

The St Clair Sustainable Living Group



By Nev Sweeney

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1.0 Starting Out

Yonks ago I wanted to start up a group based around people in our area living more sustainably. A fine idea but my thinking was rather fuzzy so I never really moved too far with it. Eventually I decided that it would be good to build it around the fairly non-threatening idea of home grown veggies – save money, provide food for the family and have fun – that sort of thing.

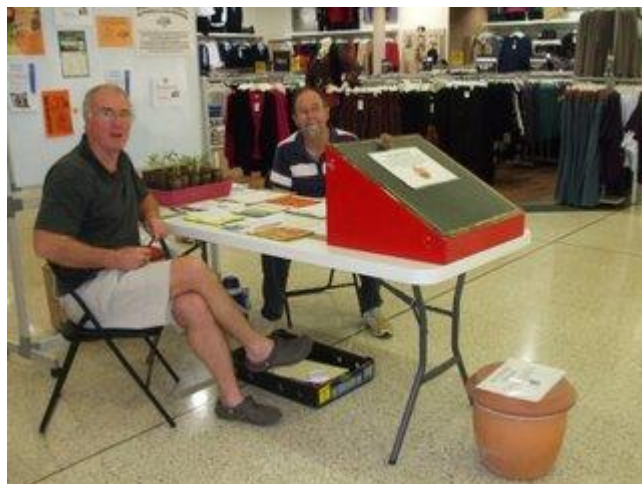
If I could attract both new and veteran veggie gardeners we could get cross fertilisation (if you will pardon the pun) of ideas and share seeds, seedlings, produce and growing techniques and information; everybody wins! Getting too heavy with global warming and peak oil can put people off, so starting off with something a bit more positive increases the likelihood of reaching interested people.

I put a flyer together with our email and phone number and put them up around the place (Including our local McDonalds) but never really got any bites. I knew there must be people out there but contacting them seemed to be a bit more difficult than I thought.

Then I had my second brain-wave. Our local shops are reasonably big and popular, so why not get a table, bring along some seedlings and other stuff like the solar oven and pot-in-pot cooler to spark some interest and have a bit of a stand. They are also only 5 minutes walk away so I could transport stuff easily. I knew that the centre management were well disposed towards community groups; and there were a number that had tables there regularly so off I trotted to talk to them.

I started into my spiel and was brought to a rapid halt! Before I could even commence discussion I needed \$10 million in public liability insurance. What a shock! There was no group to share the cost with, only me. Although I found somebody on the internet who would insure me for one day it would cost me several hundred dollars. Bugger!

I didn't forget the idea but had to shelve it for a while, back to the drawing board. But then something interesting happened.



Bob and I in the shopping centre

Recently I have become involved in setting up some sustainable living workshops with Mamre Farm and as part of that we decided to do a promotional stint in our local shopping centre. They had no problem allowing me to have some signup sheets and flyers for a veggie growing group as part of that and (woo hoo!) they

already have the right level of public liability insurance. I was in!



The surface of the board facing away from us

We did a number of the shopping centre displays, the first one went off well and we had some interest in the workshops as well as the veggie growing group. I designed the flyers to be half an A4 sheet so that they were the right size to be folded up and put in a pocket. We also had a white board and were set up so that the back of the whiteboard was covered in brochures and accessible without approaching our table, that way people could walk up and browse without feeling intimidated by us. Next time we will make sure that flyers will be available to pick up from that side of the whiteboard too. We were there on a Saturday morning from 9:00am to 12:30pm.



Talking with one of the visitors

Some people did stop to chat, but it was good to have someone to talk to during lulls in the enquiries. If you try this and it is only you, take a book!

We ran the second one and were having a similar experience when my wife suggested giving out the flyers rather than just letting the people come to us. D'oh! This worked very well and it also seemed to work better when Rachel was giving them out rather than me, so never underestimate the power of a pretty face.

2.0 The Story Continues

It took six months but the St Clair backyard veggie gardener's group got up and running. In the end while we only got one expression of interest from the Saturday morning stall at the shops, a number came from other areas. Notably two different very enthusiastic families contacted the website after seeing flyers in the local library and one lady became interested after visiting us here at the choko tree on Permaculture Day. Now with a committed core of people we are able to start regular meetings and work on getting more members as we go.

