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## 'Growing' food and community in the remote Kimberley region

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# NEW COMMUNITY



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# 'Growing' Food and Community in the Remote Kimberley Region.

Anne Jennings

## Brief history of localised food production in Australia

I will commence by contributing historical evidence of localised food production in Australia, starting with Aboriginal people, on country, prior to colonisation. I will then move on to food grown by colonists, then addressing the depression and world war years, concluding with activities at the end of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries.

### First Nation Peoples

For thousands of years people living in Australia have undertaken many forms of food production, involving preparing, processing and sharing food, starting with the Aboriginal people prior to colonisation. Bruce Pascoe's (a Bunurong man from Victoria, author and historian) research of journals and diaries written by explorers and colonists has "revealed a much more complicated Aboriginal economy than the primitive hunter-gatherer lifestyle we have been told was the simple lot of Australia's First People" (2005:11). Evidence points to "people building dams and wells, planning, irrigating and harvesting seed, preserving the surplus and storing it" (2005:12). One example provided by Pascoe is the 'desert raisin' or 'bush tomato', which has been used by Central Desert people for thousands of years. This plant has become dependent on people for its propagation and spread. Custodians, in turn, celebrate the plant in ceremonies, dance and song, with body painting often featuring its image. Further, surplus harvests were conserved for future use by being ground into a paste and rolled into balls. This allowed for transportation and/or storage of food that could be kept for future consumption. It also enabled fruit balls to be shared among family and community and provided the opportunity for them to be used in economic transfers. Overall, as Pascoe pointed out, "Australia is a colonised country with a colonised mind. The first Europeans were steadfast in their refusal to use the food offered by this country, the domesticated food products of Aboriginal Australians" (2018:xiii).

### From Colonisation to the twentieth century

Colonisation saw Europeans arriving on Australia's shores, initially English and Irish people. The first garden of introduced food plants was started within the first week

of the commencement of the colony at Sydney Cove, in January 1788 (Coltheart, 2016). The following year saw yields of cauliflowers, French beans and strawberries. Due to the perceived lack of alternative food sources and the inability of the new settlers to learn from the Aboriginal people living there, growing known food became imperative.

The next few years saw people in settlements and on newly established farming properties producing vegetables and fruit for their family and staff, as well as exchange for other products. This trend has continued since then, with different periods highlighting the relevant history in time, as it relates to the food being grown; for example, during and after the gold rush days, Chinese gardeners provided fresh produce for their own use and local sale or exchange.

Another case records activity by one Mary Cunningham, who successfully planted and harvested vegetables and fruit on her family farming properties, starting in the late-1800s. After returning from a stay at the Australian army base in Egypt in 1916, Mary returned home and harvested her almond trees and dispatched them to the troops based overseas. Interestingly, as well as noting the exchange of plants between friends and family during different periods, Australian historian Lenore Coltheart, wrote that "[h]istoric food garden research not only provides a basis for assessment and conservation of vulnerable elements like Mary Cunningham's almond grove .... but offer new insights into everyday life by looking into the backyard of Australian historiography" (2016:7).

In his exploration of *Australia's Quarter Acre: The story of the ordinary suburban garden*, Timms acknowledged:

*"For centuries, the vegetable garden and home orchard were simply a matter of necessity: 'if we don't grow them we do without'. Brunning's Australian Gardener declared as recently as 1924. That was the case for most Australians during the nineteenth century and remained so for many until well after World War II. We tend to forget that, throughout human history, gardening has very often been a matter of life and death" (2006:129).*

To further support the widespread movement of home food gardening, it was noted that, in "1845 ... one Hobart Town nursery catalogue offered the seeds of fifty-two different vegetables and herbs" (Timms, 2006:131). For many people it was essential to have vegetable gardens during both the Depression Years of 1890s and 1930s, to allow them access to food and nutrition.

After the Depression, some people reported being embarrassed about growing home vegetables, because they looked like they were poor.

The Second World War did, however, stimulate a higher degree of food independence as a result of threats to the Australian food security (Gaynor, 2018). The post-World



War II migrants to Australia also added variety to backyard food production, with people from countries including Italy and Greece bringing their vegetable growing expertise to this country.

