



## “Feeding the world; Caring for the Earth”

a 2014-15 educational resource for family farming and soils  
at <http://familyfarms.enviroed4all.com.au/>



# 80 and still learning about growing plants, Warracknabeal, Australia

## Our Family

Come in! Welcome to our **backyard tomato plot** – a tiny family farm – in **Warracknabeal**, the Wimmera.

My **wife and I** are in our **80's**. We live in town, having retired off a broad-acre farm. But we haven't lost our love of **farming/gardening**; we have been family farming all our lives, growing food for us and the world, and native trees and flowering plants.



## Our Farm

We grow some food in our urban backyard (*photo right*). The garden is big, and our urban family farm here takes up only about **3 sq metres in tomatoes** this year, but they grow up to **over 1.5m high**, between stakes. My wife mainly grows **herbs and other plants mostly** in tubs. It is enough to keep us busy! But many town families grow no food at all – our town has two supermarkets.



Our Mediterranean climate can be quite harsh in the **summer growing season**: typically very **dry**; some days are **very hot** (over 40C, and even 45C); many days have hot, dry **northerly winds**; with occasional big **thunderstorms**.

We have town water supply with **water piped** from the Grampians over 100 km away, so there is always enough water for the tomatoes to grow. *Can you see the tomato plants and herb pots in the photo above, on the right side of the path?* They are **sheltered** from winds and storms by the **fence** and our extremely hot days by the **shade cloth**.

Warracknabeal was built on the floodplain of the



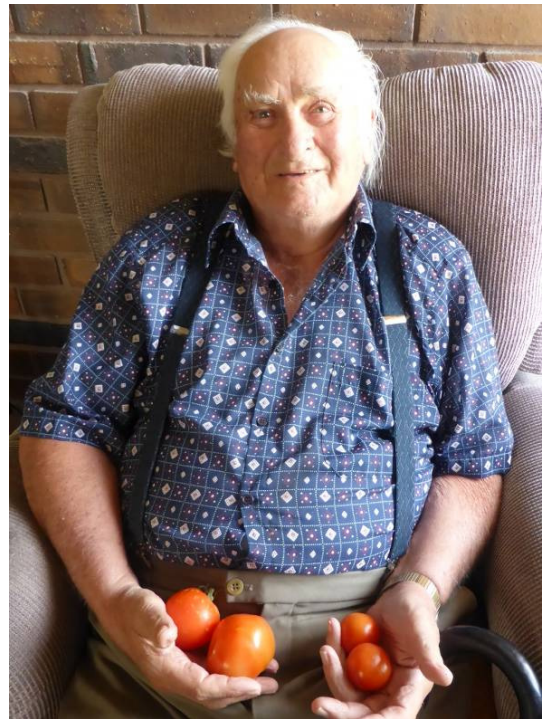
Yarriambiack Creek, so our garden is **flat**.

Floods are good for soil, but there are none here anymore. The **soils** are **sandy and poor**, especially compared to where we farmed 20km away at **Bangerang**, where we had lovely '**self-mulching**' soils in Buloke country. ('Self-mulching' means that soils fall apart as they dry into a loose surface mulch - some protection against erosion.)

## Our produce - '**Feeding the world**' Means '**Feeding ourselves**'

### Tomatoes

My favourite tomato is in my left hand of the photo above right- the **Grosse Lisse** (*Lycopersicon esculentum*). It produces lots of large, juicy red fruit. It is interesting to watch them flower, form fruit, grow and change from green (*photo right*) into red – ready for picking. I have been growing *Grosse Lisse* out at the farm for a long time- beside the cow shed. Now I'm growing them in town.



### Herbs, vegetables and fruits

My wife grows other food around the garden, e.g. under the Roma tomatoes. (*How many plants can you identify in the photo right?*) Her **herbs** are:

- ✿ chives,
- ✿ coriander,
- ✿ parsley (*photo below right*),
- ✿ lemon thyme (*middle in front of tomatoes*),
- ✿ mini lavenders).
- ✿ mint, apple mint,
- ✿ rosemary,
- ✿ society garlic, (*to the right of the tomatoes*)
- ✿ sweet basil (*on either side of the tomatoes*),

rhubarb (a vegetable) (*photo far right*)

strawberries, (a fruit) – we had others at the farm and some scented pelargoniums (*photo right*).





