.

## WHAT WORKED FOR US

Our mentors were key to our success with grants. Pete Williams started the philanthropy arm at Deloitte. Retired now. He has donated his skill set in finance, technology and governance. When we hit walls and couldn't go on, Pete usually has a three sentence solution that gets us through. He has helped with every single grant and award- either tidying or rewriting. He makes it understandable and puts agency language around it.

Agencies and funding partners will start to approach you to meet their deliverables. You don't have to accept them. It's exciting. But make sure they meet your values, and drive. We always give them consideration to see if they can expand the project in the future direction.

There are heaps of skilled grant writers who actually enjoy this part of projects - align with them, bake them cakes, they are worth 10 x their weight in gold. If you can win them with cakes you can hire them and it's worth it. Find ones that have received grants in your area.

Relationships are crucial and make everything so much easier. Align with people, groups, agencies, focus groups, and key stakeholders and communities that have similar values, direction and goals, There is no place for ego or misinformation, deal with it quickly and respectfully.

## SEQUENCE TO DEVELOPING A PROJECT

- Identify a problem you are trying to do, but can't do - its a problem
- Is there a solution within 100km
- How are others doing it?
- Can it be done better?
- Draw, create a concept
- Look for a grant that is roughly about that (health, well-being, farming, bushfire)
- What our idea is and what grant is about
- Aligning our solution for a problem with all the research done by agencies for a grant
- Don't change your idea too far away from what you want just to get a grant.

We always think about how to design projects so they can be duplicated and shared with others.

## BABY STEPS

It can be good practice to try for smaller chunks of funding first like \$10K ones. After having a few little ones, confidence will rise. This really depends on what members have done previously - if you can deliver something bigger earlier, go for it!

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Before diving headlong into applying for a grant make sure you understand the eligibility criteria. If you are not sure, contact the grant provider. For example if you need to have a DGR1 status they may be able to connect you with a group. Other grants may have criteria such as having been in existence for a certain period of time or restrictions about the locality. There is nothing worse than investing a lot of time to be ruled out on eligibility criteria.

## ADMINISTERING FUNDING

Acquittals for funding can be a lot of work. They are timely so you've got to be on it and keep track of all spendings. It is definitely worth getting a bookkeeper. Agencies want to know how the money was spent.

You also need to take images of the project happening, write up what you did and what didn't work as learnings are as important as successes.



# CHALLENGES

- Most grants tend not to fund salaries- some do and some don't. This can be difficult as you end up with a grant with a huge workload and possibly only volunteers to complete it.
- Don't be put off. Not everyone is in support of grant funding. Some can have a perception that your grant comes from their rates money - they think they have ownership in your project for that reason. Just keep on communicating that the grant is based on a community outcome and the money is not for personal gain. You can't please everyone.
- Most funding bodies want recognition for the investment into your project. This is totally understandable, but sometimes comes with challenges in your community of Tall Poppy syndrome. Some people struggle to see how funding in an organisation can benefit all. If the funding is targeted in small regional areas it can become competitive and just like football everyone starts choosing a team.
- As bushfire funding was competitive there were groups competing for the same grants spreading incorrect information.
- ANOTHER problem we found was when local representative groups acted as gateways wanting to decide who could apply for funding under certain grant schemes. This can stop innovation and diversity in a town.
- There can be a generational loss of people stepping up. The baby boomers who hold positions have done a great job but to keep thriving small towns need to allow new young leaders to emerge and support them.



REFLECTIONS FROM A NUMBER OF THESE SUPPORTERS HAVE BEEN CAPTURED HERE AND ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES

# MENTORS

Mentorship plays a critical role in the growth and development of food systems projects. Through professional guidance and support, serving as a sounding board, or building connections in the food movement, the exchange of ideas and experience with a range of mentors can fast track projects and build capability.

Acres and Acres CO-OP engaged a wide range of mentors and professional support throughout the projects implementation and development

PETER WILLIAMS // Deloitte



If you have got someone with amazing passion and the capacity to network, dont stand in front of them and block them, get out in front of them and clear the pathway

JOEL ORCHARD // Young Farmers Connect



There is a wealth of information already in the public domain that is available but having to source through it to find the most relevant and useful ideas is time-consuming

BERNIE KENNEDY // Murrumbidgee Basin Produce



Its easy to get lost in the detail of the work that you are doing - sometimes its good to just have someone to call for a chat

SAM BYRNE // Coop federation



There is a lot of potential in this multi-stakeholder organisation to really engage the community and the people who support it - it will be exciting to see where it goes

MEGAN HUNT // Gateway Health



I really hope to see the model expand and be replicated and turn into a regional project

MATT CHARLES-JONES // Totally Renewable Yackandandah



Just create something that is positive and meaningful and don't bother trying to bring everyone around



# MENTORSHIP CASE STUDIES



## PETER WILLIAMS - DELOITTES

Peter has a deep experience of bush fire recovery: having co-led the recovery of the Flowerdale community in Victoria after the Black Saturday event in 2009. He was able to share his insight into the experience of disaster recovery which included both his personal involvement and professional expertise in accounting, web development, entrepreneurship, innovation, finance and technology.

In the early phases of the project, communication was often required daily to resolve issues of funding, people management, prioritisation and to act as a sounding board to refine the vision and project strategy. He also offered leadership support, project development, financial forecasting and support at board meetings with the development of the Acres and Acres governance.

Peter's reflections are that "the best mentorship arrangements are unstructured", that it is important that there is no self-interest and that it is key that there is independence. His approach was not to offer direction but a reflective voice and provide a supportive space to question and explore ideas.

"Being available is essential especially given the nature of emergency management." The process of mentorship often required a deep-dive intensive using zoom, phone conversation, face to face meetings, attendance at key events, online collaborative technology and document sharing.

"It is extraordinary how far Acres and Acres has come and how much of the original mission has been achieved, Key elements such as regenerating soil, accessing land, making compost, and developing project assets are all core aspects that are now up and going and well advanced." In general, there has been successful delivery of outcomes, a huge learning curve and the creation of many opportunities in such a short time frame.

"I met Josh in January of 2020 - he had just lost his home and within the smoking remains he was already talking about a project of food reliance: At this point, I recognised Josh as someone with an unwavering vision and if you have got someone with amazing passion and the capacity to network, don't stand in front of them and block them, get out in front of them and clear the pathway."

"Even though the compounding issues of Covid19 have required the need to reassess expectations and deliverables, Acres and Acres has demonstrated itself as a real platform of purpose. With more people coming on board and with the successful acquisition of funding this has meant the project has been able to demonstrate great capacity."

## JOEL ORCHARD - YOUNG FARMERS CONNECT

Joel has been working in support of small scale farmers and small scale farming systems for the past 5-6 years with expertise in creating collaborative food system programs and peer support platforms. He has created strong and dynamic networks throughout the local food economy, organic and small scale farming sectors and has experience extending to supply chains, farm equipment, training programs and service providers.

As a small scale farmer himself he has managed market gardens, speciality crops and a direct distribution model which were all valuable contexts from which to offer Acres and Acres a wide range of directly applicable support.

Joel provided Josh with links to information, expertise, suppliers and other projects for inspiration to reduce the critical time that is needed for the background research into all of the important aspects of setting up a farming and local food system. Through the Young Farmers Connect network and other ancillary support forums such as the Australian Market Gardening Success Group he was able to introduce Josh to a wide range of experts, other farmers for support and ideas, tool and seed suppliers, soil experts and other program support forums.

Through the Young Farmers Connect Network, he was also able to provide contacts and connections to professional services, guidance on policy and introductions to other regional food systems models. He reflects that "there is a wealth of information already in the public domain that is available but having to source through it to find the most relevant and useful ideas is time-consuming. I've spent a lot of time doing literature reviews and desktop research so was able to point Josh in the right direction without him needing to do the research himself."

Joel and Josh formed an informal and casual mentorship relationship and was available to help whenever Joel was needed, offering that "a quick phone call or a simple text message is enough to break through a roadblock, to confirm an idea or set a path to finding the answers." Helping to create links with the industry networks and experts enabled Josh to be more self-sufficient and build on his existing capabilities.

## MEGAN HUNT - GATEWAY HEALTH COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICE

Megan's background and expertise is in local government, education, health promotion and population health. Her portfolio and interests extend to food systems, social recovery and emergency food recovery. She was also involved with the North East Local Food Strategy and has been keen to see the Acres and Acres project evolve and align its ideas with this existing strategy.

Megan offered Acres and Acres support to connect to the Towong Shire Council Advisory Report on regional development, strategic development and concept design to ensure it fits within the Council's existing policy guidelines.

She also offered her local knowledge on the interplay between grass roots processes and the bigger picture of regional strategy and networks.

With her industry and regional project knowledge she supported with connections and links to other projects for ideas, inspiration on food system platforms and production models.

Megan is also a Director of a philanthropic community Trust and offered her expertise and understanding of funding models and grant writing.

In her community sector role she was able to provide networking, partnership development, industry connections, letters of support, exposure to other expertise and introductions to the philanthropic sector.

This also included guidance on story building, how to broaden and engage with complementary audiences through communication technology.

