 **Landcare Broken Hill Inc**

***Greening the Hill Mk.2***

ABC Radio interview No.24 – 8 October 2019

**OUR VEGETABLE GARDEN IN SPRING**

As a component of Landcare Broken Hill’s ***Greening the Hill Mk2*** Initiative we have often spoken about a number of projects which have vegetable gardens as a focus:

* our Landcare community garden projects which have started and are underway at the Centre for Community in Beryl Street – GtH2 Project 21;
* our encouraging of private individuals to ‘green’ their own backyards by getting out and garden in their own patch – GtH2 Project 19; and
* our Green Schools Project, GtH2 Project 5, which will hopefully get underway in 2020, following the wonderful lead of Alma Primary School in South Broken Hill

So today I thought I’d talk about my own family’s vegetable garden this Spring – perhaps to give a little encouragement

As a family we’ve always had a vegetable garden. I started when I was a very young child, in my primary school years.

This Spring we currently have 30 varieties of vegetables growing and in the last week or so, sown the seeds of another 7. We are really at the change-over time from the end of the winter vegetables, moving into the spring/summer vegetables.

We also have 22 varieties of herbs growing and recently sown the seeds of 4 more varieties.

**BEING WATER WISE, UNDERSTAND YOUR LOCAL DISTRICT & YOUR LOCAL CLIMATE**

In the Broken Hill district where water is scarce or comes at a premium cost, a vegetable gardener needs to be sensible and choose vegetables which are less water thirsty and so which are capable of growing, watered less frequently. So my advice is: select your vegetable varieties carefully keeping in mind how much water you will have available, how much water you can afford and how much time you’re prepared to put into watering.

Out on our station we do not grow members of the cucurbit family: pumpkins, melons, zucchinis etc. They just require more water than we have available or are prepared to allocate. The cabbage family is a water-thirsty vegetable. My advice is to always check your gardening book, the information on the back of the seed packet or your local nurseryman to see how much water the vegetable you’re considering will want to consume. In these drought conditions we are experiencing, I simply say: be sensible.

Design your garden beds having regard to the climate conditions and the scarcity of water. In the Broken Hill district the evaporative rate is 10 times greater than the average rainfall rate. In circumstances where BOM advises that our drought in this region is worse than the infamous Federation Drought of the late 1890s, you must accept that the effect of our evaporation is and will be even more extreme.

So choose to construct your vegetable garden beds by adopting **wick gardening** principles, or the modified version of that approach which we’ve adopted on our station and which I described in an earlier Landcare interview.

The key point is to ensure you water your vegetable garden in the most water efficient method. Subterranean percolation first if possible; or next surface drippers; and then, and only then, aerial sprinklers.

And remember, mulch and mulch again. Do whatever you can to retain the moisture in the ground, ensuring that the root zone of your vegetables never dries out.

**ALWAYS OBSERVE YOUR GARDEN & READ THE SIGNS**

It is really important to ‘read’ the natural signs when growing vegetables. This year has been particularly interesting. **Just by looking at the way the vegetable plants are growing this year, I agree with the meteorologists that this coming Summer is going to be ferociously hot.** I’ve noticed that this Spring, or rather late Winter, unusually many vegetables were bolting to seed. They have been going through their growing cycle in a sped-up fashion. Normally a vegetable will not flower and ‘go to seed’ until a good number of weeks pass during which period you harvest, but this year the speed with which they started to go to seed was far earlier than in previous years.

I’ve observed this going to seed phenomenon this year with rocket, coriander, silverbeet, swiss chard, broccoli, mustard, pak choy, bok choy, and a number of other Asian varieties. If it was just one or two varieties I’d just think it is disappointing putting it down to the soil composition or fertiliser and quickly plant a fresh batch, but this year something more is happening. **Given the wide range of vegetable varieties I’m observing, I’m convinced that the climatic triggers for seeding have come far earlier this year.**

Once a vegetable plant starts going to seed, there’s not much you can do, save temporarily stalling the process by harvesting the flowering heads. If the plant is determined, as they are this year, multiple flowering heads quickly emerge. For vegetable patch management purposes, the only way you can cope with this situation **is to stagger your sowing**, so that as each batch of plants starts to go to seed, you have the next batch ready to plant out, and the seed for the batch to follow ready to sow.

