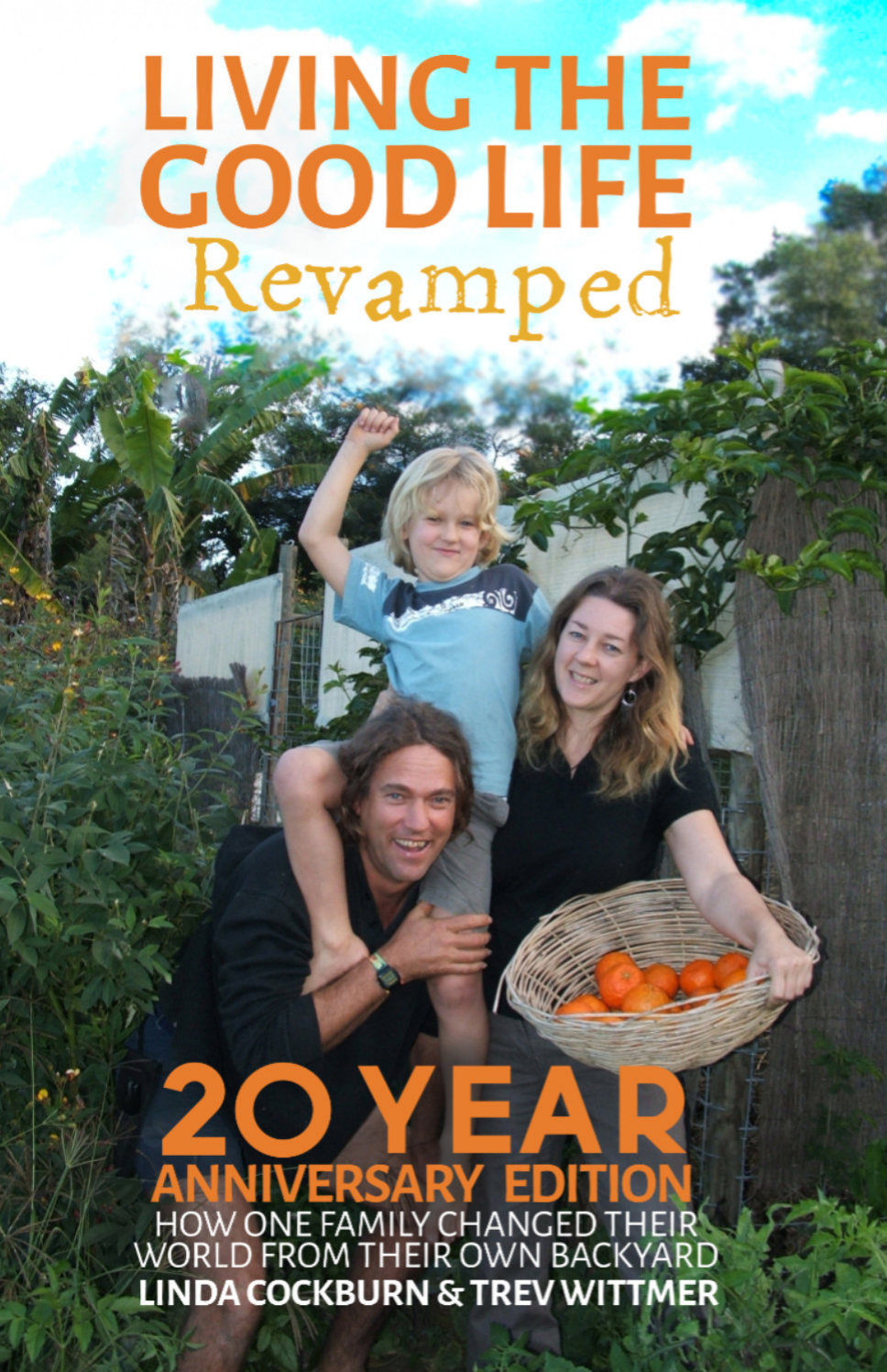


LIVING THE GOOD LIFE *Revamped*

A photograph of a family of three in a lush garden. A man with long brown hair and a black shirt is crouching in the foreground, smiling. A young child with blonde hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and grey shorts, is standing on the man's shoulders with one arm raised. A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black shirt, is standing to the right, smiling and holding a large wicker basket filled with oranges. The background is filled with green foliage, including banana leaves and a wooden fence.