Over time, Australia experienced the arrival cheap inner-urban housing – the urban sprawl - and more advanced food preservation - including ice-chests and Fowler's 'Vacola' bottling outfits, through to refrigeration, the corner store and then supermarkets, to name just a few changes (Gaynor, 2006; Kunek & Stone, 2018). Another major alteration was from small commercial vegetable gardens to expanded large-scale farming ventures, where horticultural products were produced from monoculture systems. Added to this was the proliferation of modern transport systems, which resulted in the availability of foods being produced in vastly different climates from the ones where the products were presented for sale. Consequently,

*Few shoppers today would even know, as they fill their trolleys with fruits and vegetables, which of them are in season and which are not. Another payoff for having everything at hand all the time is that taste and smell have been almost eliminated from what we eat. (Timms, 2006:138)*

In summing up his research, Timms concluded *"A great deal has changed since the 1930s. Home gardeners today are beginning to show the way, not because they have been forced to, but because they are better informed about, and more attuned, to the processes of nature"* (2006:207).

As time moved on, backyard vegetable production scene also changed. By 1992, home food harvest was dominated by Australian-born people of over 55 years of age, as different to all age groups in earlier generations (Gaynor, 2006).

The second half of the twentieth century also saw other changes, including the emergence and support for publications like *Earth Garden* and *Grassroots*, and the commencement of community gardens. The Permaculture movement, started by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, was also at its peak during that era. As Holmgren points out *"[g]rowing food right where people live, in back and front yards, has environmental, social and psychological benefits"* (2018:91).

From the late twentieth century and now into the twenty-first century, people's interest in growing their own food has evolved further, with many seeking 'pure' food. Reasons given are based on health, including the danger of pesticide residue and herbicides in foods and concerns for the broader environment relating to their usage (Gaynor, 2006), as well as issues related to climate change. Another factor is 'food miles', the transport measure of the distance travelled by food products between production and consumption (Gaballa and Abraham, 2007). Rose emphasises these points by observing: *"... contemporary food systems in Australia (and globally) are acutely*

*categorised as being oligopolistic: they are dominated by a handful of powerful agri-chemical, grain- and meat-packaging and trading, food-and-beverage-processing and supermarket corporations."* (2018:197).

The quality and taste of food, and the continuation and growth of heritage, non-hybrid varieties of fruit and vegetables available from seed-saving clubs and small seed companies has also added to change of consciousness. This involves a resurgence in adopting permaculture principles, involving the recognition that urban areas produce large amounts of organic matter, which can become a critical resource for improving and maintaining soil fertility, and use of composting systems and greywater recycling. In addition, as well as building household resilience, urban farming is a practical and satisfying way to connect with nature (Holmgren, 2018).

This historical context has provided the background to examining urban food production in the twenty-first century. This *"[k]nowing our history empowers us to redirect these historical forces for the establishment of an economy based on [local] food production"* (Kunek & Stone, 2018:187). The next section will provide a brief view of some Kimberley First Nations Peoples' wild food production and then to a larger case study of the community project, *Incredible Edible Broome* - all located in the remote North-West of Western Australia.

### Background to the location - Broome

Broome is located in the Kimberley region on the North-West coast of Western Australia, 2,240 kms north of Perth. The climate is usually classified sub-tropical and our nearest towns are Derby, 203 kms north; Fitzroy Crossing 396 kms east, and Port Hedland 599 kms south. There is archaeological evidence that Aboriginal people have lived in the Kimberley for at least 60,000 years.

Rainfall, which comes over summer (wet season) and often via thunderstorms and cyclones along with humid weather, averages 464 mm annually (just over 18 inches). Little or no rainfall is received in the dry season (winter). The countryside around Broome is predominantly rangeland used for cattle production.

While remote isolation can be a limiting factor when it comes to many fulfilling everyday needs, including accessing fresh food and high transport costs, the wonderful dry season (winter) weather - usually around 30 degrees every day - and world-famous beaches attract many tourists during that time. The permanent population is around 16,000 people, which expands to about 45,000 during the peak of our tourist (dry) season. Some of the population is, however, reasonably transient, given many people 'go north' for a few years, for work and leisure, then move on.

I will now provide a brief overview of contemporary First Nations People's continued use of local food products, before moving on to a detailed case study of the local, grassroots, community project, *Incredible Edible Broome*.

### Contemporary First Nations Peoples

Aboriginal society continues to access native foods in culturally contemplated ways. One West Kimberley example is Mayi Harvests, established by Pat Torres in



Broome (see [www.mayiharvests.com](http://www.mayiharvests.com)). This Indigenous family-owned business harvests wild food products from their traditional lands. Ancient protocols are applied, including cultural beliefs and the land management practices of harvesting products seasonally, to ensure a sustainable future. Mayi Harvests not only sell their products, they also openly share their knowledge of plant foods and remedies to assist customers enjoy good health and well-being (Torres, 2019).

