

Putting Down Roots

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Putting Down Roots was a pilot gardening programme for asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants offered in 2012–13 through the Australian Red Cross Migration Support Program Victorian Division in Melbourne.¹ Run in partnership with the Melbourne-based Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES) and Cultivating Community, the programme developed a unique approach to increasing the social and emotional wellbeing of participants through involving them in sustainable gardening training and by supporting them to grow an edible garden. For participants, Putting Down Roots proved to be more than just a way to learn about gardening in Australia. It was also an opportunity to cultivate self worth, gain meaning and find tranquillity during a time of great uncertainty and hardship. While the experience may have been temporary, during their involvement with Putting Down Roots, participants put aside their identity as asylum seekers and became gardeners.

Asylum seekers face significant barriers to accessing mainstream services and have limited opportunities for social and recreational engagement. At the time of the programme, many of the asylum seekers supported through the Australian Red Cross had no work or study rights or, in cases where they did, faced multiple barriers to gaining employment (Australian Red Cross, 2013). Putting Down Roots was developed in response to the need for more meaningful engagement activities for asylum seekers. The programme's development was also informed by research completed by the Australian Red Cross on the significant food insecurity of asylum seekers (Australian Red Cross, 2013), as well as the expressed interest in gardening and horticulture of a large number of asylum seeker clients. The impetus for delivering a gardening programme was also influenced by extensive research outlining the therapeutic benefit of gardening for those who have experienced trauma and psychological pain (Thompson et al, 2007).

Through Putting Down Roots, 25 asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants from around the world came together to learn the fundamentals of gardening and growing food in Australia during an eight-week sustainable gardening course at CERES. Participants came to the programme with differing experiences of growing food, from farmers and a graduate with a masters degree in plant science, to those who were completely new to gardening. Participants came from all parts of the globe: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Iran and Egypt. These differences contributed to the vibrant discussion on topics such as soils, farming practices, fruit, vegetables and climate.

Each participant was matched with a volunteer mentor, and worked with them and Cultivating Community to design and develop an edible garden either

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KEY WORDS

*Asylum seekers
Refugees
Gardening
Community gardens
Community development*

REPORT

in their own home or, where that was not possible, in a community garden close to their home. Participants met with their volunteer mentor in their garden on a regular basis. The gardens became sites for connection and empowerment where stories, experience, lots of food and many cups of tea were shared.

While their claims for refugee status are being assessed, asylum seekers often face overwhelming uncertainty. The nature of their path is transient and, for many, these challenges are compounded by a history of torture, trauma and separation from family. For those involved in Putting Down Roots, establishing and tending their own garden provided a rare chance to temporarily put aside such challenges and arrive at a place of peace and tranquillity. As one participant, Aaran² reflects, 'Here in my garden I forget about what I went through in Sri Lanka, I forget about missing my family. I even forget about my difficulties now in Australia. Here I feel at peace.' For participants, this garden was a space in which they had the opportunity to carefully nurture their plants, and in turn they nurtured themselves. Maria, another participant, reflects, 'It is therapeutic. It's great for people like us, because you know I feel very alone and kind of isolated. I feel much calmer in myself, and to see the plants, to water them, to look at them growing; it is such a simple thing to do to make yourself feel good.'

Time in their gardens contributed to a sense of dignity for programme participants. It offered them a sense of purpose and a positive way to spend idle hours when many were living in limbo, far from family and friends. Sami, a beekeeper in his country of origin, was able to acquire a beehive for his garden through the programme. He began to regain mastery and skills unused since he fled his country. As Sami's confidence developed, he started volunteer work. Participants reflected that there was simple dignity in having a piece of earth to garden and being free to do what they liked with it. They could grow vegetables familiar from their country of origin, but rare to Australia, alongside vegetables common in Australia but new to them. Saeed, a young participant and new gardener, described how much he enjoyed sitting next to his garden, simply watching his tomato plants grow. They reminded him of happy times with his mother, an avid gardener. The gardeners also made unexpected discoveries, learning about the similarities and differences of the soils, crops and climate in Australia compared with those in their country of origin.

The relationships that participants developed with their volunteer mentors provided another avenue for connection and discovery that extended beyond gardening and horticulture. These relationships enabled participants to learn more about each other's culture and ways of life. The volunteer mentors also began to appreciate the challenging realities faced by those seeking asylum. Although each garden 'belonged' to the participant, it was through the company and support of their volunteer mentor, through learning from each other's techniques and by sharing the space that they experienced a genuine and mutual sense of friendship and gratitude. One volunteer mentor was adopted into an Afghani participant's family as their new Australian 'grandmother'. Sharing time in the garden could foster community cohesion and enhance levels of acceptance, belonging and trust for both participants and mentors.

For many of the asylum seeker participants in Putting Down Roots, their gardens became a refuge, affording an opportunity to develop meaning and dignity

from the complex and uncertain experience of seeking asylum in Australia. These sites told a layered story of the gardener's journey to Australia, through the food they grew and the thoughts and conversations the gardens provoked. They could bring participants fond memories of home or allow them to escape from their current reality. Participants from all over the world came together with volunteer mentors to share remarkably different life stories around a common interest in gardening. The understanding that developed helped bridge cultural, religious, gender and political divides. The gardens of Putting Down Roots not only grew food but also nourished self worth, fostered social capital and grew hope for what the future might bring.

Epilogue

While the gardens and some of the participant–mentor relationships continued growing, Putting Down Roots in Melbourne, Victoria, was unable to continue because of a lack of project funding. However, it inspired a programme of the same name offered through the Australian Red Cross Migration Support South Australian Division. Furthermore, since 2014, the Migration Support Program Victorian Division has been delivering a gardening programme called Hub Harvest. The programme works in partnership with local community gardens and asylum seeker organisations. Hub Harvest aims to promote food security and provide opportunities for learning and social interaction for asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants in workshops that focus on urban agriculture, gardening and local food knowledge.

NOTES

- 1 The views expressed in this article are those of the author in her private capacity and do not in any way represent those of the Australian Red Cross or other organisations and individuals mentioned.
- 2 Names of all programme participants have been changed to ensure their confidentiality.

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