



SEASONS IN MY KITCHEN GARDEN

A journey from paddock to potager



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Prologue

*Paddock:
a piece of fenced-in land
(Australia and New Zealand)*

My perception of food changed in an instant. Driving through Longevity on the Princes Highway, I was gazing out the window at the large steel towers that carry masses of high-voltage power lines through the Gippsland region in Victoria. Standing prominently against the gentle rolling hillsides, they looked completely out of place, like an alien invasion fleet waiting to strike. But it was not the futuristic towers that concerned me, it was what was beneath them—cattle, herds of grazing beef cattle. While it is not safe to lie beneath these extra-high-voltage transmission lines, which are known to emit an electromagnetic field, it is acceptable to grow food here. Beef cattle, sheep, fruits and vegetables are all produced in the vicinity of these power lines. Does this have an impact on the food? The fact is, no-one knows!

This was the moment that highlighted the importance of provenance for myself and my family, and changed forever the way I sourced and prepared our food.

That image of the cattle underneath the towers has plagued me ever since, especially when I look at my children, Brodie, Oscar and April, and wonder what this chemical-filled life is doing to their growing bodies.

The only way to really know what you are eating is to know the origin of your food, or to grow it yourself. With lots of friends who lived on farms, my family and I were able to start eating beef obtained from a known source almost instantly. The rest followed.

*Potager:
a kitchen garden, from the French,
meaning vegetable garden*

Buying and processing our own beef was easy. It was just a matter of finding the right local butcher to prepare the meat we provided. We soon found a source for lamb, and for pork. We started to keep a few chickens for many so you can have in a small residential housing estate in Somerville on the outskirts of Melbourne. We also started to grow our own herbs. Vegetables could be purchased directly from small local farms and market gardens, and we began to embrace the seasonality of our produce. We developed our own produce route, a map showing where we went for each item. Fun at first, but in no time the kilometres began to add up.

Decision time: do we continue running around like this, or do we buy a farm and do it ourselves?

When the opportunity arose to purchase the farm I'd grown up on, a 20-acre (that's about 8 hectares) property on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, the decision was made. It was only 10 minutes from our current house and offered our family the opportunity to control how we lived and what we ate. It had to be the right choice. All this running around was too much work. Too time consuming. The farm was only 500 metres – how hard could it be!



SPRING

A time for rejuvenation and growth

They are a twisted and contorted mess, proving that you really shouldn't take gardening advice at face value. The lady at the market actually professed to be sharing vital information with me when she told me to plant the seedlings in clumps to minimise root disturbance. While it was not what I had been shown before, as a horticulturist I have gleaned many useful hints and tricks from growers over the years, and am always willing to give their tips a go. This was obviously not one of the good ones. The carrots were twisted and knotted together, some even looked as though they had morphed into funny-like carrots. The parsnips are not much better, growing backwards over themselves as though they were too shy to grow outside the soil from the punnet.

Not everything is a complete disaster. I am pleased to announce that the carrots grown from seed are perfect. They are straight and beautiful, so the problem was certainly with the advice, and not the green thumb. Lesson learnt. That will be the last time I grow root vegetables from punnets, no matter what other gardeners tell me.

Now what can I do with these ugly veggies? Carrot and pumpkin soup with fresh cotlander from the garden. Perfect. Once they've been cooked and blended, we can appreciate their full flavour, without looking at their contorted bodies. The sooner they are eaten, and out of sight, the better.

No fences, no weeds

Apparently good fences make good neighbours. If that is the case, we are in big trouble, because finding a reliable fencing contractor

on the peninsula is like finding a needle in a haystack. What's worse is that until our fences are improved we cannot stock the farm. Ideally, cattle would now be filling their bellies with all our delicious, rich, spring grass, but we just cannot risk a large steer escaping onto busy nearby roads. So, for now, the pasture continues to grow with no impediment.

Several years ago, no-sprayed hay, you could sell a roll of hay for \$80. Now, everyone has hay and you'll be lucky to get more than what each round costs to cut, rake and bale. While we still have several months before we'll need to cut our hay, looking out across all that long grass makes me think of lost opportunities. It seems so inefficient to let so much pasture go to waste, especially when local farmers have had years when they would have done anything for this much feed.

On the positive side, I have noticed a distinct lack of weeds. Usually, the farm paddocks are plagued by capeweed, but this year I have not seen any. Over-grazing really does have myriad flow-on effects, namely soil nutrient depletion and weeds. And that, of course, when you get weeds you need to spray to eradicate them. Eventually the farm ends up being a chemical cocktail of herbicides and insecticides and very little else. At least now we can notch one-up for organic control and natural soil improvement.

We need new fencing not just for cattle. We also need it for my new horse who is coming home shortly, as well as for the sheep. There'll be arriving in summer and any other animals we may wish to bring home on a whim... and let's face it, thank bound to be a few of those.

We continue to ring around to try to get a few local fences to quote for us. Eventually





SUMMER
a time of abundance and harvest

to be a bone of contention. We want to select a tree that is edible, but grand. It also must be evergreen, in order to screen the property from the road.

At first my thoughts were purely ornamental. I wanted ornamental pears so that we could enjoy the seasons; however, they don't provide a screen in autumn, nor do they provide fruit. Citrus were an option, but as a line of trees they just didn't seem magnificent enough to make that statement required of driveway trees. Oudean Farm, the home of Diane Elisabeth Murodoch, is famous for its driveway lined with lemon-scented gaura (*Corymba citrifolia*), although these do not fit our criteria either.

