

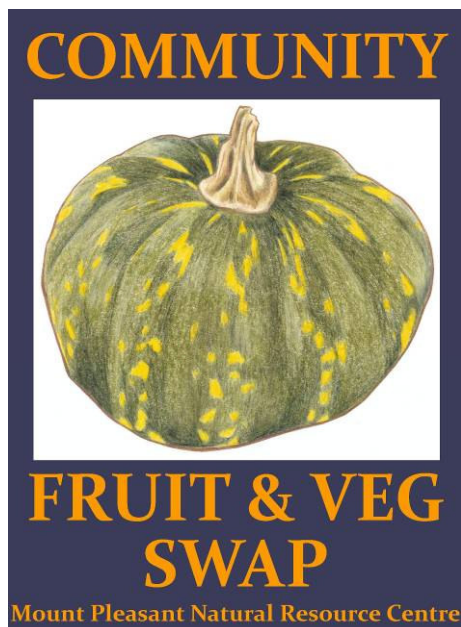
STARTING A COMMUNITY FRUIT & VEG SWAP IN YOUR TOWN, SUBURB OR NEIGHBOURHOOD



Increasing the resilience, skills and knowledge base of your community for sustainable living, through informal networks focussed on food and eating.

If you don't have access to a local Community Fruit & Veg Swap and want to know how to set one up and what's involved in keeping it running – read on. The following is based on the experience of the Mt Pleasant Community Fruit & Veg Swap which is run by a non-profit volunteer group the Mt Pleasant Natural Resource Centre.

For any additional info or to have a chat about this project, please contact our Coordinator Faye Mc Goldrick on the numbers provided below.



The Mt Pleasant Community Fruit & Veg Swap is an initiative of the Mount Pleasant Natural Resource Centre Inc.

Project start up funds provided by a NRM Achiever Grant from the Adelaide & Mt Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board

For more information on this project and volunteer opportunities, please contact the MPNRC Coordinator Faye Mc Goldrick on

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WHY A COMMUNITY FRUIT & VEG SWAP?

A Community Fruit & Veg Swap is a regular event where people come together and share surplus produce in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Although it is called a 'Fruit and Veg Swap', there is actually no swapping of produce, rather it is shared. Participants bring along their surplus produce on the nominated day and time and everything is placed on the one communal table (or in our case now, tables!). Participants are then free to browse and select as much or as little as they like of the items to take home.

A Community Fruit & Veg Swap is so much more than a means to share surplus produce and avoid food waste: it is a great opportunity to realise social networking with huge benefits, where a community can come together to share produce, knowledge and ideas. It is a great place for community members to meet, catch up with old friends, and make new ones.

As Jennifer Alden, CEO of Cultivating Community puts it: 'Neighbourhood veggie swaps are a part of an emerging alternative food economy, a larger community food system. As the impacts of climate change and peak oil become more extreme its things like growing our own veggies, sharing resources within our communities and generally re-localising that are going to ensure a resilient and food secure future.'

By being part of a local veg swap people can

- add variety to your diet and eat fresh good quality food
- save money
- reduce food miles
- gain inspiration and ideas about gardening and cooking
- meet others you wouldn't normally meet
- make friends in your local area & feel more connected to your local community,

Essentially it is a place where people can have a chat over a cuppa, share some produce and exchange tips on what to do with all those tomatoes and zucchinis we always end up with every year!

Community Benefits: Local Community Fruit and Veg Swaps provide a good reason for an informal, relaxed but regular community gathering which helps to:

- strengthen local communities
- encourage 'organic' (naturally occurring and developing), spontaneous links within local communities, which bridge the differences such as age, class, occupation, professional status and ethnicity which often divide Australian society
- reduce isolation and provide a connection point for isolated members of the community, including elderly residents and those newly arrived from other places

Whilst many community initiatives bring together like-minded people from geographically diverse locations, Community Fruit & Veg Swaps bring together diverse people within a single local area. Strong interaction and networking between residents create safer, stronger communities and better places to live. Community Fruit & Veg Swaps are informal community gatherings with a focus on food production, preparation and preservation, gardening and eating, which are central issues in sustainable living. Without the need for formal structures or strategies, these gatherings foster a spontaneous conversation between community members which directly and indirectly addresses many issues of sustainability. People of diverse perspectives, experiences and generations can talk about different ways of doing things and share ideas, skills and knowledge.