20 YEAR
ANNIVERSARY EDITION
HOW ONE FAMILY CHANGED THEIR
WORLD FROM THEIR OWN BACKYARD
LINDA COCKBURN & TREV WITTMER



Introduction

‘We’re going to try go six months without spending a dollar.’ I smile, waiting for the inevitable response, which is a knowing grin and an array of, ‘But how are you going to...?’ questions.

I’m prepared for being asked about shampoo, scrubbing brushes and soap. Even better am I at responding to questions about transport and tissues, but for a long time I didn’t know how to answer the one about toilet paper. I’d experimented with Lambs Ears (the kind you grow), which, while soft, didn’t have the required strength. Newspapers were not an option. Round stones were once favoured by some cultures and are the last resort of ill-prepared campers, but it’s one place I’m not willing to compromise. The issue, as opposed to the area, was a thorny one.

The Romans used a sponge on a stick, which they then returned to a communal bowl of salty water for the next person to use. The thought, while revolting, inspired a solution. We were growing thousands of loofahs in the backyard; they could be used once, and discarded down the composting loo. It seemed the last piece in the puzzle, but we didn’t realise the puzzle was a living thing, and we’d need

to keep building on it as we went.

While modern toilets are an improvement on the communal poo sponge on a stick, every time the toilet's flushed an aerosol spray of contaminated water forms a mist that adheres to the walls and ceiling and can float for two hours. We still haven't got the elimination of eliminations right.

I'm quick to point out that while we can opt out of some things, we can't avoid paying taxes, rates, insurance or medical bills. We aren't about to be jailed for tax evasion or let a family member bleed to death or die of a strangulated hernia. Non-payment of rates might have drastic consequences and insurance is there just in case we lose the house, though ours is not inclined to go wandering. We would also need to remain connected to the phone and internet, and have an educational expenses fund for our six-year-old son, Caleb. We don't want to turn our back on the world, just reduce our environmental impact as far as possible without making our lifestyle unliveable.

Everything else is up to us to provide or to go without.

While there's a general push for industry and agriculture to adopt sustainable practices, the domestic area goes largely unnoticed. Severe droughts in 2004 provoked discussions about building higher dam walls, and when hot summers produced power shortages there was talk about burning more coal and increasing infrastructure. Almost no one mentions we could learn to be more efficient with our water and power use. We looked into what the domestic sector was creating or using with respect to pollution, water, power and resources. The figures were frightening, and while this book originally shared that, we've cut most of it from this edition and stuck with the story.

During our research, we were often confronted with information that was unrelentingly negative and gave a message of hopelessness. This book is positive, and gives practical information on how we adopted a sustainable lifestyle without huge cost and without great sacrifice. It's a unique look at how we live and how we could be living. It's also a humorous insight into how we went to an extreme we at first didn't intend to and don't recommend for

everyone... and spent six months mostly self-reliant, or *domestically sustainable*, a term we prefer over self-sufficient, which implies ‘going it alone’ or turning away from the world. Domestic sustainability acknowledges the effects capitalism, consumerism, overpopulation, and our current overuse of resources has on the environment, and reassesses our way of life while embracing what it means to live within a community.

But why would we want to undergo such an ordeal – although we think of it as an adventure.

Like most families we’d lost touch with food creation, not just buying and artfully cooking the produce of others, but seeing it from seed to saliva. the cost of food was resented, because it represented a necessity we no longer felt connected to and forever needed replacing.

Both Trevor and I were working full-time, and Caleb was ‘doing’ full-time daycare. I was often away nights, and forever behind the wheel of a car or in front of a computer, usually while eating junk food and wondering why I was getting so fat. We wanted a simpler life. But how could we? We’d already tried living off one income, and found it nearly impossible. Then I started researching aspects of our family’s environmental impact and, somewhere on a highway in a car that looked like someone had dumped a rubbish bin full of junk food wrappers in it, something gelled. We could live off one income if we provided our own food and learnt some of those forgotten skills like cheese-making; growing, threshing, winnowing and grinding our own wheat; making bean curd; and harvesting our homegrown sesame seeds. We could even have a go at producing vegetable oils and growing our own coffee. We could grow our own meals, shampoo, scrubbing brushes and more.

