

AN URBAN FARM GROWS COMMUNITY

Some innovative projects in Auckland are introducing healthy food-growing practices to new audiences. One of them is Katrina's Kitchen Garden, an urban biodynamic farm operating out of West Auckland. Co-director Katrina Wolff tells their story.



Above: Katrina and Steve, directors of Katrina's Kitchen Garden.

Opposite page: Katrina tends one of the roadside hugelkultur beds.

People find biodynamics in different ways. I came to it through a reading group I belonged to when my children were at the local Steiner school here in Titirangi. Peter Bollen hosted the reading group; he also hosted biodynamic 500 stirs at his house. From there, I gained an insight into this method of gardening.

I was thrilled to later meet local biodynamic guides: Lis Alington, then Diane de Saint-Quentin, and later Simon Harmer. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. Attending the Biodynamic Conference in 2016 was further confirmation that this was the correct direction for my future.

I find a lot of the Steiner school community here in Titirangi is similar to where I was – dedicated to the Waldorf educational philosophy, and highly curious about what else Steiner said. The gardens of these households are generally treated organically, and there is a value placed on learning to grow food, as well as teaching young people to appreciate home-grown food. It's a community that wants to eat seasonally, and embraces the vision of eating locally.

A couple of barriers to this in Titirangi are the clay soil, and the lack of light for those living surrounded by bush. The lack of light is really hard to overcome, and many people adopt a 'summer garden' approach, and don't attempt too much in the winter months. Composting is thankfully something that can happen year-round in little light. We have gotten around the clay soil issue by building up the soil. We use the hugelkultur method to do this at low cost.

There is another barrier prevalent in society today, and that is a lack of confidence or knowledge. It seems to me that gardening has skipped a generation or two. Many of our customers talk fondly of grandparents who were able to feed themselves – well before self-sufficiency became a trendy aspiration. What happened after this? Supermarkets got bigger, food distribution systems became sophisticated, produce became available for purchase all year round, and we



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favoured increased leisure time or work time over tending a vegetable garden.

We are seeing a change in this trend now. So many initiatives are popping up connected with food justice or food security. For the Love of Bees, Whenua Warrior, Kai Auckland, KaiCycle, Kaipatiki, Love Food Hate Waste – the list could go on and on.

We are primarily an urban farm offering training to a wide range of people. The produce we grow is sold to our local community in the style of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We also sell seedlings, which people can use to grow their own food.

In the interests of helping people grow their own food, we offer a foodscaping service. To make our soil from scratch on site, we collect food waste, garden waste, and other materials from our local community, thus creating a closed loop food production system. The land we use is spread over a number of properties – all urban homeowners who wish to support our vision of creating a local food culture.

The parallel but equally important vision is to create jobs for young people with learning difficulties, at the living wage or higher.

Katrina's Kitchen Garden is unique in that the biodynamic approach is integral to what we do and teach. There have been surprisingly few objections to this approach, and it is really just the 'stinky' cow manure that can put some people off. The time it takes to devote to stirring water can puzzle people, but on the whole I meet fascination and acceptance.

It seems to me that people are drawn to the very fact that it's inexplicable. I feel our society is sometimes missing a sense of magic in our lives. We have scientific analyses of what we eat,

how we think, what vegetables are high in which vitamins or minerals. For me, there is comfort in trusting that the moon's influence is significant, and to let that celestial body inform us, as a body that has far more strength and power than Google or Wikipedia can ever have.

We are descended from people who looked up to the stars for guidance, and I think many of us find comfort in reaching out to the cosmos in our lives still today.

Our biodynamic processes on the urban farm are centred around compost making, regular use of CPP (cow pat pit) with seedlings, and regular 500 stirs. Thanks to a workshop with Tony Hudson and Sarah Smuts-Kennedy in August last year, CPP is now being made on site. We grow valerian, chamomile, yarrow, nettle, dandelion and oak, and we are striving towards gathering the animal components needed to make our own compost preparations from scratch. This would save money and also get us closer to the ideal of becoming a self-contained farm. As soon as I can get hold of cow horns, we will make the 500 here on the urban farm.

More important than the technical processes to me is my inner work. I strive to stay grounded, to feel into what the plants are 'saying', what the soil is showing me. I use the



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biodynamic calendar too, as an indicator of what is happening in the cosmos that I should listen to. I've participated in an anthroposophical plant study group and found the drawing and painting exercises extremely useful in deepening my perceptions to allow subtle changes to inform my next steps. Meditation is an essential part of my day.