Venue

The obvious venue is one of your group's houses if anyone has the room; because it is comfortable, safe, amenities are in place and it is free. In our case, because I was setting it up the obvious place would have been at our house but we didn't have the room to fit everyone in so I had to look farther afield, specifically facilities provided by our local council.



In the end there was a community cottage behind our local shops available for rent and they had a vacancy on Monday evenings so I chose the third Monday of the month and a quick email to the members confirmed that this was OK.

Due to the fact we were a community group the rent was set at a very reasonable \$10.50 per hour and we only needed the venue for 2 hours. It is certainly

large enough to take far more than our current 10-12 people so as the group (hopefully) grows we will have no trouble accommodating the new members.

Another bonus is that if we have 10 or fewer meetings a year we are covered by the council's public liability insurance policy, although if site visits to each other's houses or other places are on your agenda as they are on ours, it would be wise to check into the costs associated with public liability insurance. If it is agreeable to the members the

cost of the insurance would be borne by everyone so there would not be too great a financial burden on the organiser.

After the group agreed on the venue and timing of the meetings at the first meeting I booked out the venue for the following year so that we are guaranteed a place to meet. Other possibilities are your local school if you have any contacts, they may be able to arrange the use of their facilities or your church if you attend one may allow you to use one of their rooms for meetings.

Promotion



Here is what our flyer looks like

One of the easiest ways to promote your group is to develop and print some flyers that say a bit about your group and give contact details, I used both my home email and email/guestbook details for our website, at the very least include a phone number. Once developed you can put a flyer up and leave take away copies in any of the following locations in your local area, assuming they give you permission, to get to your target audience –

- Doctor's surgery
- Health food shops
- Day care centres
- Local library

Other ways you can get the word out is to see if you can get a press release put into your local School and/or community newsletter or approach your local papers that can

be positively inclined towards community groups. Also try approaching a community radio station if one exists in your local area although even the mainstream radio stations sometimes have time set aside for community service announcements and could give your veggie gardening group a plug.

3.0 Setting Things Up



Tea and Coffee Making Facilities are good to Have

Even before the meeting started I arranged to have tea, coffee, sugar and milk as well as some sweet biscuits with me for refreshments after the meeting. You shouldn't rely on your venue to provide them so take some with you just in case they don't. It is a very nice way to end the meeting by having an informal chat over tea and coffee. I got there early and set up the chairs in a semi-circle so that everyone could see everyone else, in front of a wall that I had set up butcher paper on, holding it up with Bluetack to record ideas. I also took 8 or 10 books about veggie gardening from my library and placed them on a table to one side of the room so that people could have a browse through while having their coffee or tea.



Setting up the room prior to the meeting

I put a sign on the front door of the cottage so people would see that this was where the meeting was and provided a sign-in sheet at the front of the room including a place to enter their email. In this way I could make sure that everyone was able to receive copies of notes from the meeting as well as reminders for the next meeting and any other details required.

After welcoming everyone and thanking them for their attendance the first point was to confirm that the time, date and venue were suitable for future meetings and then confirm the date of the next meeting. We then went around the room and each person was given an opportunity to speak, telling the group 3 things -

- Their name,
- What experience they had with growing vegetables, and
- What they would like to get out of the group/see the group do.



Happy smiling faces

While I as the facilitator recorded each person's responses to the third point on butcher paper so we could build up an idea of where group members wanted to go, a few of the responses are listed below –

- Learn how to grow vegetables better.
- Make the best use of what you've got.
- Learn to grow vegetables organically ie without chemicals.
- How to plan a vegetable garden, what to plant when etc.
- Be more self-sufficient.
- Share ideas and learn from each other.
- Learn how to set up and maintain a worm farm.
- Learn about growing and using medicinal herbs.
- Learn about preserving the harvest.
- Learn how to companion plant.
- Learn about chooks in the back yard.
- Learn about composting.
- Get together to do practical learning workshops like plant propagation or pruning.
- Have workshops or working bees at each other's houses regularly.