We live on a 2180-square-metre town block, just over half an acre. Is it possible to feed a family on a suburban block? Later on you’ll see the mathematical equations that say *yes*. But that’s theory, what about practice? Why is it so interesting to know if we can survive under our own auspices?

The increasingly fragile global ecosystem and world events make

us wonder what would happen if the elaborate system we've spent many thousands of years evolving disintegrated overnight. Could we survive? Have we the knowledge and the skills to adapt to changed circumstances? Are we 'progressing' ourselves into vulnerability? We know how to drive cars but few know how to fix them. Components of just about everything we use are drawn from around the world at unknown cost and unknown ramifications if they were to stop. We know how to cook a meal, we have the ability to buy ingredients, the means to transport them to our homes, electricity to assist in its preparation. Can we sustain ourselves without the huge human network? We've all learnt to refine our skills and filter out broad based knowledge – this may be to our ultimate disadvantage.

We want to explore a non-consumerist approach. Can we survive without a new Bionicle – Caleb, the release of an eagerly awaited literary novel – me, a boutique beer –Trev? Will we feel deprived? Will we have withdrawal symptoms? Will we develop other ways of obtaining pleasure within the boundaries of our 2180 square metres?

What will the impact be on our health? Will we be less stressed? Lower our cholesterol? Improve our liver function? Will we lose weight? Trev's accused me of devising the world's most elaborate diet. What about our mental health? Will the six months leave us feeling invigorated or depleted? Will we long for the end of the six months, or will we wish to linger in our 'sacred space' just a little longer? What will we take with us, what are the long term ramifications of living on so little? And, as so many people ask, are we trying to go back in time, or is this a movement forward?

The major impetus behind the experiment is concern for the health of the environment. By choosing to live in a sustainable way, we'll reduce greenhouse gas and our use of disposable items and household chemicals.

Trev will continue to work in the 'real' world, while I'll stay at home. It could just as easily be the other way around. It also means Caleb will experience things like picking caterpillars off cabbages and feeding them to the chooks, eating sugarpeas directly off the

vines (and leaving chewed off stems for me to find later), collecting eggs and passionfruits, climbing mulberry trees, cracking fresh macadamias and developing an appreciation of the most important unit known to humankind – that of energy, not currency.

Overall there are five facts that led us to the conclusion an experiment in domestic sustainability was a worthy pursuit.

- 1 It takes 9 calories of fossil fuel-based energy to provide 1 calorie of food in Australia. *(now 7-10 globally)**
- 2 Each day the average Australian family uses 15 to 20 kWh of electricity created primarily by burning coal, the production of which creates 5.5 to 7.3 tonnes of CO₂ a year.
Now 18-25kwh a day creating 6.5 to 9.1 tonnes of CO₂
- 3 In undeveloped countries the daily average water use per person can be as low as 30 litres of water. The world average is 139. In Australia – the driest country in the world – it's 300.
Now 274 litres. But our use doesn't stop there: industry and agriculture consume much larger amounts on our behalf. It's called virtual water and the global average is 3,800 litres, Australia ranks 9th largest at a daily, per person rate of 4,375 litres.
- 4 Most families turn over 200 litres of drinkable water into sewage a day. That's 73,000 litres a year.
- 5 Every litre of petrol creates enough vehicle emissions to pollute 10,500 litres of air. *This figure can no longer be verified, but it served a role in inspiring our adventure.*

We no longer felt we could continue those practices in good conscience. We concluded early on that we can't change the way people live, but we can change the way we do. So we did.

This is our adventure.

Please note: occasionally we've inserted comments into the original Queensland adventure, these are in italics.



1 January

We watch over Caleb's shoulder as he crosses off the first day on our six-month calendar.

'I wish it was already over,' he says.

We agree. Not because we're dreading the next six months, but because we want to be able to say we've done it, we've succeeded – and it's a long time until we can. But it's a relief to finally begin what we've been saying we would for two or three years. We don't know whether we can do it or not. It's all speculation at this point and, now we've told everyone we're going to try, we're too embarrassed to fail.

Most of what we'll be doing has become par for the course. Managing our own water and power has been part of our daily lives for three years. We know, bar unforeseen climatic oddities, that we can go six months without relying on mains water or power. Transport – well we suspect we're going to miss the car, but we've been using bikes and feet for some time too. Food – we've been providing our own at a rate between 5% and 80% for six years, but

never at such a high sustained rate. Can we do it? It's the late-night question gnawing at our sleep. We don't know.

