

# The veggie house...

My track record with veggie gardening is abysmal. I could say it had something to do with a childhood spent weeding and harvesting celery and lettuce for 50 cents per hour. I have a poignant memory of three long hours dragging by and in my head totting up the princely sum of \$1.50. Blaming my shortcomings on childhood experiences however, is a cop-out. I just haven't put aside the time and made the real effort required.

I was hoping in fact that Pete would become our veggie gardener - that some magical environmental switch would turn on some deeply embedded 'veggie garden-gene'. But until this year, that magic trigger hadn't come to pass. Every year I'd get the seedlings in, but by January I'd have lost the plot. The weeds had got the better of me; the zucchini's had grown to the size of tornadoes, the lettuce bolted to seed, and the tomatoes, unstaked, were sprawling everywhere. Then last season a combination of factors occurred that made us both resolve that this season, things would be different.

We both love eating our own tomatoes, but last summer, thanks to the forays of our ducks, possums and the bower-birds we didn't see, let alone harvest, one ripe tomato. The crunch finally came when one week Pete did the grocery shopping, and discovered the ludicrous price of vegetables. That was the magic genetic turn-on, and he joined me in my resolve to do something about it. So on our return from our winter holiday Pete started to construct our first 'Veggie House'. We decided to follow the example of my friend Liane Hofflin who for several years has successfully grown her veg-

etables in a netted 'house'. Netpro in Stanthorpe have crates and crates of hail netting off-cuts. For our first house I selected netting that was also fruit-fly proof.

Pete elected to do the heavy soil preparation work and incorporated a 3 inch covering of old mushroom compost, diatomite, blood and bone and



potash. By the middle of October it was ready for planting.

For the first time I approached the planting of veggies not only with enthusiasm but also with excitement, and as I was planting I reflected how a small shift in mental attitude could make the biggest difference to the outcome of a project. What used to be a chore was now a delight.

I had lots of seedlings coming in the nursery and in the first spate of planting I put in snow peas, Chinese greens, rocket, beans, carrots, cabbage and broccoli. I have since added fruit-fly suscepti-

ble vegetables - bullock's heart tomatoes, capsicum and eggplant. I had always avoided planting the Brassica family, as I hate using insecticides and keeping the white cabbage moth and it's larvae at bay proved a fruitless task (literally). Now with the netting the moths are well and truly thwarted. I'll try and control my gloating when I see them fluttering on the outside.

The very first benefit of our netted house occurred in the first fortnight after planting. Our friends David and Sarah Caldwell had with mammoth effort planted out heaps of veggies on the same day as myself. On the same afternoon a fortnight later, we both had a hailstorm; poor David and Sarah's plantings were mushed, ours were untouched.

A problem in our site has been diurnal variation of temperature. Our night-time temperatures on cloudless nights throughout the summer often fall below 12 degrees. This really interferes with plant growth, especially with warm season annuals like most of the solanums (tomatoes, capsicums etc).

Last week I went out after dark to pick some rocket for a salad and upon opening the door of the veggie house warm air enveloped me. I was blown over by the difference in temperature between inside and outside. And on a hot day the temperature inside is slightly cooler, so my lettuces may even decide not to bolt!

There is no doubt too that climate change issues influenced our resolve and that growing our own food, where possible, will diminish our own carbon footprint. Take for example a hypothetical dinner-plate. Add up the miles each individual food item has travelled. Pork from Canada, peas from China, spuds from Tassie. Even though we live next door to a veggie-growing district, the chance that we will have locally grown veggie on our plate (when purchased from a multinational supermarket) is remote. The best thing of all though, is that we will know that the food we are eating is clean, nutritious, tasty, and best of all, uncontaminated.

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