

Emily Connors – Fertile Ground at Joe’s Garden

Situated alongside the Merri Creek near the Harding Street Bridge, Joe’s Garden is an institution in Coburg, for both its ability to draw in the community and its iconic status as the last surviving inner city market garden. Named after Coburg local, Joe Garita, the previous owner of the two-acre urban farm, the garden is steeped in history, having been farmed continuously by Chinese and Italian gardeners for over 150 years.

Joe migrated to Australia from Italy as a young boy in 1937 and lived around Victoria before settling in Coburg, his father buying the land in 1945. Over the years, Joe and his family cared for his vegetable garden, raising seven children, seeing off rapid urban development, a proposed freeway down the Merri, and a change in grocery habits, leading to the rise of supermarkets and the disappearance of the local corner grocery shop, a lifeblood for market gardeners like Joe.

When the farm was eventually acquired by Council and taken on by CERES in 2003 under the guidance of Joe, it was intended that he would retire. Chris Ennis, then CERES Market Manager/Gardener (and now Director of Innovation and Business at Fair Food) worked alongside Joe for years learning the ropes before Joe felt assured he was handing on the lease of this very special farm to the right group of people. Says Chris, *“He gave it over a couple of rows at a time – it took three years until he had passed on the whole farm. I didn’t get it at the time but came to realise that he was giving CERES an apprenticeship of sorts, making sure we’d know how to take care of the land he’d stewarded for 60 years”*.

Emily Connors, known as ‘Farmer Em’ first became involved at Joe’s Garden while working at CERES, leading volunteers and learning the ropes alongside Joe’s family. During her long days farming alongside Joe’s cousin Vince Fitipaldi, she noticed she would be stopping constantly to explain to people just what this wonderful farm was and how they could purchase veggies. Finally, it was Vince who one day pulled Emily aside, gave her a big hat and told her *“she was ready”*. *“It felt like a bit of a Mr Miyagi moment”* Emily said about taking on management of the farm.

However, the management of the farm was not a bed of roses. Financially, it was not sustainable in the long-term, only receiving the wholesale amount for its organically grown local vegetables. The farm needed more income to survive. In 2015, the year that Joe sadly passed away, Em launched the first farm gate stall, starting small, with just 10 bunches of silver beet and a DIY coffee percolator. Slowly but surely, it grew under Em’s care and enthusiasm, with new veggie beds being progressively planted and hot houses installed. A coffee machine was kindly donated and now the farm is easily serving 1000 people on a sunny weekend with coffees, warm pastries, local preserves, freshly cut flowers and of course, vegetables. It has become a hub for locals to enjoy the Creek and its environs.



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"It became something bigger than we had anticipated, and people really came together to make that happen", explains Em. "If they wanted to teach others about wild edible weeds or the joys of chokos we were the place to do it." Jean Garita, Joe's wife, pops down once a year to teach the community how to sauce tomatoes too. "The Farm Gate has become the canvas for our locals to come out and playfully paint out the world they want to see", says Em.

The garden brings community together, truly planting the seeds of friendship and inspiring community sharing. This has been particularly evident during the COVID lockdowns with the Saturday morning farm gate teeming with dogs, children, bikes and picnic blankets.

"It's definitely a family here, from the people who support the farm, to the locals who visit. Even the birds. It feels like we can be self-sufficient here, nourished in all ways. By food, by music, by community."

Thinking about what the future of the Merri Creek looks like, for Emily *"The Merri Creek is fertile ground; it was for Joe, it is for me. Not just for food, but for ideas and for a better future. A place to vision and place to be creative, it is a constant source of ideas"*. In addition, the Balam Balam project, a collaboration between the Wurundjeri Corporation and Joe's Garden, is an important part of the future of Joe's, one where they are working towards growing food suited to our changing climate while creating opportunities for First Nations to find culturally relevant work. The Wurundjeri Corp will soon be employing a horticulturist to oversee this garden and their Healesville bushfood project.

It is hard for some to think of the Merri Creek without first thinking of Joe's Garden, the Garita family and of Farmer Em, and the role that each have played in growing the Merri Creek community into what it is today. A truly beautiful gift to the community.

Acknowledgements

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