Whilst it relies on changes at the "big picture" levels of government and international policy and structure, sustainability is ultimately also about individual people making choices. We are empowered to make choices when we know about different ways of doing things and have the confidence, through information and support, to try them out.

Environmental Benefits: Local Community Fruit & Veg Swaps encourage residents to move towards more sustainable lifestyles in many ways, such as:

- cutting food miles
- reducing food waste, packaging, transportation

- optimising the use of urban space for sustainability by encouraging backyard food production and making it more viable and rewarding
- celebrating and encouraging biodiversity within local areas
- encouraging residents to leave their houses on foot, to cultivate friendships and networks within their local area, and to use and enjoy their local open spaces
- offering an alternative model of exchange, based on sharing, which values intangibles (time, knowledge, skill, friendship) as well as tangible goods (such as fruit, vegetables, seeds, plants, home baking and preserves, and more) without the need to reduce these many dimensions of value to a single currency (i.e. money)
- encouraging more sustainable practices in home-grown food - for example, methods of designing, shading and irrigating gardens; sharing seeds, cuttings, plants and seedlings, rather than purchasing nursery-grown plants; re-using and sharing materials
- increasing the resilience, skills and knowledge base of the community for sustainable living, through informal community networks focussed on food and eating

DOES IT REALLY WORK?

Yes! Swaps are run on an honesty system with people contributing and taking what they want without any prescribed value system. We initially had concerns with how an honesty system would work and worried that it may be taken advantage of by some, but experience has now shown that it works beautifully.

If people arrive at a Swap without any produce or are not able to join as a member (visiting from interstate etc.), they are still welcomed and encouraged to be involved. We decided that if people turned up who were not members, they had the option of either joining as a member, or they could make a donation towards the running costs of the swap. Those without produce are also encouraged to make a donation towards the running costs of the swap. This recognises that not everyone has established gardens and allows beginners to access the networking and knowledge at a Swap to gain inspiration, ideas, as well as seeds and seedlings to get started. This option also encourages people to still come to a Swap and enjoy the social contact even when things are a bit slow or out of season in their garden.

Not surprisingly the majority of Swap visitors have opted to become members because they legitimately want to become involved in the swaps on a regular basis and can't wait to come back.

Another concern was that we may be left with items no one took home, especially if lots of members all brought tomatoes or quinces to the same swap. In practice, this has not been a problem. There is much diversity of produce and members find similar items ripening at different times, so bring them at different times. The occasional leftover box of tomatoes gets turned into sauce by volunteers and returned to the swap; leftover quinces get returned at a later date as quince paste; and the occasional leftover bunch of herbs gets dried and stored for a later swap when parsley is not so abundant. Generally, there is minimal produce left over as we have found that people take home roughly the equivalent of what they bring. This is another opportunity for members who don't currently have any produce to share to take home surplus, turn it into something and bring it back to the next swap.

Julietta, voluntary coordinator of the SA West Croydon Swap, explains how a Community Swap works: *The most common question asked about the Community Fruit & Veg Swap is: "How does it work?" - by which people really mean: How are values assigned to the produce? How can you be sure you'll 'get your money's worth', that is, take home the equivalent of what you brought? The short answer to these questions is, "We don't!"*

"It's like that old saying about comparing apples and oranges - literally! How can you measure the relative value of different crops - such as abundant, beautiful tree fruits which ripen by the bucketload, versus crops which are smaller in volume but require a higher investment of time, water, work and skill, like tomatoes or eggplants? Much less the value of other kinds of tangible and intangible contributions like preserves and baking, or gardening knowledge, recipes, local history, plants, seeds, cuttings, garden stakes, safety pins, good company and great jokes! The answer is, you can't, and we don't try."

Selling? Trading? Bartering? No - Sharing! The Community Fruit & Veg Swap works on a model not of selling, trading or bartering, but of sharing. Goods are simply spread out together, and then attendees select what they want and need, roughly in proportion to their contribution.

"It is a kind of honour system, but although it may be hard to believe, we have found so far that it works - it works beautifully. If anything, we usually have to beg people to take more to avoid having produce left over."

"A good way to approach the Swap is to make sure that whatever you bring is surplus to your own household's needs. This means that if someone else can use what you've brought, this avoids it going to waste and you feel good about that. If you take away something you don't have at home yourself, that's a bonus. And you always do. I think this produces a sensation of amazing abundance."

