

## VOLUNTEERS

I've never been much of a gardener; although I have tried numerous times with the usual stuff, you know like lettuces, radishes and carrots etc. but invariably I end up with a multitude of weeds which take over and smother anything I've planted. No matter how many hours I spend weeding and nurturing, the weeds always win. This year, after the good rain, I carefully prepared the garden bed and sowed neat rows of the usual lettuces etc. and even popped some silver beet and okra. Six weeks later the bed was a mass of healthy vegetation consisting of seemingly, almost every undesirable plant known to man. There was bhindi, asparagus fern, numerous varieties of grass, a couple of Bathurst burr and seven or eight magnificent specimens of fleabane, one of which was a fair bit taller than me and nestled among them, three stunted and wilted lettuces and one silver beet, which had been chewed by some nocturnal visitor.

I was feeling disheartened and was seriously considering concreting over the entire garden bed and painting it green; when I happened upon a gardening talk-back segment on the local radio, wherein the 'Gardening Guru' was waxing lyrical about the number of 'volunteer plants' she had acquired over the years.

Apparently, a 'volunteer plant' is a desirable or at least an acceptable plant that you, or in this case she, did not plant but which fortuitously appeared in the perfect place in the garden and thrived. She described how the seeds can be carried by birds or the wind and told the listeners that over the years she had gained several 'volunteers', including a bush lemon, a passion fruit vine and numerous tomato plants.

Presumably any of my recent desirable 'volunteers', if indeed there were any, had been choked and smothered by an influx of undesirables, which when I think about it, accurately describes a neighbouring suburb.

Anyway, after listening to said guru, I am inspired to have another go with the garden next year. Also, with her mention passion fruit and tomatoes, I was reminded that many years ago in, the mid-seventies, we had been the beneficiaries of a couple of 'volunteer' plants that had appeared in the yard of our first house.

For the princely sum of twenty thousand dollars, we had purchased a ten year old, three-bedroom, concrete stumped, hi-set chamferboard dwelling on twenty-four fully fenced perches. It was connected to sewerage, a bonus back then ... and of course it was painted light green. When it comes to that, what hi-set chamferboard house purchased in the seventies wasn't painted light green?

There was nothing in the yard, not even a shrub and the only vegetation evident was some straggly looking carpet grass and a bit of clover, which supposedly passed for a lawn. My wife and I set about making a garden with great gusto, only to discover that the unscrupulous sixties developer had apparently filled in a gulley running through this suburb and in consequence our yard and those of our immediate neighbours consisted of rocks, bricks and other rubbish, top dressed with cinders and clay! It was hopeless, hardly anything sprouted and despite many generous applications of horse poo, chook poo and virtually any other poo that was on the market, those that did sprout, turned yellow and died after a couple of weeks. We tried for about six months, then gave up and purchased a dozen large terra cotta pots, filled them with potting mix and dotted them around the yard. The missus snavelled a couple for herbs and coleus and I shoved some dwarf shrubs, a chilli bush and couple of lemons in the others. Dragging the hose around and watering was a bit of a pain but everything survived and they certainly 'prettied up' the yard.

It was around this time that our two 'volunteers' made their appearance. My wife was the first to notice them. There was one under the back steps which turned out to be a passion fruit vine and the other on the opposite corner of the house that even I could recognise as a tomato. They both looked healthy so we left them to their own devices as it were and within a

few weeks the tomato plant was covered in flowers and the passion fruit vine was trying to climb up the step stringers.

After that, things really took off; the tomato plant went berserk, I had to support it with stakes, as it grew to over two metres in height and began producing enormous bullock heart tomatoes by the dozen, some of which weighed more than five hundred grams. It was fast becoming a small tree with the stem, or trunk in this case measuring nearly fifty millimetres across at the base. We named it 'Arty Tomarty' and started eating tomatoes at every meal, however the fridge was soon full, as was every spare shelf; so, we experimented by drying them, making chutneys and off-loading the excess on rellies and neighbours and anyone who happened to be passing. People started 'dropping in' on the off chance they might get some freebie tomatoes and the word went around that I had been blessed with green fingers. 'My tomatoes,' they said, 'tasted like tomatoes should taste, just like the old days!' I even put a couple in the local Show and won first prize! Some of our friends took the seeds and tried to replicate our glorious bounty but even though most managed to successfully raise healthy plants, none of them succeeded in producing fruit of the same size, quality or quantity. I should mention that the passion fruit vine, which my wife had claimed as hers and named 'Lolita', presumably misunderstanding the word passion in this instance, also did us proud by giving us some beautiful fruit but obviously not to the extent of 'my' Arty Tomarty.

For more than two years my trusty volunteer provided us and a great many others in the Shire with an abundance of tomatoes par excellence, until one day I noticed that there were no flowers and the leaves were looking a little yellow, so I gave it a bit of water. Now this might have caused it to go into shock, because as I mentioned before, up until then we had left both plants to their own devices. Anyway, whatever the cause, it continued to deteriorate and after a couple of weeks it was dead, with nary a flower or leaf. I was devastated and felt as though I had lost a friend.

I left it for a while in the hope that a tiny new green leaf might miraculously appear on the end of its withered branches but no luck, it was definitely deceased. So, on the next Saturday morning, after one final inspection of every branch for signs of life, I set about removing Arty Tomarty. I grabbed the stem and heaved with all my strength and the only thing that gave, in any way at all, was a muscle somewhere in my lower back! I then took to it with a mattock and after jarring every bone in my hands and arms, discovered that Arty was growing through a crack in the concrete cover of the septic tank, installed when the house was built, prior to the sewage connection. A previous owner had obviously taken to the cover with a sledgehammer, before covering it with cinders and clay.

So that was Arty's secret, a wonderful supply of nutrients, which was surely an example of the ultimate in recycling. I chopped him off level with the concrete and scraped the clay and cinders back to hide what I had found. I decided not to tell my wife, she has always been a bit squeamish about things like that, in fact I decided not to tell anyone and thus have retained my reputation of having green fingers.

Only the other day a long-time friend reminded me of my tomato bounty and recalled how he had never tasted tomatoes as sweet and juicy before or since. 'I tried to grow bullock hearts for years but they've never been a match for yours,' he said. 'And you never did let us in on your secret, did you?'

I smiled and said, 'Well, I could tell you... but then, I'm afraid I'd have to kill you!'