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Growing a Garden Community

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My father was a nurseryman in the days when that meant being a gentleman and having a passion for the beauty of plants. When other children were reciting nursery rhymes, I had a list of botanical names he'd taught me to get my tongue around.... pittosporum eugenioides variegatum and eucalyptus camaldulensis are 2 that spring to mind. My mother said I was born with sap in my veins. By the time I was 10, I spent my weekends in the nursery with him, heeling in fruit trees and roses and writing labels, or wandering alone down into the warm, mossy depths of the seed raising houses. When my father died and I was in my 40's, I lost my best gardening companion and mentor. I became a solitary gardener; unable to find a kindred spirit.

One day a few years ago I heard that an acquaintance of mine was looking for people to help start up a seedsavers group in my area. I was on the phone in seconds, tracking her down. And so it was that a small group of us started The Hills and Plains Seedsavers[1] and pretty soon I found a kindred spirit or two. You see, mine is not just an interest in growing food, but a passion for doing as little harm as possible to all living things, respecting the beauty and wonder of natural ecosystems, and feeling a deep connection with all that has gone before us on earth.

But just starting a group does not ensure its success; it needs communication, someone to oil the wheels and fire the passions. I

felt that this was how I could contribute best to our new group. When I mentioned this at home one day, my son Alex said ?Mum, you need a blog. Here, let me show you what I mean.? Five minutes later I'd started our seedsavers blog and started writing..... about growing food, about how to work with nature, about people I met and gardens I saw. I made people laugh and I made people cry. Writing became my next passion!

Now, with a blog, I discovered that there were thousands of people out in blogland who also wrote, grew food, had opinions, made comments and became friends, including Roger Doiron and the people at KGI. Blogs draw people in from all walks of life and many local people began to join our seedsavers group, often knowing everything about me before we'd even met, because of all my writing! In 2008 I went on a world trip for 6 weeks, staying with food gardeners, on what I called The Voyage of the Vegetable Vagabond. From Singapore to the UK, France, the USA, Canada and parts of Australia I dug in the soil and cooked in the kitchens of wonderful people, sharing stories and seeds and laughter. I dug clams out of the sand with Roger and his family and dug up Belgian endive from their garden to put into buckets of sand for the winter.

The days of the solitary gardener were well and truly over! If only my father could have seen where his delight in growing plants had led me.

In March this year, I moved to south eastern Tasmania, to a little place of 800 inhabitants called Cygnet, named after the swans that the French explorer d'Entrecasteaux saw when he entered the picturesque bay. I was once again a solitary gardener..... but I had a new blog which I called Vegetable Vagabond [2]. All my friends from blogland came with me and cheered me on in my new life but I felt that need to find real people to share seeds, produce, fun and food with.

I heard of a local sustainable living group and went to a meeting. I knew no-one but when asked if anyone had anything they wanted to say, I stood up and told them about my passion for growing food, for saving the seeds of our civilisation and for making limoncello..... if anyone could please give me some lemons! They clapped wildly and I blushed madly but there began what I now boringly call the Home Gardeners Group (as opposed to their other garden groups like the community garden group etc). We meet once a month at a volunteer member's house, check out their garden, give away seeds, seedlings etc and have coffee and cake. I have found friends I feel I have known for years.

I send them a weekly email telling them a few things I might be doing in the garden, maybe an anecdote of a market I've been to or a person I've met. I always include a couple of links to things I have read online during the week, and a recipe from my repertoire of eating from the garden. I know that soon they will get to know me, as long as I keep communicating with them, and this will cement our group and bring us all closer to the joys of life. There are now 40 on the email list and it is slowly growing.

I organised a winter walk to the local gardens of 4 wonderful people in Cygnet, for KGI's World Kitchen Garden Day [3] in August and I am going to organise another for early summer. This brought other people in, people with children and with elderly relatives in wheelchairs. To find the gardeners with gardens to visit, I simply walked the streets, looked over fences and knocked on doors. A local woman who happens to write for the state newspaper did a whole page article about it! I even got to talk for 20 minutes on the radio..... it really is not that hard to make a start. You have to be motivated, but you have to listen and not be a know-all. After all, I am just the facilitator of all this; mother nature is the boss.

If you are wanting to start a group it is worth looking people in the eye, with a smile not a frown. Have a good sense of humour and be prepared to laugh at yourself.... a lot! Be calm but firm. Don't get bothered by those who put you down or who don't want to join in at first. Be fair-minded and genuine. The more time you spend one on one talking with people, the more people will want to follow your lead. It takes a lot of time every day to do this at first but it is very important. Open your heart and your ears. Be flexible but don't let others steer you away from your goal. This takes quite some confidence, which comes with time. I was terrified the first time I had to talk to the group. But people want to find leaders so don't be afraid to lead.

Finally, follow my grandmother's 2 pieces of advice.... First, never leave home without a damp hanky and a pair of scissors (for cuttings you may need to take whilst you are out!) and second, believe none of what you hear and only half of what you see.

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