

John Agnew - March 2021



I grew up at Stansbury, on a farm that bordered the coast for several kilometres.

The consistently strong sea breezes, laden with salt, proved challenging for the garden around our house.

This no doubt contributed to our choosing a place to retire (in contrast to the views of most Australians) that was not on the coast.

So Macclesfield was a good choice.

A focus on vegetables

For me, the focus with my gardening has always been on vegetables.

I have several strong memories from childhood that impacted me.

In a time where we ploughed fire-breaks around the cropping paddocks, my paternal grandfather would go out in spring and plant some melons of various types in these breaks.

It was hit and miss with the summer rains as to whether any produce resulted, but it was a good illustration of using opportunities that presented themselves.

Another memory is of picking and shelling peas by the wheat bag.

As a family, a combine width for perhaps 50 meters was planted to garden peas, rather than the normal barley crop.

Freezing for the future

These were then picked in large amounts and peas were frozen for much of the year ahead.

Then there is our vegetable garden where the septic overflow was pumped.

What would now be a seepage pit was in solid limestone and did not seep.

When full it was pumped onto the garden, that included fruit trees and vegetables and grew seemingly endless supplies of rhubarb.

To this day rhubarb has not featured in any of my vegetable gardens and I have no plans to do so in the near or distant future.

Agricultural Science

I completed an Agricultural Science Degree at the University of Adelaide and followed this with a teaching diploma.

Throughout my teaching career with the Education Department, I taught Agriculture as well as Science (emphasis in Biology) and later Maths.

Initially I was appointed to Maitland (where I met and married my wife and our two boys were born), then moved to Burra and finally to Naracoorte.

School Gardens

One feature of many school agricultural programmes is allowing junior students to establish a vegetable garden.

Even though these schools were all in rural areas, it was very clear that the vast majority of students had no experience of growing a garden.

This has become more pronounced in more recent years, as many students have preferred spending time 'on screen'.

It was rewarding seeing some students really enjoy this opportunity, though for others the combination of dirt and weeds did not inspire.

Trees For Life

In my time at Maitland we formed a local tree group which was connected to Trees for Life.

At school I organised the propagation of trees, which were planted in a series of Arbor Days north and south of the town.

The trees' group collected native tree seed with a view to provide local provenance for any trees grown locally as well as for direct seeding projects in the area.

Agriculture teaching provided another couple of opportunities to explore different gardening methodologies.

A teaching colleague, with police contacts, was able to source a considerable amount of confiscated hydroponics equipment, taken during police drug raids.

This was given to various schools and we were one of the fortunate ones.

This equipment included a couple of different systems and these were interesting to have a play with.

On another occasion I had the opportunity to try an aquaponics system – combining fish in a tank with a garden to remove the excess N out of the waste-water.

My conclusion was, while both of these approaches were novel, I was happiest growing food in a good fertile soil.

Retirement saw us move to Macclesfield, which is nearer to our parents, who surprisingly are not getting any younger.

As we moved in during late February 2020, so did COVID.

We intended to do a lot of travelling in 2020, including a trip to PNG to volunteer in a school attached to the hospital, where our son was working as a doctor.

Needless to say, this did not happen

and neither did many of the community groups.

One group that did meet was Maccy Biochar and I have become heavily involved, and have found that biochar added to my vegetable soils improves the productivity.

Initially we intended to wait a year before we set up our vegie gardens, in order to assess how best to manage our constraints as we see them ie. space (we do not have a large block), light (particularly in winter) and water (no mains water – we manage on our rain-water tanks).

Unable to travel and with society on pause, we pushed ahead to establish our vegetable garden.

Wicking beds

I have opted for wicking beds and have found them very effective and have a number of beds now working.

Having seen a Vegepod in action at the Royal Adelaide Show the previous year, I bought one of these and have subsequently also found them a very productive system.

As a couple we have a strong sustainability ethic and are very conscious of food miles.

Thus, growing our own food is something we value, as is reducing the amount of waste produced. This was the reason we quickly established a worm farm and a compost heap.

Retirement brings a change of pace and an opportunity to explore things that a busy working life did not allow.

For me one of these things is native terrestrial orchids both their conservation and cultivation and so I have joined the Native Orchid Society to facilitate this.

A recent joy has been a long distance phone call with my son, who has recently started a job on Thursday Island, about the difficulties of setting up a wicking bed system in a climate where 50 mm of rain falls in half an hour.