## SAM BYRNE - THE COOP FEDERATION

Sam Byrne is the Secretary of The CO-OP Federation, a peak body of cooperatives for all industries that represents and supports organisations with the full lifecycle of their Cooperatives. Sam was able to provide a formative role in the creation of the Acres and Acres Cooperative and played a unique part in ensuring the organisation was able to establish effectively and within an expedited time frame during the bush fire emergency recovery cycle, enabling Acres and Acres to receive funding and financial support from the outset.

He was able to provide key support during the formation process, advise on governance, business structure development, membership engagement and legislation. The CO-OP Federation also offers networking and the opportunity to connect with the broader cooperative community.

Through this professional mentorship service Acres and Acres was able to access set-up support, development with their structure and then ongoing workshops for the professional development of their directors. Sam, reflects that "this was one of the quickest cooperative formations on record, completing the establishment process in about 8 days". This required an intense and rapid development of governance and processes.

He has continued to offer advice and information on how to help bring the members along on the cooperative journey, membership engagement, advice on distributed leadership, leadership development and membership structure.

Their mentorship relationship included predominantly remote support via phone and zoom calls with generally regular contact and a number of face to face meetings.

They met on an ad hoc basis and as required with the addition of a more intensive governance workshop which occurred over several days to help with the fundamentals of cooperatives and how to deliver an Annual General Meeting.

Sam understands the challenges of establishing a Not For Profit organisation that the whole community can feel a part of and recognises that it is amazing what Acres and Acres have achieved over the past two years. "While they may be still bedding down on some of the functions of the cooperative, the funding they have been able to receive is proof of their hard work"

He recognises that there are still concerns for volunteer and staff burnout and the ongoing challenge of long term sustainability. 'Key-person' risk is always a difficult consideration for high impact start-ups and leaders need to ensure they provide a welcome space for others to step up and contribute their energy. Sam offers that there is now room to invest in broadening the skills and expertise of the team.

"Despite doing it on the run in a catastrophe, Acres and Acres has a lot of potential as a multi-stakeholder organisation to really engage the community and the people who support it - it will be exciting to see where it goes. "



## **MATT CHARLES-JONES**

### **TOTALLY RENEWABLE YACKANDANDAH**

Matt Charles Jones has a background in education and training, specialising in sustainability and renewable energy and is a leading member of the Totally Renewable Yackandandah project and community group with an aim to power a small Victorian town with 100% renewable energy. He has been able to support the Acres and Acres project with his expertise and experience with platform development, social innovation, project development and design. Matt was an early supporter of Acres and Acres helping with the development of their mission and with the process of forming ideas into practice.

He provided “an impartial ear to formalise concepts, offer confidence and cross-pollination of ideas” and lent his experience with self-organising communities in readiness for emergencies. Their mentorship process was informal and contact was made as required where he was able to offer grant writing and communication support, such and advice on narrative building and the process of galvanising community support.

Matt recognises both the challenges and importance bringing everyone involved in a community project along for the ride and reflected that the challenges with community dynamics can require specialised support. He also advised that in response to key “change moments” such as emergency recovery that sometimes the most useful process is to “just create something that is positive and meaningful and don’t bother trying to bringing every around”.

## **BERNIE KENNEDY**

### **MURMUNGEE BASIN PRODUCE**

Bernie, by his own description, is a reasonably new small scale farmer producing a range of organically grown vegetables and veggie boxes in the Beechworth and Wangaratta region. His production method, scale and common climate zone provided a great farming and production model to offer the Acres and Acres project relevant insight into small scale farming systems.

He has been able to offer relevant and specific expertise in irrigation design and setup, market gardening, small scale farming, organic farming and soil health. Bernie has been open to sharing his knowledge on growing methods, soil testing, biological farming, composting, production cycles and pricing.

As a farmer he realises that there is great advantages in sharing knowledge and the ability to have a look at other farms, see them in action and learn about their production systems. He offered a range of informal support and mentorships over the phone and through direct consultation services.

He recognises the scope of the Acres and Acres project has required a fast learning process and the ability to have a wide range of dynamic systems working together. Trying to establish a project of this nature and make time for structured mentorship can be challenging and they were able to facilitate small regular opportunities to connect and share notes. Bernie reflects that “ it is easy to get lost in the detail of the work that you are doing - sometimes its good to just have someone to call.”



# APPENDIX



# CONTEXT

## BUILDING ON LOCAL KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH AND EXPERTISE

The Acres and Acres Cooperative is fortunate to have been able to evolve out of a strong ecosystem of local food systems activation and the ability to fast track its development as a model with access to a range of locally delivered strategies and proposals.

Building a Local Food Future forum (May 2015; coordinated by North East CMA, Gateway Health, Beechworth Health)

Fair Food film screening: community and panel discussion (Beechworth Urban Landcare, July 2015)

Wangaratta Community Food Hub Feasibility Study (2016; Alden et al., for Wangaratta Community Food for All)

Food Mapping Wangaratta project (2017; R. O'Hagan, for Wangaratta Community Food for All Network)  
Food Lab workshops (June, August & October 2017; coordinated by Northeast Health Wangaratta and Gateway Health)

Wodonga Food Strategy (2017; coordinated by City of Wodonga and Gateway Health)

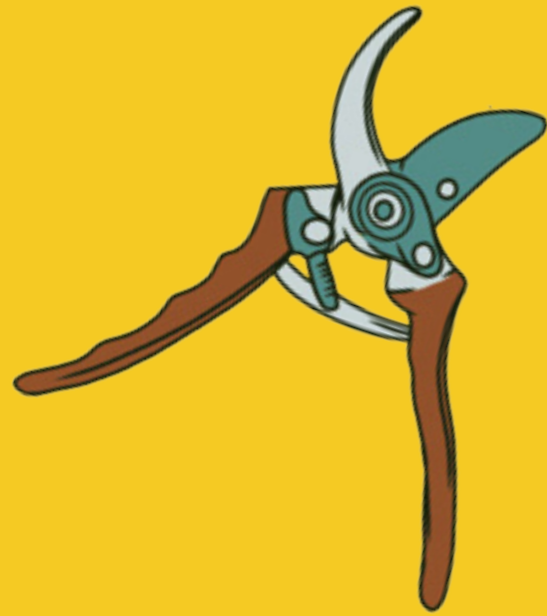
Strengthening the regional food economy workshop (Nov 2017; coordinated by North East CMA)

Ovens Murray Regional Partnership Agribusiness Forum (Oct 2017; coordinated by Ovens Murray Regional Partnership)

Farm to Plate Pilot Project workshop (April 2018; coordinated by Murray Regional Tourism)

Much of this work was further compiled and presented in the NORTH EAST LOCAL FOOD STRATEGY 2018 — 2022 Strengthening the local food system in North East Victoria.





# RESOURCES

The following resources and directories are created and maintained publicly by peers within the Australian market gardening community.

To contribute, amend or download visit [www.youngfarmersconnect.com](http://www.youngfarmersconnect.com)

## SOIL SCIENCE AND LABORATORIES

### AgVita

[www.agvita.com.au/](http://www.agvita.com.au/)  
(03) 64 209 600  
Wesley Vale, TAS, 7307

### APAL Australian Precision Ag

|                                                                                                  |                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <a href="http://www.apal.com.au/">www.apal.com.au/</a><br>(08) 83 320 199<br>Hindmarsh, SA, 5007 | <a href="http://www.apal.com.au/">www.apal.com.au/</a><br>(08) 94 772 277<br>Belmont, WA, 6104 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

### EAL - Environmental Analysis Laboratory

[www.scu.edu.au](http://www.scu.edu.au)  
(02) 66 203 9857  
East Lismore, NSW, 2480

### Nutri-Tech Solutions

[www.nutri-tech.com.au/](http://www.nutri-tech.com.au/)  
(07) 54 729 990  
Yandina, QLD, 4561

### SESL

|                                                                                                               |                                                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <a href="http://www.sesl.com.au/">www.sesl.com.au/</a><br>NSW & ACT: 1300 30 40 80<br>QLD & NT: 1300 44 60 34 | VIC, TAS, SA & WA:<br>1300 44 60 35<br>Thornleigh, NSW, 2120 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|

### Soil Foodweb Institute

[www.soilfoodweb.com.au/](http://www.soilfoodweb.com.au/)  
(08) 87 334 457  
Millicent, SA, 5280

### SWEP

[www.swep.com.au/](http://www.swep.com.au/)  
(03) 97 016 007  
Noble Park, VIC, 3174