'What's for dinner, Mum?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh, great!'

It's Caleb's favourite meal, made up of things we always have plenty of. This one is made from large wedge chips, boiled eggs, homemade mayonnaise, chives, parsley, asparagus, grated carrot and peanuts. At other times we've substituted mushrooms, pumpkin, sweet potato, corn, squash, whatever is currently prolific. It's our version of takeaway – high fat and fairly fast.

Nothing

So-called as it uses ingredients we always have on hand or in the garden, plus it makes us smile when we ask each other what we'd like for dinner and the other says, 'Nothing.'

500 gram mix of potatoes or sweet potatoes or mix of.

6 halved hard-boiled eggs

2 large grated carrots

generous handful of roasted nuts.

mushrooms sliced

a chopped onion lightly pan-fried

2 tablespoons of mayonnaise

1 teaspoon of cumin

chopped chives

Steam the potatoes until nearly cooked.

Pan-fry until golden and crisp.

Gently combine ingredients and serve warm. Exchange any of the ingredients for whatever you prefer, or have too much of.

3 January

We're down to the last three rolls of toilet paper. Caleb and I are making inroads into the Christmas chocolate, and we've polished off the ice-cream. Trev's discovered his home-grown tobacco could be

marketed as nicotineless, and his elderflower champagne, which he scientifically tested for alcohol by filling a mug, sculling it and waiting for a buzz – none came – is alcohol-less. He shrugs and says it doesn't matter, but Trev is a man of oral pleasures – alcohol and tobacco are two ritualised aspects of this. While it won't cause us to fail, it's a disappointment. I make the requisite number of oh, no, oh, darlings, before moving off. *Trev is still a man of oral pleasure, but has given up alcohol and tobacco.*

If you feel sorry for Trev, you are not alone. Many people greet Trev for the first time with, 'You poor man.' It's a running gag around the house: 'It's OK Trev, I might not feel sorry for you, but lots of other people do.'

There's a belief the eccentric idea of six months without spending a dollar is all mine and I'm a train pulling Trev and Caleb along a rough track with many torturous bends, with a sign at each one saying things like 'no McDonald's,' 'no airconditioned rides to school,' and now this new torture for Trev, 'a low-alcohol, low-nicotine, no meat, only snails diet.' I'm a witch.

Trev feels embarrassed about this, even though he recently said to Caleb, 'The next bright idea Mum has, let's shoot her.' Caleb agreed. But this is a team effort and we're all willing members. Caleb demonstrated that conclusively when yesterday I wiped sweat from my brow and said, 'Oh bugger this experiment, let's get in the car and go for a swim.'

'No, Mum! We'll fail our six months.'

Trev and I have our own environmental, personal and even financial goals to achieve through the experiment. Caleb, though keen on the idea, needed an additional goal. He's been promised a \$200 do-what-you-like-with-it shopping trip if he helps us get to the end. The kind of help I'm after is the 'eat what you're given' variety. It's given him something to work towards.

Sometime during the day, Trev suggests our next experiment be one of complete self-indulgence – how much food, drink and resources can we squander in six months? I point out that there are plenty of others already conducting their own experiments without

needing to replicate them. I suggest trying our current experiment in every state – Tasmania here we come! I ignore the dirty looks. *Well, that was prescient!*

4 January

Trev conducts Phase II of alcohol testing the elderflower champagne – two mugs provide a medium-level buzz equivalent to beer. I think he's deluding himself. Nevertheless, he's somewhat appeased.

Elderflower champagne

25 very fresh elderflower heads (yellowed ones make Cat Piss Wine)
10 litres of water
1 kilo of sugar
1 packet of wine maker's yeast (7gm)
2 lemons cut into quarters (skins on)

Combine elderflowers, water and lemons and soak overnight in a carboy. (A plastic drum with an airlock made especially for fermenting).

Strain liquid, pour back into carboy. Dissolve sugar in sufficient additional warm water; add this and the yeast to the strained elderflower mixture. Stir well.

Leave to ferment until bubbling stops, usually a week.

Bottle, adding a teaspoon of sugar to each, assuming the bottles are around 750ml. Give them a good shake to circulate the sugar.