Attendees who are not able to bring produce - for example, because they don't have a garden - may bring home baking or preserves. Alternatively, they are encouraged to make a donation towards the costs of the Swap and to contribute intangibles such as their knowledge, memories and good company.

"As long as they come in the right spirit, we don't send anyone away empty-handed," says Julietta. "We also find it evens out over the weeks and months. You may have nothing this week or next, while my fig tree is dropping bucketloads. But when my crop is finished, your peach tree may be coming into fruit. Or maybe you'll make some fig jam and bring that along to the swap in a few weeks' time!"

SHARING OR SWAPPING OR EXCHANGE? MAKE IT CLEAR & GET IT RIGHT!

It is important to ensure that all participants know that they are *sharing* produce and that there is no value assigned to produce items, therefore there is NO trading, bartering, buying, selling, or exchanging. This not only means that redistribution of the surplus will happen much more easily but it is also a legal requirement. If trading, bartering, buying, selling, or exchanging directly between participants is going to occur then there are different legal obligations that you must fulfil with your local council (e.g. participants would need to be registered as a food business with their local council and subject to labelling laws, home inspections etc – definitely not conducive to the aims of a Community Fruit & Veg Swap). If you are unsure if what you have in mind is *sharing* or something else then please either read the most current Food Act for definitions or speak to your Environmental Health Officer/s at your local council.

Having those chats: Talk to your local council about starting up a Community Fruit & Veg Swap. This is both important if you are planning to run them on council land (such as a local park) but also important because it involves the organised distribution of food in their jurisdiction. It is imperative that the local council fully understands that the nature of the food distribution is via sharing and not value assigned bartering, exchanging, selling etc. If the food distribution is occurring in any manner other than sharing then the local council have a legal obligation to control certain aspects of the activity. If they understand it is sharing and they have no legal obligations under the Food Act you will usually receive their blessing. Most groups running Fruit & Veg Swaps have their local council support, with some councils even offering additional support such as venue space or assistance with advertising etc..

SETTING UP A COMMITTEE

In our case, we decided to establish an informal community committee / reference group that initially made decisions about how we would run the Swaps, best local promotion methods etc. This group now meets occasionally to discuss the ongoing Swap operation and any required changes or improvements. This works for us, but it is not a requirement for the successful running of a Swap. If a Swap works a certain way somewhere else it doesn't mean the exact same thing will work in your location – this is where local knowledge is great.

Depending on how much information you already have about the local community, it may be helpful to recruit committee volunteers that you can speak to about local issues that may influence the Swaps, especially if you are new to the area. You will need to find out what else happens in the community on the days and times you are looking at running your Swaps, and if anything like a Swap has been done before in the area and why it did or didn't work. It may also be useful to connect with other community groups in your area that have members who would be interested in coming to your swaps.

Talk to people running existing Swaps. In our experience people are extremely helpful and go out of their way to give you information, helpful hints and new contacts to speak to. You will also find that they are passionate about their Swaps and their enthusiasm will rub off onto you, spurring you on even more!

It is of course important to speak to people in your local community to make sure you have enough people interested to make it viable, basically if you have 2 people then that is enough for a Swap, but obviously the more the merrier! Even handing out flyers or asking your local council or community groups to put something in their newsletter or on their website may be useful to seek interest.

MEMBERSHIP

Many Swaps run informally, without a membership. After discussions with our reference group and other people running existing Swaps, we decided to establish a membership scheme for our Swap.

We have seen a number of benefits to having a Swap membership with a small annual fee (\$5 for individuals and \$10 for families)

- Provides income for Swap event catering. Whilst some Swaps don't provide any refreshments, we see it as an essential component that encourages people to linger and helps drive the social interaction that is important for the Swap success.
- Provides income for promotion (fliers, advertising etc)
- People like being part of an identified group
- Provides contact database for sending Swap updates and related information such as workshop and special event dates.
- Provides contact database in case of emergency event cancellation
- Provides contact database for volunteer recruitment
- Enables member name tags to be produced – encourages people to socialise and meet new people
- Ensures members are covered under our event insurance
- Allows us to track numbers on participation (important if we ever want to apply for funding)

At our swaps we provide tea, coffee etc. as well as home made baking / hot soup etc. We also have available a number of printed items: labels for swap items, membership cards, name badges, brochures as well as materials on safe food handling to distribute to our swappers. Charging a small membership fee allows us to provide these services, and we have not had anyone complain about the membership fee or be put off by it. In fact people seem to be happier with a membership because they then feel part of a group and know that when they bring produce along that it will only be fellow swappers enjoying it and not anyone passing by on the street.