## SEED SUPPLIER DIRECTORY

### **4 Seasons Seeds**

www.4seasonseeds.com.au  
(02) 67 365 011  
Tenterfield, NSW, 2372

### **ACE Ohlsson**

www.aceohlsson.com.au  
(02) 97 466 640  
Bringelly, NSW, 2556

### **Active Vista**

www.activevista.com.au  
0427 995 867  
Longley, TAS, 7150

### **Australian grain and forage**

www.agfseeds.com.au  
(03) 53 456 262  
Smeaton, VIC, 3364

### **Boondi Seeds**

www.boondieseeds.com.au/  
New England, NSW

### **Diggers Club**

www.diggers.com.au/  
(03) 59 847 900  
Dromana, VIC, 3936

### **Eden Seeds**

www.edenseeds.com.au  
(07) 55 331 107  
Beechmont, QLD, 4211

### **Heritage Seeds**

www.heritageseeds.com.au  
(03) 95 017 000  
Mulgrave, VIC, 3170

### **Inspirations Vegetable Seeds**

www.vegetbleseeds.net.au  
0438 367 425  
TAS, 7000

### **Lefroy Valley**

www.lefroyvalley.com  
1300 533 769

### **New Gipsland Seeds**

www.newfgipps.com.au  
(03) 97 379 560  
Silvan, VIC, 3795

### **Rijkzaan Australia Seeds**

www.rijkszwaan.com.au  
(03) 53 489 000

### **Royston Petrie Seeds**

www.roystonpetrieseeds.com.au  
(02) 63 727 800  
Mudgee, NSW, 2850

### **Seed Freaks**

www.seedfreaks.com.au  
0437 185 912  
Geeveston, TAS, 7116

### **Fair Dinkum Seeds**

www.fairdinkumseeds.com  
Gin Gin, QLD, 4671

### **Fairbank Seeds**

www.fairbanks.com.au  
(03) 84 013 346  
Epping, VIC, 3076

### **Four Seasons Herbs**

www.fourseasonsherbs.com.au/  
0412 721 268  
Exeter, TAS, 7275

### **Garden Larder**

www.gardenlarder.com.au/  
0401 203 447  
Casterton, VIC, 3311

### **Green Harvest**

www.greenharvest.com.au/  
1800 681 014  
Maleny, QLD, 4552

### **Greenpatch Seeds**

www.greenpatchseeds.com.au/  
(02) 65 514 240  
Taree, NSW, 2428

### **Heirloom Harvest**

www.heirloomharvest.com.au/  
0409 524 300  
Mount Compass, SA, 5210

### **Seed World Australia**

www.seedworld.com.au  
(02) 44 230 894  
Nowra, NSW, 2541

### **South Pacific Seeds**

www.spseed.com.au  
(02) 69 627 333  
Griffith, NSW, 2680

### **Southern Harvest**

www.southernharvest.com.au/  
(03) 62 296 795  
Kingston, TAS, 7051

### **Terra Nova Seeds**

www.terranoaseeds.com.au/  
(02) 96 161 288  
Smithfield, NSW, 2164

### **The Italian Gardener**

www.theitaliangardener.com.au/  
0407 833 930  
Adelaide, SA, 5006

### **The Lost Seed**

www.thelostseed.com.au/  
(02) 64 930 486  
Bemboka, NSW, 2550

### **Yilgarn Seeds**

www.drylands.org.au/  
(08) 99 381 628  
Geraldton, WA 6530

# COMPOST SUPPLIER DIRECTORY

## New South Wales

### Australian Native Landscapes

[www.anlscape.com.au](http://www.anlscape.com.au)  
(02) 63 665 205  
Blayney, NSW, 2799

### Biocast+

[www.biocast.com.com](http://www.biocast.com.com)  
0429 197 596  
Oxley Island, NSW, 2430

### Go Grow

[www.gogrow.com.au](http://www.gogrow.com.au)  
(02) 66 864 674  
Ballina, NSW, 2478

### Jindalee Ag

[www.jindaleeag.com.au](http://www.jindaleeag.com.au)  
0438 478 334  
Albury, NSW, 2640

### Living Farm Aus

0412 770 001  
Northern Rivers, NSW, 2471

### YLAD Living Compost

[www.yladlivingcompost.com.au](http://www.yladlivingcompost.com.au)  
(02) 63 822 165 Young, NSW, 2594

## Victoria

### Argus Recycling

[www.argusrecycling.com.au](http://www.argusrecycling.com.au)  
1300 732 925  
Dandenong, VIC, 3175

### Camperdown Compost

[www.camperdowncompost.com.au](http://www.camperdowncompost.com.au)  
(03) 55 933 737  
Bookaar, VIC, 3260

### Elmore Compost

[www.elmorecompost.com.au](http://www.elmorecompost.com.au)  
0428 511 525  
Elmore, VIC, 3558

## Western Australia

### Bunbury-Harvey regional Council

[www.bhrc.wa.gov.au](http://www.bhrc.wa.gov.au)  
(08) 97 972 404

### Landsave Organics

[www.landsaveorganics.com.au](http://www.landsaveorganics.com.au)  
(08) 97 554 189  
Vasse, WA, 6280

### Nutrarich

[www.nutrarich.com.au](http://www.nutrarich.com.au)  
(08) 92 488 067  
Baskerville, WA, 6056

## Queensland

### Platinum Compost

[www.Facebook.com/platinumcompost](http://www.Facebook.com/platinumcompost)  
0431 151 705

### Rockmin Compost

[www.Facebook.com/rockmincompost](http://www.Facebook.com/rockmincompost)  
0429 622 969  
Toowoomba, QLD, 4350



## TAD JONES - WORKER

I'm Tad Jones. I'm a horticultural worker. We're at a plot called Crazy Acres, just on the edge of town at Corryong. There's plenty of corn growing and zucchinis here. Some stuff certainly does grow better than others. There's been a lot of rain at the start of the growing season. Everything has been a bit late. It's been a weird year.

I helped plant the zucchini. I helped plant most of this. These are the new seedlings. It's dill and parsley. I think we've got some Chinese cabbage, some snow peas and bok choy seedlings as well that we planted two weeks ago.

The eggplants, some capsicums and chilies are our seedlings. And the corn is our seedlings, but the Wood Ducks got to it at the start. A lot of wood ducks out here and cabbage moth mostly. They're pretty bad. They're more so out at Tin Pot, which is Tintaldra.

This is a hoop house. What we'll do is when it starts getting a bit cooler, before the first frost, we'll put plastic over that and then we'll extend the season by about six weeks. I think we're actually going to try and keep some sorts of plants going through the winter. It's a bit of a trial, we'll see how it goes.

When we started on Crazy Acres it was just a bare paddock. Just imagine a paddock that cows are in, or were in. Just a bare paddock on the edge of the road on the outskirts of town. I can take home whatever I want. I have always eaten pretty healthy but this is better quality than the supermarkets, you can't beat the freshness.

### Did you grow up here in Corryong?

No. I sort of grew up near here on the border; Albury-Wodonga. I used to come up here camping when I was younger, camping and fishing. Town was getting to be a bit of a rat race. I knew this was a nice town. So, it was a change of lifestyle really. It just has more of a community spirit. It's like we're up in the mountains surrounded by nature. People are more friendly; you don't have to lock your doors or worry about anything getting stolen. It's brilliant; I don't know another way to describe it.

I've been here a few years now, since before the bushfires. That was pretty scary. I stayed in town, I was silly, I stayed in town. It was nothing I ever want to experience again. It was basically a wall of smoke and flames surrounding the town and there was only one way out; scary.

You can see Mount Mittamatite, right in front of us, looks pretty bare. That used to be full of bush, overgrown bush. After the fires it just looked like a big black rock. As you can see, it's growing back a little bit now, but you can still see the bits of the rock in it. Before the fires, you couldn't see anything like that. It's slowly coming back.

### What was your experience after the fire as a resident?

Yeah, it was pretty horrible. We had a centre where you could go down and get food. We had to go and stay in Wodonga for a couple of weeks in a motel. It was pretty bad. It was quiet afterwards for a while. Then COVID hit so it has been pretty quiet for the last couple of years.

### Could you tell me a bit about your work history?

Well, I haven't really worked for the last 20 years. I had a bad work accident, I almost died. So I didn't really work, I just bred fish and gardened.

I got my arm trapped in a machine and it got ripped off. I went to hospital and they sewed it back on, but I was in hospital for a few years after that and eventually it got amputated. The job was in a tissue mill that returned recycled paper into tissue. So big industrial machines.

It's been a long, hard road, just to try and stay positive and battle on. I will always suffer from a bit of pain from the accident, still to this day, daily. I've suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from it. I'd be lucky to sleep four hours straight. Some nights I just wake up every half an hour. It's horrible to be honest.

### Has it been difficult retraining how to do everything?

Yeah, very hard. You've got to have a lot of patience. I can see why a lot of people just give up because this is an ongoing thing. It will be with me until the day I die.

I've got to be able to work flexible hours. Sometimes I get pretty sore, so I've got to take a couple days off, just the pain management. There's always been a little bit of work up here on farms and at the hospital. And they've got a nursing home out here. But I couldn't do it.

This fell in my lap. I started volunteering, I thought I know a little bit about gardening, and it went from there.

### How did you hear about Acres and Acres?

It was through posts on Facebook. An old friend knows Josh Collings and she recommended me, and then he got in contact with me and asked if I'd like to volunteer. It just went from there. I just thought it was a good idea, like, good on him. There's nothing like that around. Like, why not? Like I hope your successful mate. And I eventually got involved.

### What's Acres and Acres like as a work environment?

Yeah, pretty good. Real good work. You are outside. But it depends if you like gardening, if you hate gardening, you wouldn't like it or if you hate being outside, you'd hate it. Some of it is hard work, but you just get on with it.

### And you're feeling supported with your injury?

Yeah, of course. That's what I like about the job. It's flexible.

Could you share some of the challenges of Acres and Acres beginning stages?

It was a bit tough at first, but we're finally getting there. From how we started into what it looks like now; it's totally a big difference.

Yeah, I'll just keep plodding along and try to make it successful. Hopefully it keeps growing. It should.

But I think we've got enough plots now, to be honest. With the people we've got. You could always start more plots, but you'd need more workers. We are only a small team, four of us and one guy that volunteers all the time, Digby, he's a legend.

