

Garden temptations

Beware! Community gardens may attract thieving cyclists.
DAVE FAWKNER gets tempted by a pod of beautiful beans.

MY BICYCLE AND I were minding our own business when we ran into the protesters. They were occupying a section of linear park that was once an inner city rail corridor, but is now a long expanse of green through which the shared path meanders.

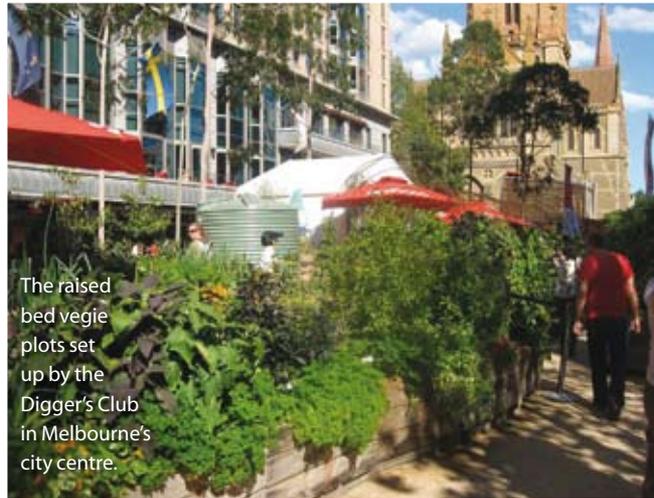
They'd cordoned off a section with coloured tape so that it looked like a crime scene, and banners hanging from nearby trees and fences indicated it formed the perimeter of a proposed community garden.

The point, as one of two protesters who pounced on me with a clipboard and petition said, was that a two-metre-high fence would create a bottleneck for joggers, dog walkers and cyclists, along with passengers alighting from cars on the adjacent nature strip.

"We've really got nothing against community gardens," her companion said. "We just don't want them in our front yard."

While I could almost see the back-to-front logic of this statement, I was becoming confused by the concept of public space not being community space. My confusion increased when she claimed they had already lost space in the park to a children's playground and a bocce court.

The other protestor (the one with the clipboard) explained that, several decades ago, the former railway site had only just been saved from being sold off as industrial land.



The raised bed veggie plots set up by the Digger's Club in Melbourne's city centre.

"But why would they need such a high fence?" I asked, mentioning a community garden beside a path several kilometres away, which has a fence no higher than needed to deter the rabbits from the neighbouring golf course.

Her companion, oblivious to the bicycle I was balancing between us, opined that a fence would be necessary to stop passing cyclists from pinching vegies on their way home for dinner.

"Anyway," she continued, "vegetable gardens may be alright in their prime, but they look ugly when let run wild. Some of these people," she whispered conspiratorially, "are seed savers."

In the end I signed, but only after the woman with the clipboard assured me that notice would be taken of my comments that I was objecting to the potential creation of a bottleneck in that particular spot, and not to the creation of a community garden on one of the other two sites suggested.

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CBD vegies

A week later I found myself at a family get-together in a nearby, but much larger, park. There were mature trees for shade, vast expanses of lawn for the kids to run on and beds full of flowers... but what I really wanted was a sprig of rosemary for the barbecue.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could turn some of these beds over to vegetables?"

I thought to myself. Not just for the food, but because purple basil, rainbow chard, rhubarb, tomatoes, strawberries and a host of other things can be just as colourful and inspiring when planted in contrasting colours and patterns.

There must have been something in the water because a week later, while riding through the city, I came across just such a garden created for the Melbourne International Food Festival.

In a square on one side of a busy intersection, the formal landscaping had been interposed with raised beds of edible crops. Set up by the Digger's Club, it was designed to demonstrate the sorts of things that could be grown in pots in even the smallest space. Workers and shoppers were pausing to stroke foliage and herbs before lifting their fingers to their nostrils and smiling.

I was just eyeing off a pod of butter beans hanging attractively from a trellis when I remembered what the woman at the protest had said about thieving cyclists and vegetables. **OG**