Leave two to three weeks before drinking.

Recently our power creation has not met up with our consumption. It's a predictable effect of high humidity and temperatures reducing solar PV efficiency by 0.5% for every degree over 25, and increasing the time the fridge needs to run to maintain 5 degrees. Especially true as we're all sweating profusely and continually opening the door, mainly to rest our heads in the freezer for a moment before searching for something cold. We've tracked down a sheet of heavy plastic to make a barrier over the front of the opened fridge – it will allow us to access the contents through cut slots, and yet not let the heavier cold air 'flop' out onto the floor when the fridge is opened. I spent ages fastidiously taping the plastic sheet to the fridge only to

discover it prevented the door from closing. I moved it back an inch or so, whacking it in any old way. Meanwhile, Trev's on the blazing roof cleaning the solar panels with a squeegee. Then he spends a blistering several hours working out how to lower the solar panels into a more efficient 'summer' angle. Our installer told us it wasn't necessary and before long Trev discovers he believed it so unnecessary he didn't bother to make it possible. I turn up in time to wriggle along underneath the panels and pop the bolts Trev can't reach.

5 January

We woke stuck to the sheets and prepared for a day of lethargy. The humidity has sucked all good intentions, and the heat has inflamed tempers. I ask Caleb to pull the plug on the bath before I leave the house and race down to the end of the grey-water hose. I stand there for several steaming minutes waiting for it to start running. It doesn't. I return to the house to do it myself. He's forgotten, but he's keen to clamber over me with sweaty hands, bump his nose into my headache, and wrench at my neck, which has felt like it's been resting at right angles to my body for several days now. To add to it all, Trev tells me it makes me look like my father. I'm not impressed. *It turns out neither was my father and he refused to read further.*

Trev's making repeated comments on his imminent demise – the blood tests are back. The medical receptionist tells me my results are normal, but the doctor wants to talk to Trev about his. She won't elaborate. The doctor will give him a call – but this is several days ago and, while I'm sure he won't die, his blood pressure is rising. 'Kidney cancer!' he cries, 'Malfunctioning liver!' I suspect high cholesterol and, considering he experimented with battering and deep-frying goat's cheddar cheese this morning, it makes more sense than proclamations of a multitude of cancers and organ failures.

Trev jeopardises what health he has left by standing out in the heat to finish off fencing the south 'paddock,' as he calls the steep, rocky slope just below the house: around 25 square metres of lablab, sorghum, pigeon pea and nasturtium. It's stirred up his AF (Atrial Fibrillation), a condition where the impulse to the heart goes awry

and the atrium quivers instead of pumps, resulting in an erratic pulse. While that only makes him feel weak and won't kill him, if his blood sits around in the atrium too long, the next good pump could send out a clot and that might.

Over-indulgence in alcohol, dehydration and mega loads of caffeine are triggers, and today he demonstrated his ability to sweat by wringing out his shirt – it couldn't have been any wetter if he'd been swimming in it. Then he put it back on and went back out.

Apart from the heat and frayed tempers, our first five, dollarless days have been a breeze. Last night's dinner was eggplant and tomato ratatouille followed by plum and vanilla custard. All, bar the bartered cornflour, sugar and vanilla essence, is ours.

I have a vanilla orchid growing in the hope of producing our own; unfortunately it grew a large spider. I picked up the pot; the spider made a bolt up my arm; I dropped the pot; and the poor vanilla has remained in intensive care ever since. I was looking forward to the first flowers, which would need to be hand-pollinated, the pods, wrapping in plastic where they'd 'sweat' before placing them in alcohol where they'd exude their fragrant deliciousness. It's something that will happen one day, but not perhaps with this wounded orchid.

6 January

The medical test results arrive in the mail: Trev has almost twice the recommended level of cholesterol, more than four times the triglycerides and his urea is off the charts, which could indicate either kidney problems or a diet high in protein. I calm him with a lullaby of 'Well, you did eat a leg of pig all by yourself over Christmas.' My cholesterol was a tad high, but then I too felt obliged to make the most of the last week.

Trev cleared the sediments of elderflower champagne from the carboy and made his first ginger beer – I'm looking forward to a good quaff. One of my addictions has been a regular, non-medicinal, non-alcoholic draft of dark-coloured, sparkling beverage of international renown. Six days without it and I could do with a substitute.