It was decided that this list could be added to in subsequent meetings. The concept of having a guest speaker eg someone from a local Permaculture group to discuss Permaculture principles; or to show a DVD related to vegetable culture was discussed and accepted. There was also a short discussion around what would be the ideals of the group and these were agreed to be –

- Have fun.
- Save money.
- Connect with likeminded local people.
- Share ideas and experience.
- Learn new things.



The Book Table

Once the meeting is concluded (and tea, coffee and biscuits happily consumed) it is important to return the room to its original condition and clean up afterwards so that you get invited back to use the facilities again! All that remains then is to type up any notes of the meeting (I hesitate to be so formal as to call them “minutes”) and email them out to the members.

4.0 Running a meeting

The group has now been formed and the first couple of meetings have been conducted. We are still getting new members and over a dozen people at the last meeting. This first meeting was all about setting up the group and the second was about planning what to grow so it was time to move into the more “technical” side of gardening. So by mutual consent the third meeting was about how to grow vegetables from seed.



The Seed Raising Mix Raw Materials



One of the group sowing seeds into the seed raising mix

I don't have access to a projector at the moment so I had to transfer the information I wanted to present onto butchers paper with brief notes (but no diagrams, my drawing skills suck!) that covered off the following –

- Why bother? – satisfying and fun; save money; give them a head start; plant only growing plants; wider range of veggies over commercial punnets.
- Which seeds are sown directly versus sown in punnets – big seeds and root crops direct sown, everything else in punnets.
- Hygiene – the need to disinfect all trays, punnets, tools etc with dettol or bleach etc to prevent disease build up.
- Making potting mix – the usual formulation of one part sand, two parts compost or worm castings and three parts cocopeat (horticultural coir), mix by hand and keep damp to prevent dust formation.
- The process for sowing – putting the mix in punnets, tamping down, sowing twice the diameter of the seed deep and then filling the rest of the punnet cell.
- Conditions for best germination and growth – warm and moist with plenty of light when the seeds germinate and protect from pests.
- Pricking out – use a paddle pop stick, at the four leaf (2 seed leaves + 2 true leaves) stage, keeping as much soil as possible, pit into filled tubes or pots then level off with seed raising mix.
- Plant out by hardening off if required, in the late afternoon is best, dig a hole and place tube directly in the hole, cover up, mulch and water in.



During the Practical Exercise

Having gone through all of the theory we had a 10 minute coffee break to give everyone a chance to regroup and have a talk with the other members. After the break we did the practical. I had provided some plastic trays of sand, cocopeat and sieved compost, a plastic up in each tray and smaller trays to mix the seed raising mix up in and some 8 cell punnets for people to use. I also had some seeds appropriate for the season just in case, but had asked everyone to bring their own seeds to use and share and in the event there were plenty of seeds to go around.



During the Practical exercise

I also provided an ice cream container and scissors to make labels for the punnets and within half an hour everyone had made their seed raising mix and planted their seeds in the punnets. After a quick discussion we decided this theory then practical format for the meeting was a good one and that some of the meetings going forward would follow the same formula. After some discussion we identified the following subjects as suitable for future meetings.

- Wicking bed
- Self watering container
- Cardboard Box Solar Oven
- Worm Farm
- Bokashi bucket
- Hay box cooker
- Rocket stove
- Natural bug spray
- Sprouts and microgreens
- Seed saving
- Moveable sun shade
- Mini-greenhouse
- Up-the-wall garden



The meeting wound up on this note and everyone seemed to be happy with the night's activities.

5.0 The Group – Three Years On

The group which started out as the St Clair Veggie Gardeners Group is now in its third year and we have a dozen or so people who regularly attend with a few others who drift in and out. The format is still the same, the first half is me or another presenter spruiking on about a particular subject for about an hour, then we break for coffee and cake & biscuits followed by a second hour or so of practical, which may be me or others demonstrating a skill or technique or it may be something everybody can have a go at. Either way there is always a practical component of each session.