### Can Acres and Acres provide the area with fresh fruit and vegetables?

Yeah, of course we can. I think we already are. We sell veggie boxes once a fortnight and have a market every other weekend. We basically pick to order.

### Are there any areas of the CO-OP that you would like to see grow or improve?

We're still sort of starting; you know what I mean? Maybe when everything's finished, then I'll have an opinion on that. But until everything is finished, I can't really say. I'd probably be speculating. I don't want to do that. As long as it's going, I'll be helping.

### Thank you for sharing your story Tad. Is there anything you want to add?

No, I'm alright mate. I'm not much of a talker to be honest.



## JOSHUA COLLINGS - DIRECTOR

My name is Josh, I'm one of the cofounders of Acres and Acres and the Managing Director. We're standing at Acres and Acres HQ, which is the first garden that we started for the project. There's a couple of different versions of what a farm is and this one is the smallest. But it also has all the support parts for the wider project.

I guess it's a bit like an urban farm but in a regional zone. Everyone pictures country areas to have all this fresh produce growing but we don't have that in regional towns. It's predominantly grown in single sourced areas, food bowls, dedicated to cows, sheep, and then all the veggies are growing together. It's not fresh by the time it reaches us and we're losing out on the opportunity for local employment. This style of intense small-scale farm can feed a lot of people, and the produce only travels five to 30 minutes to get from where it's picked to the point of where it's getting consumed.

Also on this site, we will have a greenhouse nursery to grow all our own seedlings, so they're acclimatized to our area. We have a wash station to process vegetables. A tool library where growers can hire specialty tools for market gardening. If you look at the size of those investments, you're saving up to \$100,000 for each individual farmer if we can all work together.

Also we've got an office, so everyone has access to the internet and computers for marketing. All these things are important for small scale farms. We don't sell to a mass producer and our product can get lost without proper support. We are a part of our product from the time that it's put in the ground to the time that it goes into someone's mouth. We see what meals our customers are making. We get photos sent to us of people using our produce. That's a connection from farmer to consumer that you don't get in shopping centres.

### **How long has this site been established?**

We've had this garden for two years so far. We really started the project coming out of the bushfires. Then going into COVID during the recovery there wasn't any fresh food available to us. That's what sparked the idea. It also stemmed from our food swap group, the people that formed the CO-OP.

We are past the end of the line in Corryong, the very last stop for food to arrive. In a disaster situation food-chains drop. We needed to have resources and tools to grow food rapidly to support our community.

So this site is the first but different from the other sites. We actually brought in 60 tonnes of mixed soil ready to go. It wasn't perfect, but it was organic, and it allowed us to grow straight away. The other sites have been much more of a process where we're fixing the soil with cover crops and large-scale composting. We're making our own compost, in a location where it's hard to get the resources to create healthy soil, we're learning how to build it and creating a closed-loop system from start to finish.

### **We're standing outside of a beautiful old building...**

It's an old bakery, it was the town's original bakery. It is currently being converted into office space, the cleaning space, storage and sorting, a future shop and potentially an event space for workshops and long table dinners. Everything to show an example of food coming from five metres away onto a plate. The difference in taste. Sharing how to cook it. We don't want people in our community relying on frozen foods. We want to show it's possible for everyone to have the opportunity to eat fresh produce.

### **Where are you living at the moment, Josh?**

Currently, I'm living in Corryong with my partner, Kate, and Tully, our child. We're renting. Our land is in Cudgewa. We've been here for a very long five years. It's been an absolute journey. It's such a beautiful and magnificent place. We've met so many wonderful people moving into the area and people that are already here. It's pretty enchanting, it's not easy living, but it's very beautiful.

I've always grown veggies, but the gardens were rotational when you're renting, moving house to house. So this is a great reward to feel like you've got your roots in the soil. After the 2019 fires we'd lost the house and I was standing on our house site with the media, that had all turned up in Cudgewa. They came to my property and they were all trying to take photos of me crying and being upset, but I wasn't in that state. Whether it be a response to the trauma; I didn't feel like that, I was looking for solutions.

On the ground were the remains of our veggie patch, it had been three or four days since the fires and my zucchinis were a foot long. They'd made it through being burnt to come back so quickly! It sort of made me start to think; everyone needs fresh vegetables. This area doesn't have fresh vegetables. There's food shortages, so I set my whole path from there to looking for ways of creating a sustainable food model.

### **What is Acres and Acres offering the community of the Upper Murray?**

Currently, it's fresh food. Fresh, locally grown, chemical free, tasty, food. It's well priced, comparative to items that have been sprayed. We're not at an organic food price. This is not about making money. This is about feeding people properly and producing food in a way that's sustainable for our environment. We want it to be available to everyone.

We've built a tool library sharing all the equipment necessary for starting a market garden. A walking tractor, hand tools for gardening, a little tractor, a little tip truck and trailers. All this can be hired by the community to use.

There's also the community worm farm. We're in the midst of building the first bin at the moment. This takes waste from our product and creates a new cycle. We're also looking at land acquisition and five year leases. If you're a new farmer it's quite an investment, particularly if you also need to buy the tools. We're connecting landowners with willing farmers to establish market gardens .

There's also micro farming. If you're a home gardener we come and help put in four or five rows. All that heavy labour work you can't do easily by yourself is done with our machines. This creates a specific crop that could enter into that Acres and Acres distribution model. If you have five or six people doing that, all of a sudden you have a hell of a lot of food getting grown.

We've also have started working with the school, I would class that as another aspect of our model; education and workshops. A workshop and leadership pathway for jobs in the future, not just around veggie growing, but how to set up any kind of business through a process with Acres and Acres being a vehicle for that to happen.

We have four staff and a handful of exceptional volunteers, locally and also people travelling to the area to help.

#### **What funding streams is Acres and Acres co-operative accessing?**

Acres and Acres began through direct funding from music nights, festivals, bush dances and funding for bushfire projects. We then moved into philanthropy, donations from the June Carnarvan Foundation, Into Our Hands Foundation and a number of large philanthropy groups.

Commonwealth Bank has funded us. And then we moved onto agencies for our specific projects. For the kitchen development we partnered with VicHealth. For composting we've aligned with Sustainability Victoria. D.E.LWP has invested in the blueprinting of the project, in the hope of being able to duplicate our growth and progress as a model for other areas that want to take up our model and learn rapidly.

Our biggest supporter has been Bushfire Recovery Victoria, who invested in the resilience and community engagement aspects of the project.

Incredible mentors have enabled this and been fundamental to our growth. We've had food systems specialists like Joel Orchard. Pete Williams, who has worked in multi-billion-dollar companies, guiding our granting projects. Dennis Giovanni for sustainability. And Megan Hunt supports our understanding and connection to local food systems.

Without mentors, we'd be flailing around trying to learn all this stuff, but it's like sitting on the shoulders of giants and achieving much more in a shorter period of time. It's essential for grants and launching a project in this way.

#### **What are your hopes into the future for Acres and Acres?**

This season, our food is selling out most weeks. We need to create a lot more food. People are cheerleaders for it. So that's really exciting to know that level of excitement is getting picked up. Working with local businesses like Tintalra Hotel, Pickled Parrot, the Local Bakery, Cudgewa Hotel, and Bethanga General Store, that's one of the hubs, it's going straight from farm to consumer. We also have the opportunity to be wholesale for greengrocers and if we're at the same price, but the food's fresher, I just don't know why you wouldn't use it; a local business. We want to be able to supply the freshest food possible for everyone.

As we move through the seasons, and learn from our mistakes, and bring new mentors on board, we're getting sharper and better every day.



## REBECCA CHETTLEBURGH - P.O.D. CHAMPION

My name is Rebecca Chettleburgh. I've actually got a micro florist in Bethanga called Bethanga Blooms, that I've just started in the last few years. I have run community gardens for years and am a qualified Permaculture and Horticulture teacher. I met Josh and we've become really lovely, great friends through what he's doing, because I think what he's doing is beyond amazing, and that his passion is palpable. I love it.

I grow all my own flowers. I do seasonal flowers, and I also grow unusual plants with unusual branches just for interest. I also grow lots of succulents. I'm known for my lovely succulent bowls that I grow. And I sell them through the Bethanga General Store or online through Facebook.

We're standing in the Acres and Acres site in Corryong. And it's very exciting and beautiful. This is actually the first time I've been here to look at it. I've talked to Josh a lot. We've just started, in Bethanga, a brand new vegetable box hub through Acres and Acres. It's the first hub for deliveries of weekly vegetable boxes. I've helped start that at Bethanga, so I'm the contact there.

We're a couple of 100 people in a little town, but we've just got the most magnificent new general store with everything you'd want in a small town. She supports all the local artists and everybody's got their wares in there, it's fantastic. And now we've got fresh fruit and vegetables from Josh every week. And we're building up, we've got five or six boxes already and we're working our way up..

### What got you into floristry and growing?

I was in my 20s, I still didn't know what I wanted to do when I grew up. Then I started a horticultural course. I actually did a Permaculture Design Certificate about 21 years ago in the Shannon Valley. It became an accredited course and I worked on the accreditation process through TAFE NSW.

I started teaching accredited permaculture through TAFE NSW in Bethanga at the organic farm there. That's what I did for 16 years until it all went online. I couldn't teach how to garden online. It just wasn't for me. You've got to get your fingernails dirty, it's such a hands-on physical thing.

