

# ACE OF SPADES

## CLARE'S SUSTAINABLE STEPS

- ✦ The first thing the couple did was put in a little garden near the back door and fill it with vegies.
- ✦ Since then they have added a new area to their patch each year.
- ✦ They also created a wood-fired pizza oven, and levelled a large area nearby so they could sit and eat near the oven.
- ✦ The garden, which is also home to ducks and guinea pigs, now has a frog pond, a bug hotel and a lizard lounge for the blue-tongue living outside Clare's studio.

A Healesville couple has created a bountiful garden that looks after the environment and the family's wellbeing

WORDS PENNY HARRISON

Clare James has been known to collect lawn clippings from neighbours, old woodchips from the side of the road and even rotting seaweed at the beach.

But the fruits of her labour are evident in the flourishing sustainable garden she and husband Mark Boulet have created on their small block in Healesville.

"There is so much out there waiting to be turned into rich, sweet, healthy soil, and if you have that you can grow anything," Clare says.

It's taken about 13 years for Clare, an artist, and Mark, an environmental science lecturer, to turn the "big rectangle of kikuyu lawn out the back" into an oasis of fruiting trees, vegetable gardens and chook pens.

Clare says her dream was to create a garden where their two daughters, Lylah and Olive, could get lost, hunt for eggs, pick fresh fruit and vegetables, and always find a posy of flowers.

For the family, the garden has become a natural extension of their home.

"It never really feels like a chore for us to be out there from breakfast until after dinner," Clare says. "Often, we light the fire bowl or the pizza oven in the early afternoon to cook our dinner. We bring out a basket of bread, preserves, cheeses and pots of tea and coffee throughout the day."

Much of their food comes from the garden and each year they harvest apples, nashi pears, figs and plums, six varieties of citrus, feijoas, pomegranates, grapes, an array of herbs and countless vegetables.

"We get up to 50 eggs a week from the chooks (or none at all in winter) and, at certain times of the year, eat entire meals exclusively from the garden," Clare says.

Growing food comes naturally to Clare, whose father always had an abundant vegetable patch.

"It feels good feeding your family from the backyard," she says. "Our food scraps are divided between a chook bucket, guinea pig bucket and worm bucket in the kitchen. The chooks eat our scraps and weeds, producing eggs and manure, and also help remove pests. The worms devour our waste and make nutrient-rich plant food. Excess fruit and vegetables get bottled, preserved or gifted to others. All of these cycles are just what makes sense to us as gardeners."

This sustainable cycle can be achieved even in small back yards, and Clare says she loves seeing people embrace gardening, although she often baulks at telling them how much time she devotes to her patch.

"I don't want to turn people off, thinking that it's a lot of work," she says.

"You don't need to give that much time to a garden, but you also can't expect to have a maintenance-free garden, unless it's all hard landscaping.

"It really becomes a way of life and a way of connecting with other people."



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