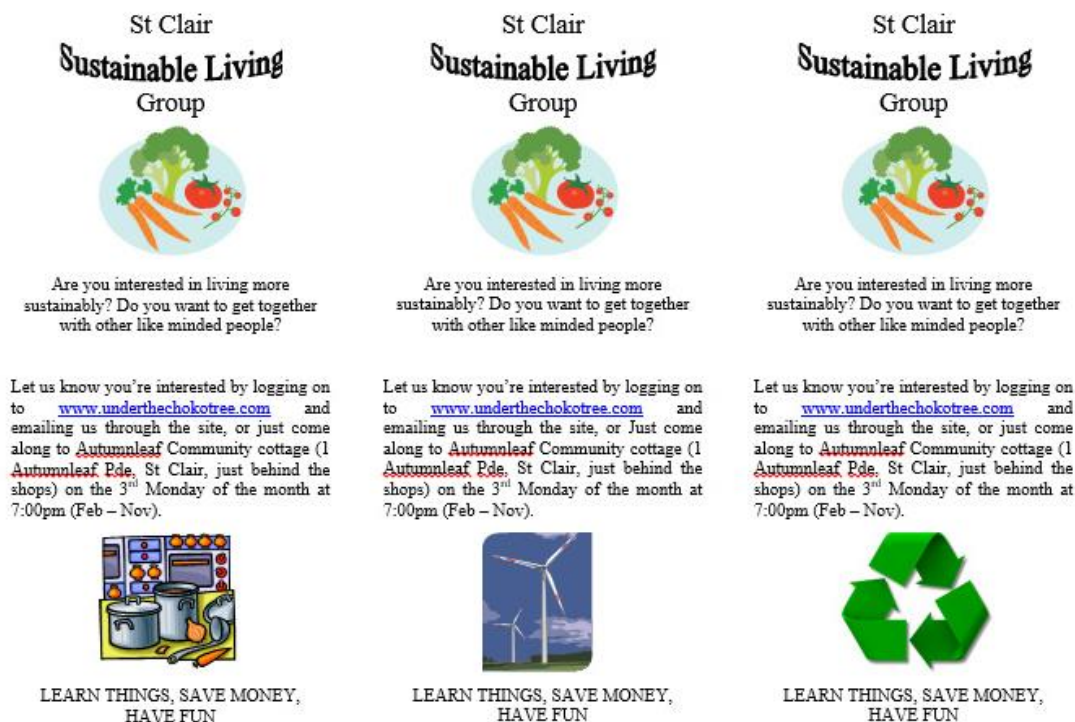
I now have a very effective, if somewhat small, projector - the Samsung Pico SP-H03 LED - the size of a cigarette box which, unfortunately they no longer make. There were some problems with it and I had to take it back to the shop to get it looked at twice before the warranty ran out so maybe they discontinued making them for a reason. Also, being LED you really need a dark room for it to be effective, it can't fight against sunlight.



Projector Plus Tripod

I also have an Inca i3150 tripod and an Epson ELPSC21B screen, both of which fold down and are portable and all together make a reasonably professional and easily transportable kit for making presentations. The tripod also gets used when I am taking photos for articles so it is very handy to have around. As with a lot of things, you get what you pay for and a little bit more cost up front buys you better tools for delivering presentations, cheaper ones have less functions and don't last as long.

Originally I would put a half A4 page flier in the St Clair Library and these would disappear over time, we got a couple of members that way. Recently, to try and drum up some more new members, I have left flyers with my mate Don at the St Clair Michel's Patisserie. The fliers, 1/3 of an A4 page wide, are printed off in colour and left on the counter where people buy their coffee (see next page). So far almost 90 have been picked up but I have had no enquiries.....yet!



The three-to-an-A4 Flyer

The number of subjects one can cover in backyard veggie growing is limited and after a while start going over old ground and so, with the consent of our membership, at the start of this year we became the St Clair Sustainable Living Group as I was looking at in the first place. This has allowed the interests of the group to branch out somewhat and make my job of finding topics to talk on easier. We still cover some growing and gardening related subjects but also cover other things related to energy, water, food preservation and storage and low energy cooking.