An East Kimberley example is provided by Samantha Martin, a descendant of the Kija/Jaru peoples, who was taught ways of identifying, preparing and eating produce off local land and waters by her mother and other Aboriginal Elders. She understands their nutritional properties and the diversity of Australian bush foods and regularly shares her passion and insights through a documentary series (and book) *My Bush Tukka Adventures* via television programs on SBS/NITV (Martin, 2014).

Similarly, another television program, *Kriol Kitchen* (also on SBS/NITV), hosted by Ali and Mitch Torres and featuring Broome and other Kimberley Aboriginal people, clearly points to strong connections between local native foods, cultural history and nutritious and tasty cuisine. As well as sharing family stories and recipes this program has moved forward by supporting young people sharing their own cooking styles, influenced by the generation that came before them.

Aside from acknowledgment of the value of bush foods from Kimberley Aboriginal Corporations and change agents like Incredible Edible Broome, Aboriginal

food knowledges remain largely marginalised, typically through small enterprises (Wooltorton et al. 2019), but rarely through mainstream food acquisition or consumption. In reality, the Kimberley environment provides significant food sources, including native fish, reptiles and small animals, as well as fruits, seeds and vegetables. It is recognised that for many small, remote communities, the Kimberley's environmental richness and biodiversity is a precondition to food security. Like climate change, food insecurity is interwoven within a web of cultural, ecological, economic and political complexity which, according to Pascoe (2018), points to the need to work locally and ensure information about local food knowledges is actioned and passed on to next generations.

#### Case Study: Incredible Edible Broome (IEB)

Incredible Edible Broome (IEB) is a grassroots community-initiated, -owned and -run project, based on provision of locally grown fresh fruit, vegetables, seeds and herbs. The motivation to commence this project started when the (then) manager of the local Broome Circle Community House was shown a TEDtalk video at a conference, featuring the dynamic Incredible Edible co-founder in the UK, Pam Warhurst. She returned home to Broome and spread the word. This resulted in a planning workshop held at Notre Dame University, where over 80 enthusiastic local people participated - and IEB was born.

This organisation is now a part of the new wave of self-organising, non-hierarchical, community food groups

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<i>Monthly Food Shares</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ Meeting monthly at Broome Circle Community House. People bring in excess produce from their home gardens including vegetables, fruit, herbs, plants, seeds, cuttings, recipes, seedlings. This can include paw paws, bush foods, bananas, coconut and herbs and plants to make drinks and tea. People moving to Broome are often more familiar with growing in the Mediterranean climates of Australia, so regularly request hints on growing food in a sub-tropical climate.</li> <li>☛ Also shared are more standard vegetables like tomatoes, sweetcorn, cucumbers and zucchinis, to name a few.</li> </ul>
<i>Equipment Shares</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ IEB has two trailers for community use – one large one, with hydraulic tipping which can, for example, be used to cart mulch. The other one is equipped with multiple use garden tools. This equipment is available to the community at a minimal cost to cover ongoing expenses.</li> </ul>
<i>Skill Sharing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ At monthly Food Shares members regularly demonstrate a wide range of skills, including cooking Asian foods, how to de-husk coconuts (with a large machete!), making mango roll-ups; cooking with lemon grass; making Kombucha; cooking with Boab leaves; making coconut yoghurt; Blachan (sambal) cooking demonstration; composting, permaculture, and more.</li> </ul>
<i>Seed Exchange</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ Members save seeds and share at the monthly food shares. IEB has also set up an open, collection box of seeds at the local Library. These are available free to everyone, with many returning seeds from their resultant successful gardens.</li> <li>☛ Also locally sourced native bush seeds are available to giveaway at both venues.</li> </ul>
<i>Local Garden Tours</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ Regular tours are held, travelling to members and others' productive gardens, many as cycling tours.</li> <li>☛ Learning from each other while having fun.</li> </ul>



