



Youth Guerrilla Garden FUTURE PROOF

WORDS BY HEATHER GALLAGHER PHOTOS BY FIONA CADOREL

Climate anxiety is rife among young people right now. On Victoria's Bellarine Peninsula, a rundown corner of a carpark is helping youth understand how small actions can lead to big changes.

On a small pocket of disused land in rural Victoria, a quiet youth-led revolution is taking place. An ugly patch of land behind the Ocean Grove Library's carpark has been transformed into a vibrant Youth Guerrilla Garden where local teenagers grow, tend and harvest produce.

The project is the brainchild of community planner and teacher, Fiona Cadorel, who was inspired by US-based guerrilla gardener Ron Finley. Fiona, part of Bellarine Community Health's Healthy and Connected Communities team, is passionate about engaging and supporting youth.

'I have a background in student wellbeing, and I listen to young people and what concerns them,' she says.

'Climate anxiety is huge. There's a lot of angst in the teenage years, but if you channel that energy right, they're unstoppable. They are growing food and using that as a vehicle to talk about bigger issues; the scary stuff they're worried about.'

YOUTH CLIMATE ANXIETY

The Australian Psychological Society acknowledges climate-related anxiety can be particularly acute for youth.

'I am seeing more and more people presenting with climate-related anxiety in my practice and I anticipate this will increase across time,' says president Tamara Cavenett, before adding projects like the Guerrilla Garden help give young people a sense of autonomy. 'When you're anxious, it can be important to channel your anxiety into things you can control,' she says. 'Community gardens are a great way to use a feeling of anxiety to propel you to do positive and helpful action. Evidence shows that directly experiencing nature can significantly increase your mood

and improve your mental health.'

Meanwhile, the Australian Parents 4 Climate Action group has found keeping kids positive a challenge. National organiser Laura Grufas says some parents are reporting their kids have 'switched off and lost hope for what the future holds'.

However, doing something, be it guerrilla gardening or protesting, helps alleviate those feelings.

'I have spoken to numerous students and they say it does help,' says Laura. 'But it is easy to slip back into anxiety or despair as they think nothing is changing or happening, so you just need to research and keep reminding yourself of the things that are happening.'

MANY HANDS...

The Guerrilla Garden is deliberately targeted at youth aged between 12 and 24. Fiona says there are plenty of opportunities for primary-aged kids to get their hands dirty, with programs such as the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden program, but by the time kids get to secondary school, most of these options are off the table in favour of traditional schooling.

Unsurprisingly, she's found many young, willing hands pitching in on the Guerrilla Garden project and reaping the benefits, with participants enjoying the refreshing and inclusive space.

The project is attracting a range of kids; many who've struggled to find acceptance among their peers including those on the autism spectrum, kids from the LGBTIQ community and some who've been bullied. Others are just passionate about the environment and get to be a part of a productive garden.

'It's a period of time in their life that they're forming their identities separate from their families,' Fiona explains. 'The Guerrilla Garden provides a space that's non-judgemental. And they engage with it because they own it.' >

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Guerrilla Gardening is the act of growing food or flowers in neglected public spaces, traditionally without permission. While the Ocean Grove garden has the support of local authorities, it still utilises a space that was once previously an eyesore.

'The Youth Guerrilla Garden has a deliberately provocative name that appeals to young people who feel disillusioned, disempowered or ignored,' Fiona says. 'The Guerrilla Garden is a safe and supportive space for young people who are seeking to rebel against the status quo, for those who are questioning our current food and waste management systems and are worried by the impacts of climate change on their health and wellbeing.'

It's also about providing food for those who lack ready access to fresh fruit and vegetables.

A Food Bank Hunger Report in 2021 found one in six Australian adults did not have enough to eat in the year with 1.2 million Aussie children going hungry.

'I want to live in an Australia where everyone has access to fresh, affordable organic produce,' Fiona says. 'Imagine if councils adopted the World War I and II "Victory Gardens" model that saw governments encourage people to establish vegetable, fruit, and herb gardens in parks and on public land in Australia.'

By teaching kids how to garden, the project aims to create a closed-loop food system. 'It's simple,' Fiona says. 'Grow, eat, compost, repeat.'