I am encountering people in my street, the wider community, and even online who are overjoyed at what we are doing. The closed-loop urban biodynamic farm model brings a vision of hope for a new way of working, a new way of forming community ties. Auckland City is one of the most unaffordable places to live in the world, and it seems that if the land is so highly valued, it ought to be better used – for growing flowers for bees, food for humans, or regenerating soil through composting. I suspect that the generosity of the homeowners we meet is an expression of their desires to see their land used well.

Auckland City has the aspiration to be zero waste by 2040, and creating closed loop urban biodynamic farms will help this. Half of current landfill is compostable waste. For people who aren't composting food waste, we must find ways to help divert this material from landfill by combining our skills.

I am seeing neighbours meet and greet each other, kids playing in each others' gardens, plants being shared, seeds being swapped, and gardening secrets from prior generations shared with new gardeners.

As my co-director Steve McCarthy says, we are seeing something else created – not just Community Supported Agriculture, but Agriculture Supported Community. Neighbours meet for the first time; gardening tips are exchanged on the street while walking dogs. There are shared meals and biodynamic stirs. Building skills, engineering tips, logo design and business development skills are shared within the community.

In his lecture cycle *World Economy*, Steiner touches on what is referred to as associative economics, and an 'objective

community spirit' that arises out of mutual economic exchanges.

Our CLUB Farm (Closed Loop Urban Biodynamics) is the prototype for a model we will replicate, and we will also support others to create their own CLUB Farms – both in New Zealand and internationally. We have a Facebook group dedicated to Club Farming collaboration, support and sharing of ideas. I welcome new members to this group, and see it becoming a platform for discussion of a new form of food production and distribution, which also values organic waste and builds community.

More information:

www.facebook.com/groups/ClosedLoopUrbanBiodynamics
katrinaskitchengarden.com

Ensure what you buy is truly biodynamic. Look for the Demeter label.



EMPOWERING SPECIAL STUDENTS THROUGH URBAN FARMING

Our plan to take biodynamics across Auckland, New Zealand and the world has its roots firmly planted in a triple mission that has biodynamics at its core.

First, we grow food using biodynamic methods.

A close friend from Oaklynn Special School expressed concern that older neurodiverse students were having difficulty getting work experience, let alone jobs. She challenged Steve to come up with a solution for these 17-21 year-olds.

From this arose our second mission. Our goal is nothing short of completely changing the possible futures for neurodiverse students in West Auckland and beyond. We want to create job opportunities and set an example for other businesses.

Thirdly, we want to play our part in reconnecting communities. This work is love, sending out vibrations that are met by love in the community.

Both of us have a background in disability support and feel that businesses can do more to create unique roles for unique individuals. Our collaboration with Oaklynn Special School is the highlight of our week. The students and accompanying teachers are totally on board with active gardening, coming to garden dressed as one might go to a gym workout. The foodscaping work being done is accompanied by laughter, joking and a positive attitude.

Our vision is that as we build a Closed Loop Urban Biodynamic (or CLUB) farm, that there will be experts connected with that farm who know how to do most aspects of the foodscaping. We are hoping that these experts will include a graduate of OakTEC, which is the Tertiary Education Centre of Oaklynn Special School. The students are at school until the age of 21. They spend the last few years of their schooling building work experience to see what work they may choose to pursue as adults.

We have developed a training programme based on a set of identified skills needed in operating an urban farm. The OakTEC students are treated just like anyone else. We all have skills we want to learn, and skills we can teach to others. This forms the basis of our training programme. We are modelling a work experience method that gets them into meaningful roles immediately, and gives everyone skills that are useful in their adult life.

The viability of paying a living wage will always be dependent on having a community of supportive people surrounding the social enterprise. This support may look like free land use, time spent voluntarily weeding or stirring BD500. We offer workshops, and many of our current volunteers are pleased

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to be getting free tuition in urban farming. Some families will support us by buying a box of love (a CSA-style vegetable box). Others will pay us to come and tend their gardens, or get foodscaping done. We utilise Steve's teaching qualification in our after-school and school holiday programmes, and these further fund our efforts.

Over time, we expect to set up future CLUB farms in other parts of Auckland and around the country. We also hope to enter into international collaborations. The model is infinitely replicable, and our hope is that the vision of empowering disadvantaged people through meaningful employment is retained in all future CLUB farms.

Katrina Wolff has been a student of anthroposophy since her children started at the Waikato Waldorf School in 2008. She was Operations Coordinator at Hohepa Auckland for six years from 2011.

Opposite page: A neighbour brings Katrina more ingredients for the compost pile.

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