

a fresh approach

Across the Kimberley and Northern Territory, growing food on Country is not just helping to improve children's health, but their educational and career outcomes, too, writes **SALLY FELDMAN**

Each day at Yiyili Aboriginal Community School, pupils head out to the school's sprawling vegetable gardens to see what's ready to pick. Situated on Goonyandi Country in the East Kimberley, the school serves the Yiyili, Girriyoowa (aka Pullout Springs), Ganinyi, Kurajan, Thamani (Rocky Springs), Goolgaradah and Moongardie communities, owners of Louisa Downs Station, on which it sits.

School principal Monty Mackenzie, his wife Erika Wells and their children have lived here for the past five years. "We've got amazing grounds," he says. "Three massive dedicated growing and learning spaces outside classrooms, so it creates another classroom right at the door."

Originally from Melbourne, the family's plan was to do a "lap around the country", according to Monty, but an opportunity came up at the school and they seized it. Erika had long been into growing food and cooking, and was impressed by the EON Foundation's Thriving Communities Program operating in community. When a chance came up to work with EON in Yiyili, it seemed like the perfect fit.

The EON Foundation's Thriving Communities Program has a simple premise – to improve the diets and, in turn, the health of people in remote communities, literally from the ground up. It was founded in 2005 by Perth businesswoman Caroline de Mori AM, whose work frequently took her to

the Kimberley, where she had seen the disparity between what the children in remote communities were experiencing and that of her own children.

At the time, she was working with the late, great Ernie Bridge (founding member of the Aboriginal Lands Trust and the first Indigenous cabinet minister in Australia) on a diabetes care and management program. "Like many Aboriginal people, he had type 2 diabetes. Travelling to remote communities with him, it became apparent that it was impossible to avoid or manage type 2 diabetes when all the food available was highly processed, high salt, high sugar," Caroline says. "If there *was* fresh food, it was so expensive, brown and wilted that no one wanted it – and I wouldn't either!" ▶



PHOTOS COURTESY OF EON FOUNDATION

Left Students from Thirroo class picking some kale. **Top left** Bernie with a jar of harvested berries. **Above** Lemongrass growing among pawpaw and mango trees. **Backdrop** A gorgeous sunset spreading across Goonyandi Country.

MEET THE GARDENERS

So, with some money inherited from her parents, Caroline decided to take action. "I wanted to talk to communities and ask, 'What can we do to help you?'; not to come in saying, 'I've got all the answers'."

The first garden was in a school at Djarindjin-Lombadina on Western Australia's Dampier Peninsula. "Within weeks, the kids were snapping off corn and picking tomatoes," she says. "It was rewarding very quickly – important when you're dealing with kids, and also with people who are fed up with 'just another program', 'another whitefella idea'. Since then, we've gone into communities by invitation only – and within months we were getting invitations."

a growing concern

Fast-forward to 2023, and EON's Thriving Communities five-year program has run in 41 community schools across the Kimberley and the Northern Territory's Big Rivers region, with about 20 on the waiting list at any time. "It's a long-term investment, a three-way partnership between EON, the school and community elders representing community members," explains Caroline. "The ownership is theirs, and we tailor it to whatever they want to focus on, whether it's health and nutrition or training."

At Yiyili, Monty and Erika have witnessed not only an increased awareness around nutrition and its impact on overall health, but also teaching and mentoring being expanded by community members like Shorty, from Ganinyi, and Anthony, who hails from Girriyoowa. Both men worked at Louisa Downs before completing their TAFE certificates in horticulture. ►

This page, top Yiyili's Galamooda class with Trevor and Cornelius in Ganinyi camp, where they built a raised bed and planted some pak choy, basil and bush beans for a community elder. **Right** Bernie harvesting carrots. **Opposite, top to bottom** Local horticulturists Anthony (*left*) and Shorty are the "Costas of Yiyili"; Priscilla Gordon (Director, Yiyili Community Indigenous Corporation and board member of Yiyili School) surveys her own garden brimming with corn, lettuce, broccoli and much more.



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Anthony and Shorty have become Yiyili's home-grown Costas, spreading the word and teaching the skills to grow fresh food. They have been responsible for building the gardens at Yiyili School and are now teaching community members to establish and care for productive gardens.

"The good thing about growing fresh vegies is that kids come and pick fruit off the tree, and we do cooking classes with fresh vegies," says Shorty. "Then they take that knowledge home and share it with their families and community."

"Some other Kimberley community members get us involved with their gardens at home," adds Anthony. "They come and get banana trees and pawpaw trees, and plant tomato plants and beans – all sorts of things."

Monty sees other tangible benefits, too. "We've been experimenting with how we can turn it into a social enterprise run by the high-schoolers – growing and picking to sell to tourists who visit our art gallery, for example, but also within communities," he says. "The kids will pick bags of vegetables and run a stall. When they sell to tourists, it's great for them to interact and speak English [the language spoken here is Kriol], and there's also embedded numeracy with the handling of money. There are so many angles for where this takes us."

"Mob teaching mob is key. It's the way of the future," says Erika. "The strength and sustainability of this program come from these two blokes and their hard work and knowledge. The gardens that Shorty and Anthony have built bring such a sense of pride in this school and community."

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Clockwise from top This thriving edible garden includes banana and mango trees, crops of zucchini, broccoli and kale, and raised beds filled with spring onions, dill, nasturtiums and parsley; students from Yiyili's Galamooda class with jars of basil pesto and chilli sauce; the kids running a food stall; Arno points proudly to a lemon, while Tishaun gives a thumbs up.



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