AN INCLUSIVE SPACE

At the start of each gathering, there's an acknowledgement of country and a group agreement about how everyone would like to be treated. There's also a discussion about values and why they're there.

The garden abuts the local branch of the national youth mental health service, headspace, and during most events there's a short tour of the building. While the sessions are not designed to be formal therapy, there is a clear sense of breaking down the stigma associated with getting help for mental health.

'I'm not creating a therapy space where kids can go blah,' says Fiona. 'It's about sharing a space where kids

can talk about who they can be in the world and how they want to contribute.

'We encourage them to be leaders in their community, change agents. And, of course, the work that they're doing is of service to others and the positive effect of that on mental health is really powerful.'

Tanya Fitzpatrick, manager and clinician at Ocean Grove headspace, says the space provides a welcome addition to their traditional consulting rooms.

'Some young people find sitting in a room facing a clinician a difficult space to talk about their thoughts,' she says. 'However, tilling soil side by side can provide a less confronting space and being active while talking can assist in the communication process.'

YOUTH VOICE

Odi Evans is the founder and leader of a local youth-led environment group called GangGreen and has been a keen Guerrilla Garden participant since its inception in 2021.

'It's very easy to feel very small as a young person – to feel as if you're voiceless, powerless, invisible,' they say. 'Faced with political and social reluctance to reform, we are increasingly frustrated with the lack of action being taken to combat the issues of climate change and biodiversity loss – issues, moreover, threatening to compromise our future.'

'Therefore, what is so inspiring, so empowering, about these initiatives is that they translate these feelings of frustration into tangible action.'

Odi, who is recovering from poor mental health, describes gardens, nature, chickens and bees as their medicine. And they've been enjoying the support and power of belonging to a group of like-minded people.

'Young people putting their ideas out there, getting their hands dirty and making meaningful contributions to their community – that, to me, is what change looks like,' they continue. 'By upskilling young people, we are equipping them with practical means to combat their own feelings of inaction and anxiety.' >



Opening page The transformed piece of land that's transforming youth. This page, from top Fiona (centre) with Odi (right) and other guerrilla gardeners; The participants use the garden to grow food and to spread the message of positive change. Page 68 Among other things, the raised beds are producing plenty of lush, leafy greens.

FUTURE LEADERS

The next step for Odi and other Guerrilla Gardeners interested is the Bellarine Youth Agents of Change Leadership Program. The program, another Bellarine Community Health initiative, is designed to give young people leadership skills, management skills and skills in community development.

'We'll identify things that concern them and then come up with actions that they can implement in their community to create positive change,' Fiona says. Meanwhile, Fiona is hopeful the garden will continue to thrive and attract more youth. And she's evangelical about encouraging others to follow her lead.

Young participant, Jett King-Smith, says he enjoys the gardening and takes pride in doing something that benefits the community.

'It's mine and a few other friendly faces' little corner of the earth,' he says.



Establishing a guerrilla garden

Find a disused piece of council land and get permission to use it. Apply for a grant for your proposed garden through government bodies.

'There's quite a bit of funding as we recover from covid,' says Fiona. 'Particularly around youth engagement and voice, food security, the environment and sustainability.'

The Ocean Grove Guerrilla Garden was built with a \$10,000 grant from Vic Health's Reimagining Health program.

With the funds, purchase a water tank, seedlings, manure, hay and gardening equipment. Also purchase materials for wicking beds which can be made by the participants, then recruit young eco-warriors aged 12 to 24 who are keen to reap the rewards of building and maintaining a productive garden.

Encourage the continued momentum with regular maintenance and harvesting by local youth and enthusiastic neighbours. One neighbour of the Ocean Grove garden was so inspired, they installed a beehive to help pollinate the produce. And host regular working bees to plant new produce according to the seasons.

Gangsta Gardener Ron Finley

Known as the Gangsta Gardener, American Ron Finley began a revolution when he turned his nature strip into a community garden. This simple act invoked the wrath of local law-enforcement and widespread media coverage followed. The news inspired people to volunteer their help and LA Green Ground was born. Now, Finley and his crew plant vegetable gardens in abandoned lots, on traffic medians and along the kerbs across South Central Los Angeles.