We woke to a shower of 3 or 4 millimetres, which would have seemed a brief blessing, then we looked up the Bureau of Meteorology radar and saw the great ship *Heavy Rainfall* drifting just south of us, unfurling a brief flag of drizzle in a token gesture. We missed out. The humidity does not abate. Trev seems to have the wet look as a permanent part of his attire. After a night in which sleep played only a small part, he declared an all-day sleep-in. Since then, he's helped milk the goat, fed everyone breakfast, devised an ingenious weeding tool made from recycled material, used it extensively, cut himself, bled profusely, bottled wine and made us both a great cup of coffee. He's still muttering about having missed out on good rain. He's walking a thin line. We've had an agreement after years of angst and long tirades on our meteorological luck, or lack of. Nothing infuriates Trev more than missing out; nothing infuriates me more than the repetitious content. Summed up: 'We really have to suffer before it rains' – 'When they say it rains in the South-East, we're not in the South-East we're in the Wide Bay; when they say it will rain in the Wide Bay, we're in the South-East' – 'When they say it'll rain on the coast, we're inland; when they say it'll rain inland, we're on the coast' – ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

Having said that, I'm moved to tears of rage when it's been horribly dry for a long period, we watch the radar with glee as a storm brews and then moves as if to rain heavily; then it disappears within one frame only to reappear a frame later, having reformed to continue its rain-filled rampage south, north, east or west of us. Still, we are better off than some, and vastly more fortunate than people such as those in areas of Chile who get an average of 1 millimetre of rainfall a year and rely on fog harvesting for water.

Trevor has projects; I potter. I add a little bit of mulch, weed a little here, plant a few seeds, pull, water, thin. I forget where things are for a week, rediscover them half-dead and have to try revive them. I grasped –no, embraced – the permaculture concept of letting weeds grow on barren ground, for to pull them out only encourages more. My motto is 'weeding is feeding.' Most things I weed go straight to Possum the goat, who picks fastidiously through

them for anything worthwhile. What she turns her nose up at, the chooks are entitled to. If I weeded the entire block at once, she'd be overwhelmed with delicacies and leave nothing for next week. Impeccable logic but I could be accused of being a lazy gardener. *I can categorically say I'm no longer a lazy gardener.*

Permaculture

Bill Mollison, the father of Permaculture, coined the phrase in the 70's from an amalgamation of the words Permanent and Agriculture. 'Permaculture is the harmonious integration of landscape and people, providing their food, energy, shelter and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way. Without permanent agriculture there is no possibility of a stable social order.'¹

Ethics

- ♦ Care for the earth
- ♦ Care for people
- ♦ Distribute surplus
- ♦ Reduce consumption

Principles

- ♦ Everything works at least two ways.
- ♦ See solutions, not problems.
- ♦ Cooperation, not competition in work, communications and economics.
- ♦ Make things pay.
- ♦ Work where it counts.
- ♦ Use everything to its highest capacity.
- ♦ Bring food production back to cities.
- ♦ Help make more people self-reliant.
- ♦ Minimise maintenance and energy inputs to achieve maximum yields.²

Part of permaculture is letting things go to seed and a little wild. I haven't planted a pumpkin in years, and have succeeded, by being so casual about the whole thing, in breeding up a fantastic cross between a jap and a butternut. *Now I do it deliberately and have a fantastic*

¹ The permaculture Home Garden, Linda Woodrow, Penguin Books, 1996

² www.permacultureinternational.org

cross between Triamble and Turks Turban. Chillies grow in perversely awkward spots, as do eggplants, basil, coriander, lettuce, kale, sorghum, millet, sunflowers, pigeon pea, potatoes, peanuts, beans, pak choi and a multitude of inbred tomatoes. My system could not be called one. I'm stingy with water, preferring a survival of the fittest regime that culls all but the hardest. I'm lackadaisical with fertiliser, instead spreading the worn-down mulch from the goat pen with its decaying black marbles of goat and chook poo, a sprinkle of dolomite, a dash of fish sauce and it's all over. My recipe for the half-hearted gardener Trev prefers the term half-arsed. *We became commercial market gardeners and seed producers. No-one's gardening is half-hearted, or half-arsed, any longer.*