The driveway sets the pace for the rest of the garden... in fact, for the entire farm. Choosing the right trees is imperative. It seems as though there is a feast or famine of ideal landscaping trees. There are undoubtedly an overwhelming number of wonderful trees, but few are perfect for our needs. For now, this decision will have to wait.

Aside from selecting trees, we still need to find a gate for the potager. We have spent several weekends traveling through antique and bric-a-brac shops, and just when you think you have found the right gate, it is either ridiculously overpriced or simply does not fit the opening that has been allocated. In hindsight, we probably should have found a gate prior to fencing the garden. In hindsight, there are many things we should have done differently; impatience has been one of our main stumbling blocks, and continues to hinder our journey moving forwards. At this point, there is no looking back. Life deals you a set of cards and it is your choice how you play them. 'Maise' is out of the question. I feel

that finding the right gate for the potager has become more than just another task, and is not simply about locating an appropriate access point, it's about winning every trick, and beating the imaginary adversary of misfortune that has been overwhelming us.

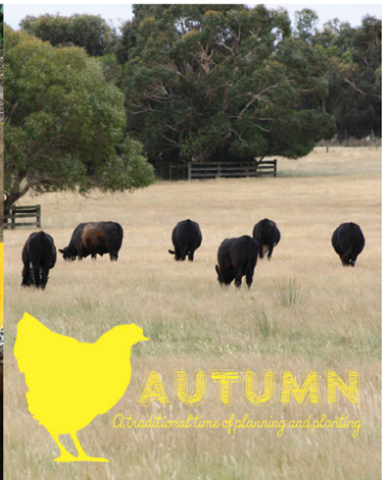
Saying on Barry

I cannot bring myself to ride Lunar. In fact, at this stage, I prefer to admire him from afar. The time is coming when I will need to move him on, but it doesn't seem right to blame him for my own shortcomings. At least he is a wonderful paddock mate for Valentina, even though they are an unlikely duo, much like Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello, due to the massive difference in their heights (Lunar at 15' hands, Valentina at 12 hands). And while we are no longer using the float for its intended purpose, we can at least use it to collect our sheep.

As they are no longer lambs, the time has come to bring them home.

They are waiting in the shambles when we arrive at our friends home in Finlay, in New South Wales. We know it is a long drive to collect our sheep, a trip that most people would consider unnecessary; however, knowing the history of these animals is far more important to us than a few kilometres of bitumen. These are to be the foundation of our breeding stock, the start of our own lamb supply, so enjoy it passionately. A quick cup of tea and it's back to the yards. Loading them in the float is actually easier than loading Lunar. A 12 foot gate, placed either side of the ramp, guides them effortlessly onto the float and





AUTUMN

A traditional time of planning and planting



Robert Byrne, Auctioneer, of Bay Street in the Borough of Sandridge, County of Bourke, sold the property (described as 730 acres, 1 road and 11 patches) originally granted to Charles Augustus Smart. The land was divided into easements, with the one now known as our property being sold to George Hiemella on 31 December 1854. On 15 June 1861, John Roberts, Farmer, purchased the farm, now comprising 16 acres, 3 roads and 11 patches. He sold it to Ellen Roberts, wife of John William Roberts, Minister/Plat on 17 September 1902. Upon her death on 4 December 1922, the 11 parcels went into probate with her husband before transferring to their son, Benjamin John Roberts. On 20 May 1924, Benjamin Roberts passed away and probate was granted to Dorothy Roberts, his wife, who died later that same year. The property again went into probate, before it was eventually purchased by my family in 1928.

A call to the local historical society yielded even more pertinent information. It was on this call that I stumbled across the most important resource for uncovering the history of our farm – someone who had lived as a neighbour for 40 years. With other more pressing issues at hand, I'll have to wait that phone call for later.

The girls Rhonda and Rita

It's late autumn and our egg supply is beginning to dwindle. It won't be long until we have just enough eggs to feed the family, with only a few left to spare for visitors, friends and pals.

In the suburbs we always had our own chickens. A few sourcing our own beef, they were the main food item we sought to control.

While regulations concerning livestock in residential areas are tight, chickens could only have two chickens, they provided more than enough eggs for the whole family.

We chose Isa Brown chickens and rescued two from a battery farm near Cranbourne. Our girls, Rhonda (after Rhonda Bushmore because she also has long legs and a ruddy/brown head) and Rita (because of the neat alliteration), really highlighted to us the differences between ethical and non-ethical farming.

When we arrived at the egg factory to select our chickens, we were marshalled through a series of sheds, each filled with multiple rows of small cages filled with chickens of all sizes. The cages were separated above large piles of chicken manure. I found myself wondering how often this manure was removed. We were asked if we wanted chickens at point of lay, to which we responded in the affirmative. We were then shown how to determine if a chick is ready to lay based on the spread of their hips. It was as simple as pressing two fingers gently between their legs; if two fingers can fit in the space, then that bird is at point of lay. A useful piece of information without a doubt, but that was the only highlight of our visit.

But it is not right to judge the farmer without understanding the evolution of the egg production industry in Australia.

The first poultry came to Australia on the First Fleet in 1788, and although it is hard





WINTER
A time for maintenance