Another unusual observation this year, has been **how early the tomatoes are fruiting**. I have already been harvesting ripe cherry tomatoes, weeks earlier than normally I would do.

**Scorching ahead**. Reading these signs, I suspect the sunshine will be hotter and will have a greater propensity to scorch vegetables this year. My recommendation is that growers should be ready with their shade cloth curtains or covers earlier this year, and ensure they protect their vegetables from direct sun in the afternoons.

**LOOK AFTER THE BEES – GOOD POLLINATION IS ESSENTIAL**

We always make sure we plant plenty of flowering plants amongst the vegetables to attract bees and other pollinating insects. This Spring we already have nasturtiums and poppies flowering and will soon have marigolds and cosmos.

Apart from making a vegetable garden even more attractive to look at, to enjoy, flowers in the vegetable garden will ensure that plenty of bees are attracted. Those vegetables which need to be pollinated in order to produce more and better vegetables, for us such as peas and beans, do so much better if there are plenty of pollinating insects around.

For those who can grow pumpkin, melons, zucchini, squash and other vegetables in the cucurbit family, pollinating insects are a must, and so attracting them is essential. We don’t grow any of these vegetables as they are water-thirsty and we just don’t think it is sensible to persevere with these in the Arid Zone with as little water as we have available on the station.

**NATURE’S NATURAL SYSTEMS ARE THE BEST – or at least best for your health**

This Spring has reminded us, very early on this year, of the proliferation of munching insects which emerge once the weather warms up. Also, as there is so little green vegetation left on our property, we suspect that once a juicy green vegetable sprouts it’s little head, insects desperate for a good feed descend on it.

Two points to be made.

First, there is **nothing wrong with a few holes or bite marks in your home-grown vegetables**, like you might experience with say, lettuce, spinach or silverbeet. Providing you wash off the traces of the insect’s visit, the vegetable that’s left is as good as one without holes. Some say it’s a guarantee that your vegetable is healthy for you, for instance, being free of all insecticide – chemical free.

So my message is, don’t get hung up or too concerned with a few insect bites in your home grown veggies.

Secondly, with some vegetables, insect attack can be severe and quite upsetting. There are natural, non-chemical, remedies to insect attack. Some people have great results in trying an age-old method of gardening by practising **companion planting**. Companion planting is an approach where mutually supportive plants – plants that help each other – are gown together.

Out on our farm we experiment with this age-out natural approach to help deter some of the insect predators. So we always plant marigolds throughout the vegetable garden as they are said to have a natural insect deterrent effect. I’ve successfully tried planting pyrethum plants in the vegetable garden in the past, chrysanthemum being the most readily available. This year I’ve just sown chamomile, not only because it can be used to produce a good soothing tea, but also it is said to have the similarly beneficial effect as pyrethrum. I’ve always surrounded my tomato plants with many sweet basil plants and also use lemon balm as a good border plant for more sensitive vegetables. We don’t grow cabbage on our station, due to the amount of water required, but in the past I have always planted a number of sage herb plants in my cabbage bed.

Another good tip, if slugs and snails are a problem, put out a bowl of beer in amongst the vegetable plants where you can see a tell-tale sign of slug activity – the silver thread or trail of their slime. They love beer, are attracted to it, drink it and then fall in & drown.

**The next public meeting of Landcare Broken Hill will be its ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**at the Centre for Community, 200 Beryl Street, Thursday 31 October 7.00pm**

**when we will present the 6 month Report on *GREENING THE HILL MK2***

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