### What are some of the particulars of growing here in the northeast of Victoria?

It does depend on where you are. We have some very clayey soils around this area. And I see that they've done a lot of lifting up of the beds here on this site, obviously to help with drainage and building organic matter as well. I really think we do need to look at raising our gardens. I mean, the last couple of rain events we've had, have really made a big difference to how I'm going to garden. I recently lost the whole bottom corner of my floristry flowers because they'd rotted at the bottom.

It's about raising your soil profile up and using raised beds or creating raised beds. You know, building the soil is what it's all about to be totally honest, end of story. If your soil is shit, you're not going to grow anything. We've all got to spend our time on the soil and then everything just goes from there.

I actually grew up in Camberwell and Melbourne for the first 10 years of my life. And then I went to Bonegilla, which is sort of near Albury-Wodonga. Then I found Bethanga about 22 years ago. And we've been there ever since. Our daughter went to the gorgeous little school there and it's just a beautiful area.

We've got everything at our doorstep, really. I mean if you're into anything you can do it within an hour or two around us. Other than the Seaside. I enjoy seasons; Autumn, Spring, Summer, Winter. Variety the spice of life.

### How did you come to hear about Acres and Acres?

I guess I'm in the industry and I'm passionate about all this stuff and have been for a long time.

I'm happy to help and support Acres and Acres in any way. I've got a lot of experience in workshops and things like worm farming, or composting and growing things. I'm happy to run some workshops or to get my fingers dirty and do some digging, whatever he needs really. Apparently, there's a few growers that are wanting to jump on board and grow flowers. I'm more than happy to help people with that.

Josh is trying so hard to include everybody that he can, to make it an inclusive thing. Ownership of a site for a community, a beautiful site and a lovely site. It really is all about the community, and hopefully, they will see this as an opportunity to meet new people, maybe learn to cook things differently that they've never cooked before.

I know that that was an issue when I ran community gardens; I found that people are always quite interested in growing but we're losing our ability to cook. We would grow the most amazing vegetables and they would still be there the next week, because people didn't know what to do with it. I found that we really needed to focus on helping people with easy seasonal recipes.

### Can you see ways you might like the CO-OP to grow into the future?

You can have an array of beautiful seasonal, fresh, local foods. I don't think you could get better than that. And also very reasonably priced, even though they probably could charge more, they're not. And I think that's really important. The fruit and vegetables that we're eating can be so expensive, but they don't need to be. And I think this is a good way of showing people how easy it can be to eat good food.

I think it's looking at how to encourage young people into this. I think young people are the key. They're doing great things in a lot of schools with their vegetable gardens and talking about food. I think our key is education and young people.

## **BERNIE KENNEDY - FARMER**

I'm Bernie Kennedy, my wife is Felicity Kennedy, and we're in Murrumbidgee between Beechworth and Myrtleford, in North-east Victoria. It's a lovely spot. We've got the Stanley State Forest in the background and some low treed hills. It's pretty touristy being next to Beechworth and Bright's not too far down the road. It's a wine area.

We've got identical twin girls, which was a bit of a shock, they're 20 months old and have been taking up quite a bit of our time lately.

We bought this place after being in the area a couple of years, we've had it for six or seven years round about. It's 30 acres and there was nothing here, it had a planning permit for a dwelling, but just a blank paddock otherwise. We've just been pumping it really. You know, really loving it too. It's been good fun.

### **Where do you sell your produce?**

Well, we've got a lot of different outlets at the moment. I've just been going for it and seeing where it goes really. We run a local, weekly box into Beechworth, Myrtleford and Bright. There's the North-east Food Hub over in Wangaratta, run by Wangaratta Whole Foods, the Bright Food Co-op up in Bright, they sell a bit of stuff through there. Almar Organics in Albury, we do a bit of wholesaling there, and markets as well, Wangaratta Farmers Market we do, and the occasional other market around.

It's been up and down really with Covid19. It's interesting, the restaurants are down, because there is no one going to restaurants. But then, people are freaking out and panic buying. So you know, there's been a lot of ups and downs. It's been difficult, having a wide spread of where we're selling has helped. It's so hit and miss, you never know what's going on. It's probably meant that I've had to spend a lot more time marketing and diversifying where I'm selling too. Otherwise, things have been selling reasonably well. There is a demand for local food. So that's good.

There's actually two of us growing here and there is about to be a third person who has jumped on. So there's Pete and Tash up the back, and they've got about an acre, and they're putting out a fair bit of stuff with us. And then there's a couple of local chefs as well, Jess and Riley, that have got a little area where they grow a bit of stuff to make their produce. They're leasing, it's a loose sort of agreement. We have the land and I'd rather not be just working on my own, so sharing as much as we can. Pete's got a lot of really good tools, and then I've got a walking tractor, we can share those. I probably wouldn't have been able to afford the Jang, the seeder, on my own, so that's great. It's good for learning too, because Pete's growing carrots and beans and chard, and he has zucchinis, and we split the crops. He's learning about all my crops, which is totally time saving, and I'm learning about the other crops that he's doing. We can share successes and failures.

### **How did you first hear about Acres and Acres?**

I think I just started hearing the name around the place, talking to Fi from the Open Food Network, and Megan from Albury Wodonga Local Food Network. I thought, I'll give them a call, see what's going on. And yeah, I met Josh and it's been good.

They've got the bigger equipment that we wouldn't be able to afford, you know, the tractor and the tip truck and other bits and pieces. That will enable us to make compost; haul stuff in, turn a pile and set the compost up. And knowledge and workshops is another really good thing. We went to the composting workshop and learnt about the spice method.

### **Would Acres and Acres have been helpful when you first set up?**

Well definitely, I mean I bought the walking tractor, which is a fair outlay to begin with. But without it, it would have been difficult to set all the beds up initially. All the permanent beds. I only use it once every few weeks really. And you know after the set up you wouldn't actually need it really you could work around it, just every now and again is great.

There are other market gardeners around that would probably be keen, you know, a couple just came earlier on in the week to check it out from over Wonthaggi way. Just to have a look around and they're thinking about setting up. It's a popular thing to do, and for good reason.

### **Can you talk about your approach to farming?**

I grew up on a farm and we did use chemicals. I had some health issues, which led me to understand a bit about health and the issues around chemical use. The food you buy from the supermarket has got a lack of nutrients really, because the soil is lacking nutrients. I was going to the naturopaths and doing a lot of supplements then I eventually realised, the food is only as good as the soil. So you've really got to make good soil to make good food. Aside from that, I was just over being in the office. I was in an office job as a civil engineer in high stress. I just said no, I'd rather be outside doing something that gave me some energy rather than took it away.

### **Can you see value in a co-op, like Acres and Acres, connecting farmers with sellers and suppliers?**

That's an important part of it. It takes a lot of time working out where to sell, getting your customers and the whole distribution network. To begin with, I was just getting to know people and driving around myself, but then more and more, I find that takes up all my time and I'd be ending up not being able to grow anything. I'd probably prefer to be just out growing stuff. So yeah, if there's someone who is good at creating a network and dealing with logistics, then that's great, just to simplify things. To begin with, you sort of have to do everything if you don't have a network like that. So yeah, very valuable.

I mean, the social aspect too is important. And just getting to know other farmers, because it's easy just to be working away on the farm and to not really get out and connect with too many other people, especially if things are going well, you're busy. So, to have get-togethers and workshops, that's very important. And then I suppose, general knowledge sharing. It's good to be able to call people up and talk about, say if the carrots didn't work, what's going on with that, has anyone got any ideas?

### **Could you see a place for similar models working in other parts of the country?**

Definitely. Yeah, for sure. Every couple of 100 kms would do the job nicely, wouldn't it.

## CHRISTINA ASTON - PROPERTY OWNER

I'm Christina. I live in the Nariel Valley with my husband, James. Together we're on a mission to pay our respects to this beautiful land that we're looking after for this period of our lives. It represents for us a lifelong desire to live compatibly with the land.

We're at the southern end of the Nariel Valley, where the valley narrows. When you first enter, it's wide and flat and you'll see the land has been cleared for dairy farming predominantly. Then as you come down towards us, the hills come back forming a funnel. Here you've got smaller properties.

I've got an environmental science background, but I landed in I.T. for a long time. I did a lot of systems work with databases and things like that. I always kept my interest in the environment and kept learning and reading voraciously about how to live more sustainably. Now, after my children have left home and I'm a bit older, I've come back to finish the journey I began in my 20s.

This land probably represents five years of James and I looking for land that met our criteria. We were pretty firm with what we needed to do the conservation work that we always wanted to do. Also to be able to do a proof of concept on how to live sustainably on the land, leaving the land in a better state than when we first came upon it.

We lost the house in the fire and a lot of the vegetation; I think that's what hurt us most. Seeing the total destruction from a fire is just so soul destroying. The house was sad but I think grieving for habitat was the biggest thing, the plants and animals. It was just like someone had thrown a nuclear bomb at the place; it was really dismal.

We are all connected and we have a responsibility even more than I had imagined. When you come here to this place; you feel so safe. I kind of thought with climate change and all these threats from fire that we're always safe, because we have running water, and everything's always so green, I just couldn't imagine that a fire would come through and affect this place.

I couldn't have any control over what was happening in terms of government policy, or what people were doing out in the world but at least I've got these 100 acres that I can manage and steward to the best of my ability. I thought it doesn't matter what's going on out there. What fire taught me was that it does matter. That we are all connected and what happens in another place on the planet will affect me right here.