WHAT CAN PEOPLE BRING TO SWAPS?

Your local Council may have specific requirements / regulations (Check with the Environmental Health Officer), but generally just about anything goes and may include:

- Fresh home grown fruit and vegetables
- Home Baking
- Homemade jams and preserves
- Home dried fruits and vegetables
- Homemade sauces and chutneys
- Fruit and vegetable seeds, seedlings and cuttings
- Fresh cut flowers
- Knowledge (e.g. organic pest control etc).

- Eggs
- Honey
- Recipes
- Compost / Mulch / Worm Castings / Animal Manure
- Gardening books

Legally swappers can bring anything provided that they are *sharing*. However, after talking with our local council we decided to exclude bottled vegetables from the Swaps (vegetables preserved without sugar and or vinegar have a high risk of soil botulism. *Clostridium botulinums* causes a severe food poisoning, which although has a low incidence, has a high mortality). We also excluded meat e.g. home made mettwurst etc. due to the higher potential health risks, and have clear packaging and labelling requirements for mulch, compost and manures.

These restrictions are to keep everyone safe and healthy due to the potential health risks associated with these products. It is up to individual Swap organisers to decide on and clearly communicate what members can or can't bring.

LABELLING

It is good for swappers to know exactly what they are getting. We ask that our members fill in our produce labels (or create their own with similar details) for any items that they are bringing to the swaps. This enables swappers to make informed decisions on what they select e.g. organically grown or minimal sprays etc. The addition of interesting facts about the item and its use may encourage swappers to select foods they are unfamiliar with and wouldn't normally take home. It also assists people

with allergies to select safe items.
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for as little as 30mins and there are others that are part of a library, nursery or community centre that essentially run all the time.

We decided to trial our Swap timing from 9am to 12noon, fortnightly on Sundays. The actual time we spend on each Swap is greater – from 30mins to an hour for set up and 30mins to an hour for pack up. We decided on the 3 hours in order to suit as many people as possible. Members with Church commitments have enough time to come first thing prior to going to Church, others with families find it easier to come a bit later. If we had limited our Swap to a short 30mins we don't think we would have had as many members and also the social aspects of the Swap would have been reduced. However, a shorter Swap does mean less work for the people running it.

Three hour swaps mean that there is a bigger window for people to pop in and out if they are busy and also allows people to stay and chat and have a cuppa and enhances the social aspect. A three hour swap does mean though that whoever runs it will need to be able to put aside at least 4 hours to run it every weekend or fortnight or month etc. It needs to be a time frame that not only suits the swappers but also the organisers. We now have many members who arrive at 9am and stay for the full 3 hours, plus a little bit extra to help pack up.

How often to run the swap is something that you will need to have a bit of knowledge of the local community to gauge: weekly, fortnightly or monthly? Ours is run fortnightly so whilst it is still regular, it isn't too onerous for the organisers and also provided time for garden surplus to build up again.

LOCATION & FACILITIES

When looking for a site to hold your swaps you will need to consider:

- Kitchen facilities if you are providing tea/coffee etc. (alternatively, if held in a park, dishes could be taken home for washing etc.)
- Power if you are providing tea/coffee – for Urn or Kettle.
- Toilets. The swap length will determine how essential.
- Council permission if you want to hold them on council land etc.
- Shelter from sun and rain and also from temperature extremities.
- Table/s for the produce to be put on.
- Chairs especially if the swaps are any longer than 30min.
- Signage so that people know where to come and also to catch the eye of people as they pass by.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

We are happy to provide you with electronic copies of all of our documents developed as part of our Community Fruit & Veg Swap. These are able to be altered and used to suit your local Swap. The following is available upon request:

- Fruit & Veg Swap promotional brochure and membership form
- Fruit & Veg Swap logo (location can be changed)
- Member etiquette
- Swap dates calendar template
- Membership packs
- Member card template
- Labelling template
- Promotional flier templates
- Sample media releases
- Safe Food Handling handouts
- Fruit & Veg Swap newsletters "In the Garden" (seasonal gardening tips)

Just contact the Centre Coordinator Faye on mpnrc@bigpond.com or 8568 1907. We encourage you to make contact if you are thinking about getting a Swap running in your local area as we would love to help. Good Luck!!