

## Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network

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**Prof F Hilmer**, Vice-Chancellor, UNSW

**Alan Egan**, Director, UNSW Facilities

**Sylvia Turner**, Director, Tiggers Childcare, UNSW

**Lisa Wallmeyer**, Honey pot childcare centre.

### **Re: Inclusive solution for UNSW Permaculture Community Garden**

I write to you as NSW coordinator of the Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network to request that UNSW enter into talks with UNSW Permaculture Community Garden members to devise a means of joint management of the community garden in Arthur Street, Randwick. A fair and just resolution to the issue would allow for continued access by UNSW students and staff, the UNSW childcare centres and the local community.

The Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network is a national association of individuals and organisations active in the use of community gardens for purposes of fresh food production, community building and urban improvement. It consists of community members Australia-wide, local government, professional community workers, urban agricultural, school and garden interests.

From our experience, school gardens struggle to be properly maintained without input from parents and the local community. In relation to plans for the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden and the UNSW childcare centres, I am interested in your response to the following questions:

1. How will the childcare centres manage a complex Permaculture education resource? What expertise do they have in doing this? What expertise do they have in Permaculture design?
2. How will the site be managed during university holiday periods?
3. I note that a fence has now been erected to shut out the community as well as university students and staff. How will the university provide timely maintenance of the garden to prevent it becoming overgrown with weeds, and the vegetables and fruit trees being damaged by pest insects and plant diseases? I assume the university does not want to become a pest and disease vector in the area.

I suggest that it would be of lasting benefit to the childcare centres to develop a relationship with the existing community garden team to draw on their educational experience.

### **Inclusive solution would improve reputation of university**

I understand the University is to hand the community garden to the UNSW childcare centres and to exclude the Randwick community and UNSW students from the site. I further understand that the

University is to consider starting a new garden on University land but that this will not be opened to the wider community.

For Eastern Suburbs community members displaced from the UNSW site, options for joining other community gardens are limited:

- ▲ by early next year, there will be only one community garden remaining in the Eastern suburbs; at present, it has limited capacity to accept new members
- ▲ other community gardens exist in the City of Sydney and Marrickville local government areas, however many of these are located on Department of Housing residential estates and are for the exclusive use of the Department's tenants
- ▲ other community gardens are small in size, a limiting factor in the acceptance of new gardeners, all of whom must go through the application process of the individual gardens
- ▲ the majority of these community gardens are a considerable distance from the Eastern Suburbs, where the users of the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden live.

While I agree that a new garden would be of benefit to childcare centre clients, the exclusion of the wider community, and the assistance and expertise it could offer, is not necessary and deprives Randwick residents of a community facility. Our experience in the Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network is that gardens in schools, and the teaching staff that make use of them, benefit from the expertise brought by community gardeners.

UNSW could further its standing as a university, and among local people, by taking a leading role, in association with the community gardeners and the University childcare centres, to work out a method of joint management for the site as a multi-user, publicly-accessible garden. This would position UNSW as a social innovator and, through its publicity services, the university could make much of the initiative, to its benefit.

Whatsmore, were the University to retain community access to the present site and to develop a joint management approach that includes all stakeholders, that would enact UNSW's stated policy. According to the University website, this consists of "a tradition of engaging with the wider community and welcome visitors from all over the world" (*The University - Visitors and the Community*, [www.unsw.edu.au/visitors/pad/visitors.html](http://www.unsw.edu.au/visitors/pad/visitors.html)).

## **UNSW permaculture community garden – a place of many uses**

A key aspect of the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden has been its multi-purpose role. Part of that role has been educational:

- ▲ use by UNSW staff for teaching and research purposes
- ▲ as an element in the University's partnership with Randwick City Council; this has enabled the garden to be used for community education, further enhancing its educational benefits to Eastern Suburbs residents; the Council has made considerable investment in the garden by providing an outdoor classroom, paving and native garden display area
- ▲ through an association with Eastern Suburbs Community College for which the community garden has served as a learning venue for quite some years

- ▲ for visits by TAFE students, as an example of urban food production and of the potential of informal university-community relationships
- ▲ through workshops organised by the gardeners that facilitated informal learning for both UNSW students and staff and the local community
- ▲ as part of the Australia-wide Open Garden scheme.

As well as these educational roles, the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden has been a noted venue for community arts in the Eastern Suburbs and as a place for constructive recreation, relaxation and waste reduction for families and individuals.

UNSW has not been alone in hosting a community garden. Universities, such as Griffith and Murdoch, also host similar gardens.

### **Importance of community access acknowledged worldwide**

The UN recognises the necessity of developing and improving the performance of the urban agricultural sector, which includes community-managed food gardens.

This was first articulated in the UNDP book, *Urban Agriculture – Food, Jobs and Sustainable Cities* (1996) and in subsequent books such as Rene van Veenhuizen's *Cities Farming for the Future - Urban Agriculture for Green and Productive Cities*, published by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction.

In his noted work, *The Great Good Place*, University of West Florida professor of sociology, Ray Oldenburg, describes the value of publicly accessible places where people gather informally. His research discloses that such places, which include community gardens, become the focus of vital communities and are important to the development of those communities and the grassroots democratic processes that enhance citizen involvement in the life of our cities. The history of the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden strongly suggests that it is such a 'great, good place'.

Many times over the years I have brought interstate visitors, many active professionally or informally in community gardens and the official bodies that support them, to view the UNSW garden. They have left with a favourable impression not only of the garden but of the university that hosts it. A similarly favourable impression has been gained by international development staff from organisations in PNG and the Solomon Islands, with whom I have professional relationships, on the occasions I have brought them to the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden.

Members and supporters of the Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network have experience and expertise in working with schools and their children in educational and design activities in gardens and a national network of practitioners engaged in this work has been established by the Network. Were a mutually beneficial outcome to be negotiated, one that is satisfactory to all stakeholders in the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden, I am sure that Network members would be prepared to offer advice and assistance to UNSW childcare centres in the educational and productive use of the garden.

The UNSW Permaculture Community Garden has served the local community and the city well as an educational, recreational, arts, social and food production facility. This is why I ask the University to respond to the following questions:

1. Why is it that the university recognises the importance of community gardens through its work on the Waterloo Estate yet contradicts that recognition by excluding gardeners from the Arthur Street garden?
2. Does the university recognise the important role played by facilities such as the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden in the life of our city, and in developing skills in decision making and urban sustainability among the public and students?
3. How will the university childcare centres plant, control weeds, harvest, irrigate and otherwise maintain the garden without participation by students, staff and community? Do the childcare centres have the necessary expertise in horticulture and Permaculture design (and qualifications in the latter) that will allow the garden to be maintained in a fitting condition?
4. Will the university enter into talks with the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden team to develop an inclusive, win-win outcome for what has become known as an exemplary sustainable education venue?

If I or the Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network can assist you in the process of developing an outcome that satisfies all stakeholders in the UNSW Permaculture Community Garden, I am happy to enter into further correspondence with you.

*Yours sincerely*

Russ Grayson

**State coordinator,**

Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network