I think it's because I'm a systems thinker- after the fire I made a chart and I just listed what our priorities are. I revisited our vision for the place and I had to keep reminding myself what it is that we're trying to do here. I rewrote the vision, adjusted it I should say. I had to add in other dimensions after the fire. I listed all the things that we would need to achieve it. We were at minus ground zero. It gave us a sense of what we were doing so we weren't overwhelmed, but it also showed our progress, and gave us some positive feedback. We weren't just aimless and lost in the process.

I heard of Acres and Acres through the community recovery committee that was being established at the time by all the different valleys, or areas, that were impacted by the fires. Josh was at one of those meetings representing Cudgewa, and he spoke about Acres and Acres there. I thought this was so good! The model fitted my model for this property and

how I should be interacting with the community. I had originally thought that I was just going to be in my own little microcosm but after the fires, I thought we need to be a bit more connected with community; with the nation; with the world.

I was really excited by the whole Acres and Acres enterprise model. I spoke further to Josh and asked him for more information. I didn't understand how co-operatives worked at that time. I did an online cooperative training course to find out about it. That was just fantastic. I learned a lot about the structure and how they operate. I was really impressed.

It's a new thing to the region, and the Acres and Acres model represents a departure in some ways from the traditional farming activities of this area. There were mixed views, confusion, a lot of things that happen in a small community that you would expect, and suspicion, and then there were other people who were so welcoming and wanting it. So I'm just so thrilled that Josh has been able to keep the momentum going and not give up. Because I imagine it's been a tough, possibly lonely journey for him.

I bought this land and I actually have an obligation to participate in this model if I want to live my values fully and be part of a wider system to provide food security for the community. If ever there is a disaster, or anything like that, it's nice to know that we can stand on our own feet and not rely on food from further afield.

When I go into Corryong the fresh food could be better. A lot of the food comes from Melbourne, and so when it arrives it's a little bit tired. I know that the more you use a shop, that helps better turnover, but while the shop is buying from so far away, I feel like it's always behind the eight ball. What attracts me to Acres and Acres is that it's local and fresh, and also, I like the idea of knowing that there's people in this area who are growing food, and I'm buying food from them. It's personal, it's relationship building. It's all the things that make for a good, resilient community. They're the core ingredients.

### **How do you see your involvement with Acres and Acres into the future?**

I like the idea of people being able to visit, and Acres and Acres being able to say, "Look, we've got a farm here, if you want to go and meet them, it's working." Then hopefully, they will think I can do this too. I haven't got the agricultural or horticultural experience myself, but it's all doable, and anyone can do it if they want. I like the Acres and Acres model; the tool library; access to knowledge. I'd like to grow, say garlic, make it work, provide produce to Acres and Acres, give people beautiful, fresh garlic from this area

### **Are there any ways that you hope the CO-OP can grow in future?**

I would like to see younger people coming in and having an opportunity to practice growing things. If they can't afford to buy land just yet, Acres and Acres could connect them with people like us. There's an opportunity there; someone then can start learning, instead of waiting and saving, we know how hard that is, to buy land then grow. It shouldn't be a linear thing. Instead of waiting until you're 60 years old to get this going, it means that young people, hopefully, will have a chance to get and buy their own land sooner.





## DIANE GAYLARD & DAVID ALLEWAY- VOLUNTEERS

**Diane:** I'm Diane Gaylard. I currently live just out of Marysville in Victoria. I come from Tumbarumba originally and my heart is really up in this area. I grew up in Tumbarumba until I was 8 and then my family moved to Canberra. I did the rest of my growing up after I left Canberra at the tender age of 30. I've got quite a few relatives here, though a lot of them have passed away now, I've spent lovely times on farms around this area.

I have been a teacher for a long time and just retired last year. And now I enjoy my garden, playing a bit of music, hanging about with friends and a little bit of travelling.

**David:** And I'm David Allevay, Diane's husband. We live in Marysville together. My association with the area is that I started coming to the Nariel Creek Folk Festival in about 1981. We actually met at the Nariel Creek Folk Festival. We got married in Cudgewa. So we've had a very long term relationship with this area and with the people of it.

I used to travel around to Kindergartens, as David The Music Man doing shows with children for about 20 years. I stopped that three years ago. Both Diane and myself are active as community ambulance officers with Ambulance Victoria and also with the SES.

### Could you speak about the experiences in your community in the 2009 fires?

**David:** As you know they had the fires recently here, and it very much echoes what happened to us many years ago. Fortunately, this time around, there wasn't such a great loss of life in the community. Some lessons have been learnt, especially by the community, on how to deal with going forward after the event. It's about the community standing together and working together to get what they want. In opposition, perhaps, from what some people want to enforce from above.

**Diane:** I totally agree with David, I think what the Acres and Acres project offers to people who are interested in growing, whether it be vegetables or flowers or fruit is a chance to come together with a like-minded community and really develop a network of friends and associates to keep that interest and knowledge alive.

I think these days with the cost of transport, and all the environmental impacts that go along with transporting food all over the countryside, it's so important for people to learn how to grow their own produce on a sustainability level.

### How did you come to volunteer at Acres and Acres?

**Diane:** Through our involvement with the SES and other volunteering in our own community, we've found there's a lot of reward in helping other people do things that they're passionate about. And certainly, Josh from Acres and Acres is one of those passionate people. It's so fulfilling to be able to donate something, even if it's only a few days of pulling weeds, back to that enthusiasm for community and progress.

**David:** We came up on Monday last week and have spent five days doing various things. Everything from pulling weeds, to helping design some shelving systems for the mobile tool library and all the things in between. That's the joy of Acres and Acres, there's a job for everyone. If you don't like pulling weeds, it doesn't mean that you're excluded. There are many things to do; washing vegetables, picking fruit, doing interviews like this! As Diane says, volunteering and helping people, you're not getting paid for it but you're getting many rewards for it.

**Diane:** It's a bit cliché, but it's something that money just can't buy. You can't buy the interaction that you have with people who have got that passion. We were so welcomed

into the volunteering role here by everybody, it was just a lovely, lovely experience.

**David:** Absolutely. If you haven't been up to this part of the world, it's very, very beautiful. You have the Snowy Mountains as a backdrop. You've got the Murray River. And this particular season you've got lush, green everywhere.

And in terms of volunteering there's no pressure on you. Some people start at seven. Some of us may get there at about nine o'clock. And if the temperature of the day gets too hot, I think we all decided it's time to retire.

### Where have you been staying throughout your time here?

**Diane:** Some beautiful camps on the side of the Murray River and down at Nariel Creek, of course, not that I want to spread that around too much. We brought our bikes up on the off chance that we might go for a ride, but we're having too much fun on the farm.

### From your experiences, can you see ways that Acres & Acres could grow their volunteer experience?

**Diane:** Maybe putting it out there that when you come to volunteer, you're learning so much about growing vegetables. Well I did. About the soil and what you need, and the tools, and the mistakes that have happened along the way too. They're quite open to saying, "Well, we did this but we really didn't need to, you know, this way is much better". It's like a workshop week, really, if you're a gardener. It's a two way street.

**David:** I feel Acres and Acres is an open-ended project for the Upper Murray, but what it spawns in other areas, who knows? It's a great concept and it'd be great if it does spread.

Could you see a place for a co-operative like Acres and Acres in the area that you live?

**Diane:** Oh, absolutely. We've got people who are passionate about that idea of sharing and working together on one block of land. To put your skills into that so that it multiplies the effect of how much you get out of the land in terms of produce, but also in terms of the relationships that you develop with each other.

**David:** A paddock full of weeds is a very frightening thing for one person. 10 people can look at it and before morning tea, it's done. Any gardener would appreciate the joy that brings.

And can we say thank you to the people at Acres and Acres. It's been a great visit and we'll probably be back again sometime soon.





## DIGBY GOTTS - VOLUNTEER

I'm Digby Gotts. I'm 73. I've been a teacher primarily, but I retired when I turned 40 and took up fruit farming. I'm an expert in growing all sorts of extreme tropical fruit and fruit tree development. I've done consultancy work across the Pacific. I'm an academic. I'm a zoologist. An educator and fruit grower.

I've been living in far north Queensland at Cape Tribulation for 25 years. My wife died three years ago from a severe cancer. It became too difficult to live around where we had our home. I decided it was time for a major change in life and career. So I came down to Corryong.

At the time, Josh was just setting up the Acres and Acres Market Garden cooperative, which was a strong draw card. I've spent a year living here in rented places, now I've bought. I'll live here for a while, see how it goes, renovate, repair, and see what happens to life in the next few years.

### What was it that attracted you initially to the project, Digby?

I've been a grower, organic growing, especially. The project itself had a lot of appeal because I can see the need for that sort of level of community involvement and self-dependence within a community, especially to cut freight costs and fuel miles associated with getting fruit and vegetables to this area. I really want the project to go ahead. I'm quite happy to donate my time and knowledge to keep it rolling.

### Has the CO-OP helped you build relationships while entering a new area?

It has, but that's obviously been very limited by COVID. It cut the social interactions down quite significantly. I've had several levels of entry into the community both from friends, who are here, and from the Acres and Acres people. It's been quite useful for me.