The Whole Lot - Ready to Go!

At the end of each year, I draft a list of 25 or 30 topics we could cover in the following

year and at the November meeting we discuss the next years' program and pick out the most popular topics. Our program for 2013 is reproduced below –

- Preserving (bottling)
- Homemade beverages
- Growing and using medicinal herbs
- Alternative power supplies
- Soap making
- Water collection and storage
- Native beekeeping
- Improving energy efficiency of your house
- Preserving (Smoking)
- Black soldier fly harvesting

Having done this for a while now I will say that it is a lot of work, and when I get home from work on the third Monday of the month I don't necessarily feel like going out again. But they are a great bunch of people and it is very satisfying to be able to play a (small) part in helping them live more sustainably.

6.0 The Group - Five Years On

People come and go but we get about 6 to 8 diehards who come along most months and the odd newbie every-so-often. I must admit that I haven't done much promotion of the group over the last 12 months, but I thought we were getting to a point where we needed to discuss where the group was going, and where the members wanted it to go. So after the official bits (ie me getting up and banging on about how to summer-ise your garden) of our November 2015 meeting, we circled the chairs for a pow wow.

As I saw it, there were a number of ways the group could go –

1. Continue as it is – A reasonable option but I do a fair bit of work for the meetings and I wanted more returns, in this case: bums on seats.
2. Continue as it is but as of early next year, put some effort into promotion, ie getting more members, preferably from the local area, seeing as this was the idea in the first place but only 2 of our regulars actually live locally.
3. Continue but as a local group meeting under the auspices of a larger permaculture group. This had been discussed a couple of years ago but rejected so we could retain our autonomy. It did have some advantages in terms of insurances, but as long as we only meet 10 times a year we were covered under the community centre where we meets insurances.
4. Wind things up and call it a day.

When I discussed these options with the group, option 4 got shot down immediately, option 3 was examined and rejected again, option 1 was not my pick, so you guessed it, next year we will be putting some effort into drumming up some more attendees. The most heartening thing is the way everyone volunteered ideas and assistance on how we might improve numbers, they are certainly committed to keeping the group going.

7.0 The Group - Ten Years On

Well, here we are, the gardening group, renamed the St Clair Sustainability Group six years ago, is moving into its 10th year in 2020! While I never really considered a 'use by' date for the group, I am still a tad surprised we are still here! So I guess it is time for a bit of a review.

What Has Remained the Same

The venue is still the same – Autumnleaf Neighbourhood centre – and we still meet on the third Monday of the month, February through to November, starting at 7:00pm and going to whenever, but usually somewhere between 8:00pm and 8:30pm. This works out well because we hire the hall for 2 hrs and I am usually unlocking to set up at around 6:30pm, but even on the odd occasions we have gone over, no one has ever said anything.



We have had one or two guest speakers over the years but mostly it is still me, developing and running a presentation. Sometimes this gives me a chance to road-test ideas for presentation I do for councils or PSW and sometimes they are specifically for the St Clair group. My initial efforts were set up so they could be downloaded in the 'Resources' area of the www.underthechokotree.com website but over the years I have been using less wording and making more use of pictures. This seems to make for a more interesting talk (and no death by powerpoint!) but also makes for much larger

files than the site can handle (3mB maximum file size) so they no longer get put up for others to use, unfortunately.

Our attendees still vary anywhere from 4 to 10 people to a session, with 6 to 8 regular die hards. There are occasional ones who come along for a while, or even just once, then drop out and we never see them again. Our biggest success story is Mick and Bridget, who saw one of our fliers in the local library and came along, stayed with the group for years, joined Permaculture Sydney West and then moved to their own farm in Tasmania, a couple of years ago!

What Has Changed

The Projector - Our little Samsung Pico SP-H03 projector passed on a few years ago and we now have a full size Epson EB-S130 projector which is coupled to my laptop computer with a USB and HDMI cable. This has two distinct advantages over the old one: firstly, it has much more power and so works well in daylight or with the room lights on (reducing the problem of people falling asleep during my talks) and it has a cordless remote so I can move the presentation on without having to hover around the back of the projector, pushing buttons. It is too large to be stable on the tripod, so gets set up, along with the computer, on one of the folding tables.