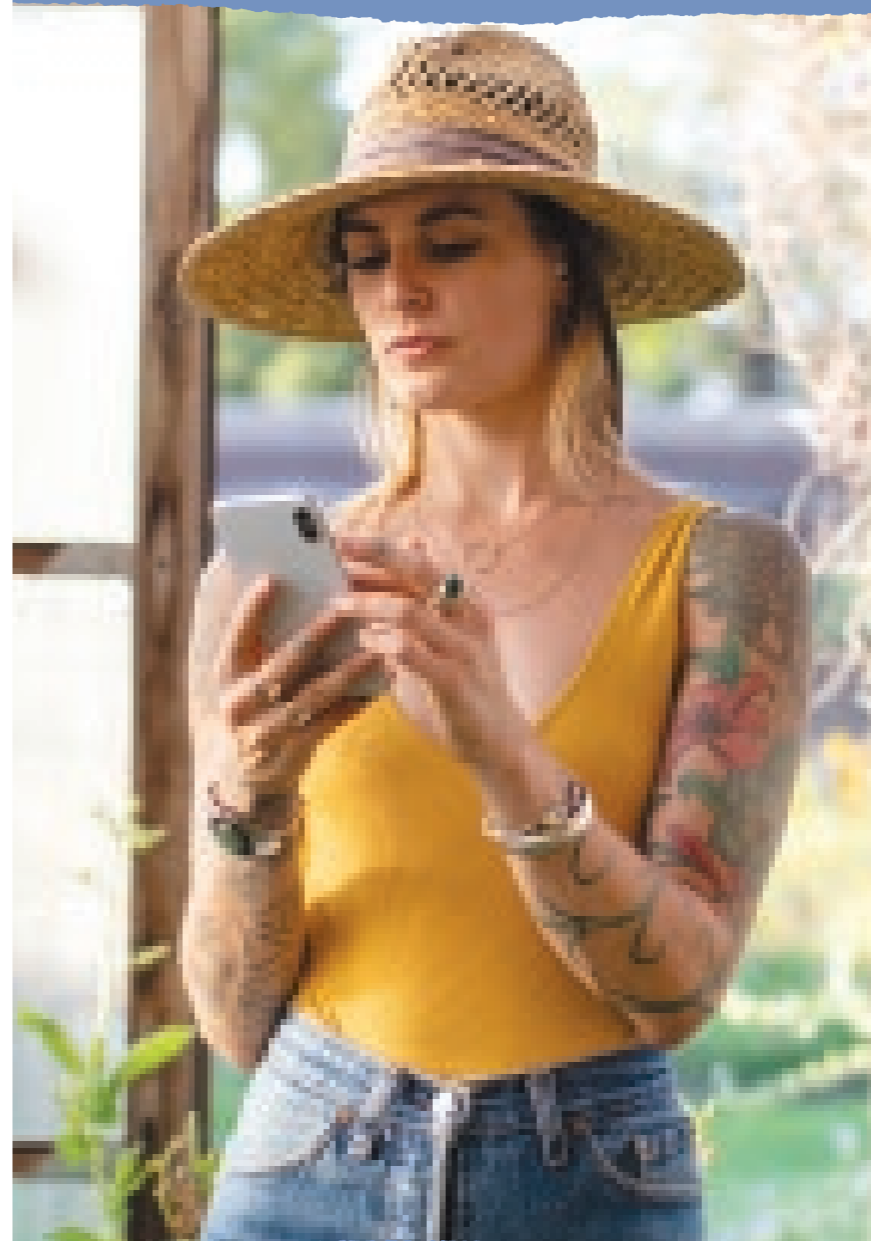
Finley says the plantings are for fun, for defiance, for beauty and to offer an alternative to fast food in a community where 'the drive-thrus are killing more people than the drive-bys. People asked me "aren't you afraid people are going to steal your food?" and I'm like, "Hell no, I'm not afraid people are going to steal it. That's why it's on the street, that's the whole idea. I want them to take it."

'You'd be surprised how kids are affected by this. Gardening is the most therapeutic and defiant act you can do,' he says. 'If kids grow kale, kids eat kale.'

People aged 12-25 seeking help for a mental health problem should contact headspace at www.headspace.org.au

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