<i>Community Education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ In partnership with Notre Dame University, Broome, hosted the film 'A New Economy' with a Q&amp;A session with a local expertise panel.</li> <li>☛ Host training workshops, including: establishing worm farms; how to develop wicking (large container growing) beds; building raised beds; bugs in edible garden; locavore (locally grown food) share lunch; what works – mulch and manure; making sourdough bread and dry season planting.</li> <li>☛ Film Nights – including films on Tiny Houses; Fight Food Waste Film and Art Night; The Kids Menu, No Impact Man and 2040.</li> <li>☛ Fight Food Waste short film competition, with a Winning Films Night involving an interactive art exhibition and locavore food/drink.</li> </ul>
<i>Broome North (new subdivision) community garden</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ IEB established and maintains with volunteers a community garden. This is in conjunction with the developers, residents and teachers and school children. It includes garden blitz's; picnic feast and film nights in the park; and a garden shed with tools for public use.</li> <li>☛ IEB also regularly assists with children's day care centre's garden in town.</li> </ul>
Broome Harvest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ Annual event held on the grounds of a local restaurant and craft brewery.</li> <li>☛ Provides a wide range of local fare to taste and enjoy at the Harvest, including: 'Boab pesto'; Banana flower salad; Boab seed beer; Kombucha; freshly squeezed sugar cane juice; Boab seed Fro-Yo, local seafood, native fruits and lots more.</li> </ul>
<i>External projects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ Involved in and/or supports other projects including Boomerang Bags, where volunteers make cloth shopping bags and donate to shopping customers to reduce plastic bag usage; Food Coop – IEB partnering by having Co-op food collections at their monthly food shares; Chinatown Shop Owners, setting up edible food boxes on footpaths and walkways in the centre of town, as well as the edible garden verge in conjunction with Broome Circle House.</li> </ul>
<i>Collaborations (Partnerships)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☛ With other groups including Broome Circle House; Broome Food Coop; Notre Dame University, Broome; Environs Kimberley; Broome Community Recovery Centre (mental health); and Police and Citizen's Youth Club (PCYC), Plastic Free Broome, and others.</li> </ul>

'sprouting up' all over the world. From humble beginnings only five years ago, IEB has progressively moved forward from initially targeting home gardening/backyard food-growing and sharing/swapping excess food to become a more comprehensive, grassroots community organisation. Further, IEB is 'growing' its membership and activities by expanding into a wide range of locally-initiated programs as a result of listening to local people talk about their needs.

IEB's community activities and projects include:

#### Exploration of IEB

This research involved one-to-one interviews with IEB members (me being a co-researcher with members); my personal involvement with the group (as a local community member/insider and a professional community development practitioner); discussions with the organising committee members and accessing publically available documents and social media.

Primarily, it was found that IEB's projects and activities clearly involve interconnected processes. Being interconnected is considered an essential ingredient in initiating social and ecological change, a process recognised in international documentation, including in *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Pope Francis, 2015):

All of us are linked to unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect (LS 89).

Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage ... which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth (LS 92).

IEB's interconnected activities are positioned both internally and externally. Internally they reflect strong relationships between members and their connection with the earth and nature, plus their activities often cross boundaries, for example community education combined with horticulture, reduced food miles and community building – all in one activity. Further, externally, IEB is connected with community organisations operating from similar value bases, evidenced by the robust alliances that have resulted in undertaking joint community action projects.

#### Urban Commons

Areas emerging from this study are classified under the banner of urban 'commoning'. In the past, urban commons were characterised as collectively shared property, however this definition has moved on to understand commons as "more-than-property" (Williamis, 2018, p. 16). "Commoning describes a diverse and expanding array of practices and interactions that are expressive in new forms



*of social relations, between and amongst groups of people, and between people and other lifeforms*" (Rose 2018, p. 202).

Key features of urban food system commoning in Australia include:

- sharing and collaboration* (of resources, knowledge, skills, land, traditions and culture, food);
  - connection and interdependence* (to country, place, home, history and memories, friends and community);
  - nurturing, care, respect and trust* (of women, children, cultural difference, multiple species, of life itself);
  - celebration, joy, welcoming and hospitality*;
  - healing and overcoming* (of divisions, fear, ignorance and bigotry, past and present suffering and injustice);
  - creativity* (to imagine, transform, work with plants and animals, co-design);
  - and diversity* (of plants, species, cultures, people).
- (Rose, 2018, p. 203)

This study has identified the values held by IEB's membership and the activities/actions they undertake embrace all 7 points listed above, at different times and to different degrees. The importance of sharing and collaboration and of connection and interdependence is a major difference to the 1880s to post-World War years, where backyard growing was an individual activity. Collective and collaborative approaches are successfully being undertaken by IEB and other similar groups.

Gaynor (2018) clearly differentiates between the two examples by identifying:

- 11 *"One of the distinctive features of the 'revival' of urban food production in recent decades is a growing attention to the more communal dimensions of food production, moving beyond a self-provisioning focus to encompass food production as a means of strengthening community and providing fresh and nutritious food ..."* (p. 173-174).

The importance of building community relationships and strengthening people's knowledge and skills base is embraced by members. Markedly, couples and their young children make up a noteworthy proportion of the organisation's membership - a shift from previous decades where many urban/backyard gardeners were over 55 years of age.