My tomatoes are very juicy - better than any bought ones! My **favourite meals** for freshly picked tomatoes are in a sandwich or on toast, and for parsley, in mashed potatoes. My wife used some of her herbs in a chicken jaffle the other night- very tasty! She is also eating three leaves a day- trialling the 'arthritis' plant remedy (*see photo right*). We often have tomatoes and herbs to share.



## Sustainability - 'Caring for the Earth'

### Using and maintaining proven heirloom varieties

Over a long time, 'Grosse Lisse' has proven that it is a great tomato to grow. It has been grown in Australia so long that it is considered to be an heirloom variety. Choosing *Grosse Lisse* seedlings supports the continued use of this heirloom variety and thus the biodiversity of our tomato plants.



Do you know the **origin** of our tomatoes? (I believe you should always be learning! Even in your 80's!) There were 'bush tucker' tomatoes in Australia when colonization began, but not this sort of tomato. Our tomatoes all can be **traced back** to **South America**, from where they **brought** to France and Italy by the **Great Explorers** in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In the **colonization** of Australia, tomatoes were one of many 'European' plants and animals brought here. Did you notice *Grosse Lisse* is French – hinting at its origins before colonization? (For a quick tomato history see <http://www.tomato-cages.com/tomato-history.html>)

### Experimenting with plants

We experiment with growing plants that are new to us or in new places. This is the first year I have grown tomatoes in town, so getting the soil conditions right is a trial. Growing the 'arthritis plant' is another trial.

My wife is trialling Muntries (*Kunzea promifera*) this year, also called 'Emu Apple' and 'Native Cranberries'. It is a native bush - a hardy and prostrate- suited to sandy soils. It produces berries as bush tucker food, that we hope will be very tasty!



## Caring for soils



The soils in the backyard are dry and sandy - not fertile enough for growing tomatoes. So I improved them for the tomato plants (*photo right*). I brought in some of our **self-mulching soils\*** from the farm at Bangerang, to mix in with lots of mulch and organic matter and added 'Dynamic Lifter' for extra **nitrogen**. I used town water to **add moisture** to this and through the dry summer months, when the tomatoes grow and ripen.



Crops on our broad-acre farm are **rotated** to look after the soils. Likewise, the nutrients I add to the soil are used in making the tomatoes that we eat. So I will move the tomatoes to a different plot in the garden next year. This year's plot had flowers in it last year.

[\*The 'self mulching' soils at Bangerang belong to the soil order called **Grey Vertosols**. They have a lot of clay - the smallest soil particles. They swell with rain, and shrink and crack open from long dry spells, if without plant cover. Winds blowing and water running across our plains over 20,000 to 2 million years ago though varying climates deposited the clays for our Bangerang soils. For more information on this soil type and what they look like, see

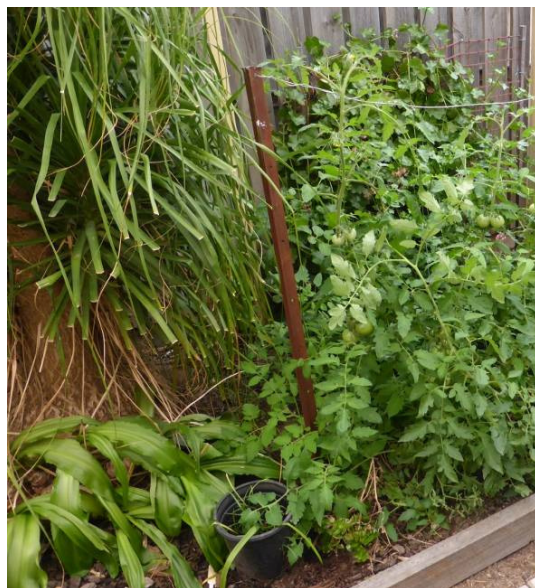
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## Visitors to Flowering plants in the garden

Our town garden is large enough for lots of plants (e.g. like those growing beside the tomatoes *in the photos right*). Our decorative trees, bushes and bulbs provide **habitat for insects, reptiles and birds** and help keep our **home cooler**. We love seeing the flowers, greenery and birds around us, and hearing:

- ✎ Kookaburra
- ✎ Galahs
- ✎ Crested pigeons
- ✎ Honey eaters

However we are not so keen on the **pests** that come into our town garden due to our improving the soils and plants! So for the snails, slugs, grubs, and white fly, we use pesticides to keep our plants healthy.



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Written by J. Clark from interviews with L. and B. Koschitzke and K.

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