I've always seen myself as a helper, an aide. I'll always volunteer. Living in Victoria, I was part of the CFA. Living in far north Queensland I was part of the SES. Volunteering has just been part of my lifestyle. I'm quite happy to use what funding I have to keep myself and my house going.

### Could you tell us a little bit about what you're doing at Acres and Acres presently?

I'm desperately holding back, not wanting to take charge and not wanting the responsibility at command level. It's important to me that I have the freedom to leave. I'm giving as much as I can but I don't want to have the obligation associated with taking charge of something.

I can identify jobs that need doing, and I'll push people in that direction, but I won't actually tell anybody to do anything. I'm happy to do whatever I'm asked to do at the same time.

I'm a teacher. Primarily I'm here to teach. I'd rather have somebody on my shoulder learning what's going on, as well as me doing a job. That makes sense to me.

### Where do you see Acres and Acres heading in the future?

I think it really does need to become self-sustaining. A lot of people see Acres and Acres as a community thing, therefore fruit and vegetables should be free. They don't see the costs associated with running a business. It does have to earn enough money to keep itself going. A lot of that output is going to be associated with salaries for some of the local people who can earn enough to live. We can't be totally dependent on volunteers, but volunteering will be a major part of it.

Self sustainability is important. Organic is important. And long-term sustainability. That's what makes it interesting for me as well. I'm learning still; I guess learning for me has always been an important part of life.

### Have you seen other co-operatives in other parts of the country?

Not for growing fruit and vegetables. I have been a member of other cooperatives in the past which have had different goals. I've been a part of a conservation cooperative with 30 landowners living on a block of land devoted to conservation.

The challenge is largely that the place has to operate by consensus. So you can't take a vote on something and alienate half your population. Trying to achieve that consensus by argument and discussion can be very slow. It's uneconomic, but it's social and that's really important. There's always going to be debates, how much should we sell our fruit and vegetables for? We've got to sell it cheaply, but for enough to make ends meet and enough to be sustainable. Where you place that line is always going to be a debatable topic. And it's trying to establish that through some form of consensus with the people rather than by any autocratic method.

### In what ways can Acres and Acres improve in future?

For me, the biggest thing is that level of communication out to the community. I think that needs to be really focused on to let people who are not friends know what's happening. Corryong is quite small with only 1500 population or thereabouts. It does get divided. There are rumours and lies floating around the community and it can seem polarised. You can only really counter that with a good flow of information.

Also encouraging more people to volunteer to help. COVID has been a large part of that too. We just don't have enough volunteers to get a lot of work done. But it'll grow as time goes on. I've seen it grow to an active team of about four or five now. And we could do with an active team of 10 or 15.

### Can you see how a co-operative like this could benefit other parts of the country?

Its biggest advantage really is that it becomes a role model for other enterprises to work. And I know one of my friends in North Queensland has been pushing her community to establish a co-operative garden because of what she's seen happening here. That's just one example. I would hope that there are dozens, potentially hundreds of others around the whole country, who can see what we've done and say we could do that here.

## **KAREN KAHLER - VOLUNTER - HOMESTEADER**

We've got five acres here at Pine Mountain. It's a beautiful mountain, a monolith, just like Uluru but one and a half times the size. It's covered in trees which got burnt out in the fires a few years ago, but it's got its own ecosystem and it's just stunning. The Murray River is behind us too. That's lovely, especially when it floods up a bit. The soils are magical here and the growth that we have is just incredible. We've got what they call 'Murray Gold' soil; it's almost black and full of nutrients. It's perfect to grow in.

We've only been here for 12 months. We've got a lot of big dreams and it's slowly coming together. It's just planning and time really. We're a military family. We travel around a lot. We've got an eight-year-old so we wanted to set down roots for him and do the whole homesteading thing. I guess we just wanted to buy our forever home. We went on realestate.com and clicked on all Victoria and this house came up.

When we moved here, I started volunteering with Acres and Acres. I met quite a few people through there, which was great. It's always daunting when you move to a new place and don't know anyone. Our closest family is five hours away for perspective. It's so peaceful here. Everyone's so friendly and I love all the community-based things in the area.

### **Have you done much gardening in the past?**

We're new to it. Before this we had 80 acres out in the Violet Town area at a place called Boho. That was more a weekender for us, and a friend ran some sheep there. We dabbled around with fruit trees and veggie gardens. I went from a brown thumb to a green thumb there.

I try to take on permaculture principles, but it's a little bit harder to do with raised beds which help me with an injury. We're pretty random; you'll see a lot of things haven't really been planned. We've just gone for it, and it's worked. We learn along the way. In our veggie garden I'm still learning spacing and what grows well together. This year has been very much an experiment and now I know what works and what doesn't, we'll be taking that on board, and I'll be growing four times the amount next year.

At the moment we've got flowers growing, Zinnias are my favourite. The corn got attacked by the birds; so sharing! We've got lots of zucchini and tromboncinos. They're just going absolutely crazy. I only had one tromboncino plant but I've got at least 20 fruits from it. It's just incredible to see. They store really well like butternut pumpkins.

This morning I actually used a few Acres and Acres surplus tomatoes to make sauces. I also dehydrated some and made some paste. Pretty much year-round tomatoes; no supermarkets needed!

I preserve a lot of foods. I have done for a few years. I very much like water bathing but I've just started dabbling in pressure canning as well. We had excess beans this year, so I managed to can a lot of beans. I can just grab them off the shelf and don't have to worry about any power blackouts or anything. They're ready to go for meals.

Like every gardener, even if they're extremely experienced or a beginner like myself, just embrace it and work at it. It's all about learning to eat seasonal food and trying new things. I'm planting cape gooseberries at the moment, I've never tried them. I haven't seen them at the supermarkets before. They're great. My son is getting into trying new foods as well. He really enjoys coming out and helping in the garden.

### **Does your garden help to supplement what you need to purchase?**

It's been interesting going down to the shops, it's a half-hour drive for us into Corryong. Half the time when I can get to the shops they're out of things that we need. Also, some of the freshness is lost because it's coming all the way from Melbourne or Sydney. We're moving away from supermarkets and either growing ourselves or shopping local. I think it's important to know exactly where your food's coming from; how far it's travelled; how it's been stored, especially in times like today. If you can't grow it, look for somewhere else locally.

### **What do you envisage on the property in future?**

In four years, Steve will be out of defence, and back home full-time with us. I'm working from home at the moment. Once my contract finishes up there's the possibility of us having extra time to finish all the projects around our place. Then the plan is to focus on maybe bringing money into our place as well.

We're still learning. There's definitely so much guidance available from Acres and Acres. They've got some great experts in there; we're picking their brains.

We've been able to use the tool library setting up our gardens so far. We've reached out to neighbours through Josh and Acres and Acres. We've been very lucky in that aspect, Steve works away and we have had a few problems with our animals. Our neighbours come to assist me. It's been fantastic. I guess the Co-op is pretty new, it's going to be amazing watching it grow.

I think it's great to diversify; one thing might not work and something else does that year, or vice versa. We have space here to grow more than what can feed my family. To grow enough foods to help feed the community. I could definitely see us growing for Acres and Acres.

### **As a mother do pesticides and additives in food concern you?**

We try to live as cleanly as possible. You know there's additives and preservatives that are out there, and different things like nitrates. It's just being mindful of all that, I want my family to eat nicely and my friends as well.

I think it's really important for my son to see where his food comes from. To know what's in season and how much work goes into growing something and raising something kindly. Just to be mindful of what you're eating and how important it is.

### **Are there any ways you'd like to see the Co-operative grow in future?**

I think they're doing great, especially during the COVID times, with no one being able to attend anything. I love the approach that they're taking. They've built up the gardens really well. They're doing the produce boxes for the area and the markets. Then they're working on other areas like getting high school students to learn, which I think is pretty awesome. They're also working on doing workshops to help educate the community.

### **You've lived in many regions of Australia, do you think this project is replicable elsewhere?**

Oh, definitely. I have seen it in some areas, but differently. When we were out near Violet Town, they've got a seed-saving club; local community members gather together and collect their seeds throughout the year, then they sell them off to fund more growing in their community. I've also seen some permaculture villages in South Australia where they do tours and workshops for the community with different teachers. It's needed in every community. I just think it's brilliant.

# BEN AND KIM - WILD HORSE GARLIC FARM

My name is Ben, I work for the New South Wales public service. In 2013 we moved to this region. I've worked for a few universities and for the New South Wales Government. I've also done other things in the past, I've been a wetland ecologist. I haven't worked with soils, but I've worked a lot with water quality, looking at element cycles in natural systems and that sort of thing.

Kim: My name is Kim. And I grew up in this region with my parents, at their cattle and horse farm at Tabletop and before that my grandparents farms at Baranduda and Tangambalanga. After going away and working in wetland ecology, I worked out in the Lower Darling, when my dad passed away in 2013, we came back to this region to be near my mum and give her support. We got a little herd of sheep and that kind of started us off in that area a bit. We helped my mum with the cattle, and we worked with her horses. And then we bought our Spanish Mustang horses to breed and to sell. And now we've found our own beautiful farm.

Ben: All up we have about 230 acres. Although probably less than half of that is arable land, the rest is this bush land. It's sort of wilderness, steep wilderness.

Kim: We bought this farm last year. The fires had been and gone, but there were no buildings on it even then. Nothing burnt here, except for fences during the fire and bush.