### Community Economy

Mobilising the 'wealth' of the community through food provisioning and practices of commoning is a key component of the IEB project. With many people now living in urban settings, there is interest in 'taking back' the food economy. As Gibson so clearly articulates:

*It is important [to] see food production as a contested site of both commoning and uncommoning, community making and unmaking, so that we can take steps to build ethically oriented community economies that make the benefits of an urban food commons more real* (2018:8).

Examples of this involving IEB and their partners include food shares, community gardens, road verge gardens and the edible food planters located on the town centre's footpaths and walkways. They offer nutritional food sources for everyone to access, replacing the

thousands of kilometres of 'food miles' and economic benefits that flow out to multinational, profit-oriented companies. An extra bonus is that local people can enjoy the *"pleasurable visuals, aromas, touch sensations of edible produce"* (Gibson, 2018:11). Another IEB activity that supports community wealth is the Broome Harvest lunch feast, an annual celebration of local food. Local seafood, native foods, leafy green salads and desserts – to name just a few – are available to eat and enjoy, while allowing participants to meet the people who grew and/or made the cuisine.

An added community bonus from the IEB food shares is that surplus garden produce is regularly donated to the local project *Feed the Little Children* (FTLC). This Broome-based group has volunteers cooking and delivering over 600 healthy hot meals two nights a week to local children and pregnant and nursing mums. Broome police statistics show that nutritional food availability has measurably reduced the number of local children charged with stealing offences (yes, some offences involve children stealing food because they are hungry!), with further research being undertaken to quantify changes in nutrition-based illnesses and hospitalisation (FTLD, n.d.).

Another example is IEBs collaboration with the Broome Food Coop, which involves their physical co-location for the monthly IEB's food share and the Food Coop's products distribution. IEB's equipment, a large tip trailer and another trailer equipped with multiple use garden tools, is a further example. Importantly, this makes gardening equipment accessible to everyone, so those who are not in a position to purchase them can start/continue their vegetable, herb and fruit gardens which, of course, also contribute to community wealth.

### Conclusion

This paper has 'painted' a picture of edible food creation in Australia, from production by Aboriginal people thousands of years ago to the colonists who only arrived around 230 years ago, through to current times. It has looked at ways people have been, and are still, involved in establishing and maintaining healthy, resilient local food systems. The case study of Incredible Edible Broome highlights their stories and is examined within the 'urban food system commons' framework - from which Rose challenges us by asking:

*"Are we going to be active shapers of our own history and creative narrators of our own stories? Or are we going to be passive observers, spectators of the historical process as it is written and shaped by the currently dominant actors?"* (2018:201).

This research exemplifies those involved to be active shapers of their own history and creative narrators of their own stories. This intergenerational approach is inspirational, telling us that the solutions are already around us – that, as William Gibson is regularly quoted as saying: *'The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed'*. Our history speaks to us today and into the future (Kunek & Stone, 2018:196); the future is here now – our hope is that we can fulfil the second half of that quote, for our and future generations' sake – as well as that of our planet. ●



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## A descriptive study of food options in a rural community: Utilising the Healthy Choices Food & Drink Classification Guide in practice

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**Ethics:** This work involved ongoing health promotion activities as a partnership with the community and small rural health service.

### INTRODUCTION

Individual behaviour does not adequately explain food choices<sup>1</sup>. There is a strong imperative to examine the connection between food choices, the community food environment and consumer behaviour<sup>2,3</sup>. In the Australian health context, understanding this connection is becoming increasingly crucial due to the ineffectiveness of strategies to reduce obesity prevalence. Australian obesity levels have doubled in 10 years; from 2.7 million in 2007-08 to 5.8 million in 2017-18<sup>4</sup>. Across 15 years, the proportion of people living with obesity has risen from 18% in 2004-5 to 31.3% in 2017-18<sup>4</sup>. The number of Australian children living with obesity has increased by 60% over 7 years; 249,000 (2011-12) to 396,400 (2017-18); with the proportion rising from 7.0% to 8.1% within this time frame. This group are 5 times more likely to continue to experience obesity into adulthood<sup>4</sup>. Children living with obesity for a greater proportion of their life have increased health and mortality risks<sup>5</sup>, thereby contributing to the societal, economic and health impacts of obesity. National and international data indicate that those with the lowest social, economic and educational resources are at greatest risk of obesity<sup>6,7</sup>.

A deeper understanding of the intersecting influences of the community food environment, consumer behaviour and food choices is of strategic importance for Australia's rising prevalence of obesity. The food environment is a determinant of food choice<sup>8,9</sup>. Public nutrition comprises 4 features of the food environment:

1. Community: the type, location and accessibility of