



ENVISIONING A SUSTAINABLE URBAN LANDSCAPE



The key to local food production is on our doorsteps

A Submission to the Council by Dr. Samuel Alexander
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**A PROPOSAL BASED ON THE FOLLOWING CITY OF YARRA (MELBOURNE)
GUIDELINES ON URBAN AGRICULTURE:**

‘The City of Yarra recognises the importance of urban agriculture in supporting community sustainability, especially in times of changing climate and the myriad of associated issues such as food security due to diminishing oil supplies.’

‘Planting productive trees is considered by Council to be an effective means of inspiring and enabling community food production in the City of Yarra by generating environmental, social and economic wellbeing from the ground up – created for and by local people.’

‘There are terrific social and physical benefits in being able to access safe public spaces to grow food and share fresh produce.’

FULL DOCUMENTS AVAILABLE HERE: [HTTP://WWW.YARRACITY.VIC.GOV.AU/ENVIRONMENT/COMMUNITY-GARDENS/#DRAFTGUIDELINESINFULL](http://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/environment/community-gardens/#draftguidelinesinfull)

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THE KEY TO LOCAL FOOD IS ON OUR DOORSTEPS

Dear Councillors

I write this letter as an advocate of relocalising food production, especially in urban landscapes. I submit the following proposal for your consideration.

The Vision

A sustainable and resilient community is one that grows most of its own food, rather than importing food from all around the world. The Council has the key to open the door to a future of local food production, simply by revising its regulations on the cultivation of nature strips. Fruit trees are tidy, beautiful, and productive. A sustainable future for urban landscapes is one where the streets are enriched with fruit trees, like in the pictures below.



Why Local Food is Highly Important

Our current systems of food production are highly dependent on carbon-intensive fossil fuels. Fossil fuels are needed for commercial fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation; but most significantly, vast amounts of oil are needed to transport food huge distances around the world to our tables. According to a study by the Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies,¹ the average basket of food in Australia has travelled over 70,000 kilometres from producer to consumer (if the distance each item travels is added up).² If we are serious about responding to the reality of climate change, and if we want to build more resilient communities where we are in control over our own food production, then we must find ways to change our systems of food production in ways that are not dependent on fossil fuels. This means growing much more of our food closer to home, rather than importing commercially produced food from all around the world. Not only will increasing local food production help decarbonise our economy and reconnect people with the natural environment, but food production has always been a part of a healthy community. Primarily for these reasons, the Council should consider revising the regulations to allow residents to plant fruit trees in their nature strips.

This is a win-win proposal, and other City Councils have begun recognising this. For example, the City of Yarra in Melbourne is actively promoting planting productive trees in nature strips. The following passage is from their guidelines: “The City of Yarra recognises the importance of urban agriculture in supporting community sustainability, especially in times of changing climate and the myriad of associated issues such as food security due to diminishing oil supplies.”³ On their website they also note: “There are terrific social and physical benefits in being able to access safe public spaces to grow food and share fresh produce.”⁴ Most directly, however, is the following passage from their guidelines: “Planting productive trees is considered by Council to be an effective, means of inspiring and enabling community food production in the City of Yarra by generating environmental, social and economic wellbeing from the ground up – created for and by local people.”⁵ Developments in Dandenong are reflecting similar principles.⁶

Possible Objections to Nature Strip Gardening

- Interference with vision for drivers: This is an issue that must be taken into account, but obviously there are already thousands of trees lining our streets that do not interfere with vision for drivers. Accordingly, so long as fruit trees were planted in places that would not interfere with vision, there should be no problem. Any trees that became problematic could easily be removed.
- Interference with pedestrians: This is also an issue that must be taken into account, but the regulations should insist that the trees must be properly maintained or they will be removed. This includes collecting fruit from the ground so as not to cause a hazard. But this will not be a problem because the very point of planting the fruit tree will be to collect the fruit, and going to the effort of planting a tree implies a commitment to maintain it, including watering it when necessary. Indeed, this is a good way to mobilise the community to assist in ‘greening’ urban landscapes. Again, in the occasional instance of a problem, the tree could be removed.
- Interference with piping systems: Finally, piping is also an important issue, but again the regulations could and should mandate that anyone planting into their nature strips first ensure that digging will not interfere with underlying pipes. Fortunately, this information (in Australia) can be easily and quickly obtained (for free) from “Dial before you Dig.”⁷ Other nations may have similar services.

There will always be a few people who object to progressive proposals like the one being presented here, but in this case it should be clear that they would be a tiny minority. Furthermore, the hundreds of existing fruit trees in urban landscapes are not causing any significant problems. Most people would love the opportunity to have a mandarin tree or an olive tree on their nature strip, and those who do wish to, do not have to. The central point, however, is that any minor risks or inconveniences that might flow from planting fruit trees in nature strips are insignificant compared to the risks of not localising our food production. And the many great benefits of relocating food production far outweigh whatever risks there might be, as the City of Yarra has recognised.

Proposal:

For these reasons I ask that the Council consider revising its regulations on nature strip gardening to allow for the cultivation of nature strips – in particular, to allow for the planting of fruit trees. Ideally, this revision would allow local residents to cultivate their nature strips, on the condition that they ‘dial before they dig’ and that they keep things safe, neat, and tidy. The City of Yarra guidelines (see references below) could be used as a basis for a new policy.

As a qualified alternative, the Council may like to consider using a limited area as a ‘pilot case study.’ There might be an area that already has a great many nature strips cultivated, suggesting that there will be very few objections from local residents. The pilot case could run for five years, after which time the Council could review the situation and see whether the regulations could be opened for the entire constituency.

Closing Thoughts

We live in extremely challenging times, where multiple environmental, social, and economic issues are overlapping and demanding imaginative solutions. Unfortunately, regulations designed for a different era are now putting obstacles in the way of progressive, environmentally sensible action. It would be a terrible shame if our children and grandchildren look back upon our times and see that motivated people were prohibited from growing their own food in available land. We need to think creatively about how we are going to deal with the various problems we face, especially ecological problems. Relocating food production is not going to solve all our problems, but it is an extremely important step in the right direction, and a great opportunity for the Council to lead the way to a greener future. Localising food will greatly reduce the amount of fossil fuels used in our food production; it will reconnect people with the natural environment; and it will foster community spirit as people take shared responsibility for localising food production. Furthermore, cultivating nature strips will demonstrate that we care about how our community feeds itself and what impact we make on the planet.

There is so much at stake, so please take this proposal seriously.

REFERENCES

- ¹ See <http://www.ceres.org.au/>
- ² See <http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2007/11/28/2103395.htm>
- ³ See <http://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/Environment/Community-gardens/#draftguidelinesinfull>
- ⁴ See <http://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/Environment/Community-gardens/#draftguidelinesinfull>
- ⁵ See <http://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/Environment/Community-gardens/#draftguidelinesinfull>
- ⁶ See <http://www.michaelbgreen.com.au/urban-orchards>
- ⁷ See <http://1100.com.au/default.aspx>