In my pottering I leave things half-done when something else catches my eye. I might return to pick up the first job, or find myself on yet a different course in a different part of the garden. I might chance upon the first task with an 'Oh, that's right' with only a 50% chance of completing it. My only saving grace is my book of lists. I make one daily – everything I can think of I can do, and lots I probably won't but, hey, let's add them anyway. I love crossing them off and refer to them often. Without lists starting this experiment would still be a dream. Trev finds my work methods frustrating; I see his need to fulfil each project with the utmost precision, punctiliousness and patience, following each one to its full completion before embarking on the next, as anal. So when he finds kilos of plums sitting on the bench, unwashed and un-refrigerated, and sighs heavily, it's a sign for me to back out slowly and spend another hour hiding in the garden. Without Trevor I wouldn't get half the things I want done, done.

I mowed the lawn today – that is, what's left of it. We sold the petrol mower a year ago and found a hand mower to run over the nature strip, which is a misnomer if ever I heard one. It's home to a few ants, a couple of species of grass and that's all. It's a 30 by 4 metre area I regularly mow, if only to keep the elastic grass under control; if I let it get too high, it simply bends over and snaps back on passing.

Plants have various abilities to convert sunlight into energy – grass is relatively low in the scheme of things, and humans have yet to find a way to eat it without first passing it through a ruminant, after which its energy value is yet again reduced. I have a hard heart and a sharp tongue when it comes to lawns. Lawns are a hangover from our English forebears’ preference for manicured blobs of green. I wonder if it wasn’t, even then, a symbol of wealth: ‘Hey, look everyone, I’m so bloody wealthy I can afford to have large expanses of fertile soil dedicated to growing something that consumes rather than provides.’

In England, they have a climate that’s grass-conducive; in Australia, we don’t. Hence my hardening arteries take a thrashing every time I drive down a road and see cramped suburbanites taking their pet snake for a spin around the front lawn, watering for hours, pampering it with various chemicals to keep it green, kill lawn grubs and strike with venom those unwanted plants they call weeds. Trev has an alternative hypothesis: it’s a primeval desire to keep the grass low so that no predators can sneak and eat us. Maybe we’re back to the lawn snake again.

8 January

Caleb ate the last of the chocolate today, the edible kind at least. Trev still has his 85% cocoa variety left. It will be safe from us. I feigned *disinterest* as Caleb ate it, while secretly hyperventilating. I have a sweet tooth. I made toffee, the kind Trev said he hasn’t eaten since his mother made it for him. We recall school fairs where for 5 cents you could buy a patty-cake paper full of toffee with an iceblock stick, or stacks of toffee that had been shattered out of the pan like amber glass and wrapped in gladwrap. Trev’s devouring it at great speed. Caleb’s disinclined to partake of our sticky memories.

Desserts have quickly become a priority. Each time I bake I plan to make a lemon and passionfruit flan, I make chocolate custard with the last of the cocoa, a five-egg yolk passionfruit gelato. My chocolate angst melts away – my sweet tooth will have its say.

We’ve grown sugar cane and crushed it to use the juice to sweeten

fruit cordials before, but now we haven't the space or electricity to grow or crush enough and then render it down to a molasses form. So we barter for sugar, but it then becomes part of the energy equation: 1 kilogram of raw sugar is 4000 calories; it takes 0.5 square metres to grow it, and uses 1315 litres of water. We still grow it, but as a windbreak and harvest the tops as 'cow candy' for the goat.

Energy is the defining measurement of success in the experiment. Living sustainably is about generating enough energy to fuel ourselves and our 21st century appliances through trapping sunlight from a suburban block and reduce our CO₂ emissions to sustainable levels. Even though we've said, 'six months without spending a dollar,' we consider currency a lower priority indicator of success.

We cracked a watermelon open yesterday; it takes up most of the fridge. Written on its side in wobbly letters is 'CALEB'; having seen them sitting in the garden, he'd thought to claim this one as his own. It won't be many more days before it's eaten. Watermelon has always been his favourite food. I'll never forget shopping with him when he was two. He became 'the watermelon felon' – the child caught pink-faced in the supermarket trolley. He ate through the plastic and submerged himself in it before I'd realised. I was a good shade of pink too when I'd presented the remainder at the checkout and admitted it had once weighed a good deal more.