What attracted you to the Upper Murray?

Ben: For a long time we have wanted to live on a property. And we've not had our own property before we've lived on other properties. We were planning originally to live closer to Albury, because that's where I work. And we wanted to buy a big parcel of land near there so that we could do things with horses and cattle, but we hadn't really thought about growing crops yet. But then our fates kind of changed. And the price of property changed a lot too. So it made us consider moving further away. And we hadn't really seen the Upper Murray until we came out to have a look at it.

Kim: We'd been camping here but we hadn't been driving around scrutinising it for farms that we might try and buy. Once it opened up, it was just amazing. It's the most peaceful, beautiful valley.

Ben: Coming up here and driving around the corner of Pine Mountain and seeing you know, the Snowy Mountains in the distance. It's a bit of a hidden gem.

Kim: That and obviously the Murray just across the road is magnificent.

## How will you approach working with the land?

Ben: I think that we're still trying to decide how we want to do things. What we were originally imagining is that we were going to graze cattle and breed horses and that sort of thing. And it's only recently since meeting Acres and Acres that we started thinking about all these other ways that we could support our family and contribute to the community. But the hard bit in that is the uncertainty. If you don't come from a gardening background; how do you grow garlic? How do you set up to grow garlic? There's quite a lot of steps to figure that pathway out. Acres and Acres takes some of the risk out of it, and it makes it more enjoyable too. It seems like you're part of a community. You've got people that are actively helping you to sort it out. And you have a lot more confidence that you can have good outcomes.

We're still talking to Acres and Acres about different ideas. Initially, we were planning to try garlic. But we've been talking about trying other things as well, depending on what the soils like, and you know how much success we have with the garlic. So, things like potatoes, for example, we might consider that and perhaps flowers as well.

Kim: One of my passions is our horse business, The Wild Horse Way. That's all about understanding how horses have evolved and how did they live in the world? And how can we create that sort of system on our farm, so that they're not over grazing on too much green grass, and they're kind of moving a lot. They need a lot of movement and different hays. We're looking at how to implement that here. And then there's the question of keeping biodiversity in our farming system. There's lots to plan and think about, which is pretty exciting.

## How did you come across Acres and Acres?

Kim: When we were buying this farm, the agent mentioned Acres and Acres to us and he just said Google it. We looked into it when we first found somewhere to rent in Walwa. One of the first weekend's I went into Corryong and met Josh and chatted and got all excited. It was pretty awesome.

## How might you be able to use Acres and Acres as a resource to benefit your farm directly?

Ben: There's a lot of specialty equipment that you could buy to help do something like, garlic, it's almost prohibitively expensive to do a very small amount. So, you'd want to put in a lot of garlic at once to make it worthwhile to purchase the equipment, for example, but that comes with a really high risk, right? So you could spend all that money and not be able to grow anything. But the tool library means that you don't have to do the research in terms of buying the equipment, you don't have to lay out that huge expense. And it's something that you can just share. Also, Acres and Acres, are providing different levels of assistance in terms of us implementing it too and that sort of begins with them offering, you know, advice and help right down to them helping us on the ground actually putting stuff in. And there's a lot of flexibility in that too.

Kim: You know, we've got this background in other areas with the cattle and horses and sheep, but not in the growing and so we wouldn't be able to go so quickly towards doing that. And it's kind of fantastic to have that support network. It's been wonderful to come into this community and to meet Acres and Acres and like-minded people that we can learn from and work with and have fun with to do these kinds of projects.

## Into the future, how can you see your involvement with the co-op?

Kim: Well when we get a bit more setup here, I can imagine Leila and I, and if Ben had time, we'll do some volunteering. Hopefully sharing experiences, sharing knowledge. With our background in ecology, thinking about systems and how they work and ecosystems.

## Could co-operatives like Acres and Acres might be beneficial in other parts of the country ?

Kim: For sure. In other parts that we've been living in we didn't come across this. And yet if we had, who knows where it would have sent us; in what other directions? I think it would be great for other regions.

Ben: It sort of surprises me that it doesn't already happen, because it seems like such a logical thing to do.

## **PETE WILLIAMS - MENTOR / ACCOUNTANT**

I'm Pete Williams. I do a lot of work in natural disaster recovery; bush fires, floods and any other sort of disaster that comes along. I'm an accountant. Two of my family members got burnt out on Black Saturday. I joined the Flowerdale recovery committee. Flowerdale is a town that lost 13 people and 234 homes in 2009. I was one of the people who led the recovery and rebuilding of the town. I was a CEO of a technology company and before that I was a company doctor in liquidation and administration, so I'm used to dealing with ambiguous situations and uncertainty.

### **How did you first come across Acres and Acres?**

Some friends put me in touch with Josh Collings after the Upper Murray fires. We had a chat about what was going on, because of my background, I said I'd come up. I met Josh in late January 2020, a few weeks after the fires, and he'd organised community leaders from around the Upper Murray and we had a session with them.

We talked about what happens with bushfire recovery, what to expect, the importance of taking ownership of your recovery. I'm very big on owning your own recovery.

What are some of the lessons from your experiences in Flowerdale that you were able to pass on? The first is that communities underestimate their own capability.

There is no They, you are now the They. Don't expect the government resources and services to charge over the hill. Make sure you're self-organising. You've got to keep doing that. And you've got to keep doing it for a long time. Again, there is no They, you are the They.

There's a real opportunity for education and creating jobs. I think there's four or five people now employed by Acres and Acres. It's got the commercial side of the market garden working, and it's also got a volunteer community. It's creating something that people can participate in and earn their own income.

### **What kind of emotions come out in a community after a disaster?**

What will happen in a disaster, you'll see communities step up and achieve amazing things. But disasters also amplify any underlying tensions that were there before. It's a massive change, everything is suddenly gone or completely changed. If there's been issues that have been existing beforehand, they'll often amplify. But you also find these gems, like Acres and Acres, where people who didn't know each other before get together and do some wonderful things.

It's about sustainable, empowered communities. How do we allow these communities to sustain their culture and their ethos? Their environment? Their economies? And how do we take what they've learnt through these disasters and move forward as a community?

### **In your role as a mentor, where did you look for funding to support what was happening on the ground?**

There are a lot of grants available from many, many sources. Josh had started with the idea of a Tool Library and trailer on a smaller scale. There were a number of specific grants for economic development for the area. Council, the State Government and Federal Government have recognised that these areas that had been badly burnt by the bushfires suffered a major economic hit.

They wanted to fund things that would create employment, that would have an educational component, and that would create community infrastructure and community assets. We ticked all those boxes, and also overcame other problems, giving opportunities for people who want to get into farming even on a small scale to access land, through leasing land from existing land holders. We actually did a lot of work looking at other small-scale intensive farming operations, both locally, and internationally.

Luckily, we had diverse expertise in the Acres and Acres leadership group. We were also able to reach out to other networks. To Joel Orchard, from the Young Farmers Federation. To Sam, from the Cooperative Federation, who helped us set up the right governance, financial management model and the articles of association. Megan Hunt, and the people from Gateway health and the Northern Food Alliance were also a great help.

Use your networks, as opposed to thinking I've got to know it all. It was very much research; learn; get out there; talk to people.

There's lots of money out there, but you need to be able to build up a model that can work and then actually do the work to say, how financially will this work? I always focus on, how do we become sustainable? A lot of not-for-profits will work on; how do we survive? I'm like; how do we thrive? So if you're not-for-profit, the first thing is make enough money to sustain yourself.

### **Could you talk a little bit about a cooperative and the organisational structures required to become fiscal?**

Cooperatives work fundamentally on the basis of membership. You're not looking to try and create shareholder value or create a return for shareholders. With a cooperative, we're doing this for the collective benefit of our members.

The board comes out of the membership. I think the key thing to think about when setting up a board is, do we have the skills on the board that are going to be able to help us run this thing successfully? You want to have people with knowledge around the core operations of your business, you want to have people who understand finance, law, marketing, those types of things.

### **What's the importance of mentorship in a project like Acres and Acres?**

Having a sounding board, who isn't just there to be a cheerleader. Somebody who's on your side but able to say no. I suppose we call it investment in the grey hairs, which I've got a bit of. People who've been through things before, and I think a mentor who's not working in the business, can take a sort of higher level, bigger picture point of view. I think it's really useful because it can be pretty lonely out there.

I think the Acres and Acres crew have done that really well. There's a network of people with different skills and experience you can tap into as different circumstances or opportunities arise.

### **What do you personally get out of your involvement with Acres and Acres?**

I feel it's vocational for me. I've had a lot of success in my career and business. But the Flowerdale experience even though it was tough and exasperating and tragic and all sorts of things rolled into together, seeing how communities that build their own capacity can really just thrive and shine. It's something that I feel is more like a calling than a personal benefit. It's in the doing, it's in the giving that you receive.

### **And what are your hopes for Acres and Acres co-operative into the future?**

I want to see the vision evolve directionally to where we started. And when I say directionally, it's resilience, food, building capability and creating opportunity for people. And how that morphs over time is fine.

Perhaps the bigger picture is, how can other communities that are in a similar scenario to the Upper Murray take control of their own destiny and look at a model like Acres and Acres and say, "You know, we could pick up and do that". That's ultimately the hope, not only the success of what has been started here, but to see that amplify across Victoria, Australia and other parts of the world.