Social media – I now advertise each meeting on a number of local and Australia-wide Facebook groups, including our Under the Choko Tree Facebook page, as well as sending out an email to all of the regulars, reminding them of the upcoming meeting and what will be discussed.

Meeting format – The original format was an hour or so of me gabbing on, coffee, then a practical section. Over time this proved to be too hard to keep going. A lot of the subjects people were interested in were just too difficult to arrange a practical component for. We still do the odd practical session but it is only one or two a year,

rather than every meeting. So the usual format now is for me to do my talk, then we have coffee and biscuits.

Also, at the end of last year (2019), I suggested we revisit some of the older topics, because we have almost a whole new crowd compared to the early days, so I drew up a list and got people to vote for their favourite ones. This gave me a list of popular topics which I was able to draw from during the year, although I did sneak in a couple of new ones I was working on too. Quite often, I would revamp an older one and include some new content to improve it.

Costs – while not huge, the cost of hiring the hall has increased over the years and now that I am semi-retired we no longer find ourselves able to fully fund the meetings as we used to, so we ask the regulars to kick in at the start of the year. It doesn't cover everything but it helps.

So there you have it, will we still be at it in another 10 years, who knows? But the last 10 have been fun!



8.0 Post script

Unfortunately, the group did not survive very long after the occurrence of Covid. We did try the whole ZOOM thing but it did not work very well and after a couple of times we wound it up. I was still hopeful of things getting back to normal, but in the end I took the community centre key back to the council in early 2022. It is possible that it may spring back to life in the future, but I doubt it!

As mentioned in a couple of places earlier, it was quite a bit of work to set up, and for most of the time it was while I was working full time but it was worth it for pleasure of working with the people who would come along, and the stuff I learned along with them.

The routine was –

- I would get home from work and have dinner, pack the car and drive the short distance down to the community centre.
- Take the key and unlock the community centre, turn the alarm off, switch the lights on.
- Go back to the car and bring back to the room my computer, the screen, the projector and the wheelie bag with all of the cups and some biscuits.
- Set up the table out the front and then the computer/projector and the screen. Sometimes I would just use the white wall as the screen but the real screen gave a better picture.
- I would then set up any tables required for practical activities and all of the chairs, usually a dozen or so, in two lines in front of the front table.
- I would do my bit, then we would have coffee and biscuits, often the members would bring something to share.
- Then, with the help of the members, all the furniture would be put away and someone would sweep the floor. They would help me drag my stuff out to the car, while I did a final check around of the room, turn off the lights, set the alarm and lock the front door.
- While that was theoretically it, there was often some discussion in the carpark as well, then we all headed for home.

Perhaps my most enduring disappointment was that I really wanted the group to be a local group. Local as in most, if not all, of the attendees living in St Clair. It was local in terms of western Sydney, but we had attendees from the Blue Mountains, Windsor and Winston Hills. I am certainly grateful for those who came, but the original terms of reference for it being a St Clair group never eventuated.

Having said that, I do not regret one bit of the time and effort that went into the group, and if you are interested in doing something similar my advice is to go for it! There is still a load of presentations on various topics on the Choko Tree Website that can be

found here -

http://www.underthechokotree.com/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=sections&Itemid=65, under various 'Presentation Series' headings, that you can use to get you started.

ST CLAIR SUSTAINABLE LIVING GROUP

Are you interested in –

- Growing your own food?
- Treading more lightly on the planet?
- Making and doing things for yourself?
- Having fun?
- Meeting people with similar interests?
- Saving money?
- Getting more out of life?
- Learning new things?
- Connecting with your local community?

I want to gauge the level of interest in establishing a group self sufficiency group in St Clair. If you would be interested in attending meetings, please contact Nev Sweeney on XXXX XXX XXX. Or better yet email me on lsweeney@bigpond.net.au and register your interest.

Thanks

“Sustainability through local self sufficiency”
“Community not consumption”