He went through such a watermelon-eating phase it wasn't unusual to find pink poo at the bottom of the potty. He tried a fresh fig today. I told him he'd love it; he didn't look convinced. I told him it was the coolest fruit in the world because it's really an inside-out flower he's eating, and that a tiny little insect must crawl inside a little hole in the end to pollinate it – how cool is that? His suspicion does not lessen.

'My brain tells me it's probably not a good idea.'

'Tell your brain to go park somewhere else while you try it,' I cajole. Then, giving in, say the only thing I know will work.

'Caleb, if you eat that fig it is guaranteed to make you fart – a lot.' He eats it. He decides it's not that bad.

Trev and I don the gardening gloves and tackle some major

weeding. Trev, who hates weeding, endeavours to make the job interesting by devising a new weeding tool. He tells me it's his way of maintaining interest in the job. I see it as procrastination: he spends half a day in his 'recycling centre'—where he's known as 'The Recycling King'—and emerges triumphant with a cool contraption (and Linda will be so astounded she will fail to recognise that Trevor is using avoidance strategies.) I make the mistake five minutes into the job of asking if he knows what a particular weed is. We spend 40 minutes looking it up and failing to find it. Trevor enjoys weed identification far more than extraction. Considering the state of weeds at the moment, it could be said I too enjoy anything more. Every time I close my eyes I see red caustic creeper, cobblers pegs, scotch thistle and asthma plant.

I've been christened *The Naked Gardener* after a recent unplanned streaking episode. I knelt in a colony of jumping ants, who lost themselves in my dress. They became distressed by the odd jerking movements of the mountain they were climbing and bit it numerous times before it divested itself of its clothing and ran, screaming, to the house. Caleb's the only one going naked, at six, he's aware his last days of disinhibition are upon him. And it's hot.

After four long nights of stick-to-the-blanket heat, the cool change seeps into the bedroom and we wake to find someone's filled the rain gauge with 37mm—and look! They've filled both wheelbarrows and topped up the tanks. Neat trick.

10 January

I wake to find Trev shaking his head in quiet dismay. It's his first day back at work. He'd plugged in the electric bike's battery charger, turned it on, and it had gone up in smoke.

He resorts to his low-tech version. He brushes off the cobwebs and pumps up the tyres. As he leaves I yell out my leave line—'Don't run over any trucks!' Our next-door neighbour's accompanying him for the exercise—Trev's going to get more than he bargained for. While the trip to work won't be too bad with a nice breeze behind him, by the afternoon the cyclone hanging off the coast will provide

a rip-roaring bluster to ride home against.

The bike's still under warranty and I organise a replacement. It should be here in a day or two.

Not having Trev at home and on holiday feels like the end of mine too. No more excuses for lethargy. It's still early when I barter flour with Elsie, who's kind enough to drive to the top of the block and beep so I can run up to do the egg swap. Elsie's eighty and has been bartering for our orange-yolked eggs for a year or so now. She doesn't like driving and can't walk down the steps for a visit but we frequently natter via email – the Internet is her second home, no agility problems there.

I knead the bread, now and then running off to feed the goat, and watch Caleb roll his own mini-loaf. He decides it's a pizza base, which he inexpertly juggles. Each time he throws it up he yells, 'It's on the house!' and it lands on a different part of it, picking up dust and dirt. I bite my tongue. He's enjoying his game, and we're not yet so desperate for food the 50-gram piece he's playing with is so important I have to rant at him. He gives me enough other worthwhile causes to rant – I let it pass.

'Hey Mum?'

'Yes?'

'It really is on the house – see?'

Above our heads his pizza is peering down from the rafter where it will remain as midnight-feast material for passing cockroaches.

I sigh, 'I'll show you how to measure out a level teaspoon.'

We make six loaves, eight mini-loaves, half a dozen cinnamon scrolls (that do not last the day), two goat's cheese pizzas, a passionfruit and lemon custard tart and a plum shortcake. At Caleb's suggestion we make four Harry Potter wands from skinny dough sticks, bake them and dip them in icing sugar. White, with green on each end, he takes them down to share with the kids down the road. They look more like oversized matchsticks than wands, they're eaten regardless. We've managed to make baked goods for the next fortnight with only one firing of the oven, making it efficient utilisation of a big power user. The bake-off uses 4 kilograms of bartered flour,