

[Home](#) » [Opinion](#) » [Elizabeth Farrelly](#) » Article

## Local plot thickens and leaves planners for dust

Chippendale is revolting. With luck, it'll spread.

"It's important that you don't think I'm good at this," says Michael Mobbs, and he doesn't mean revolt, which is rather his forte. "I'm not Peter Cundall. That's the point. You don't have to be."

He was, of course, talking gardening. Beside him sat *Gardening Australia's* Angus Stewart. But the media conference wasn't about just any gardening. It was the first spring swelling of horticultural insurrection. Gardening as revolt.

Outside Mobbs's house in Chippendale a little garden grows. Beside it a sign reads: "Mandarins, oranges, limes, chillies, mint, native mint, coriander, rocket, strawberries, raspberries, kaffir lime leaves, cumquats, parsley, passionfruit, bay leaves, lemon myrtle and more ... Pick any fruit, berry or leaf that you want to eat. These plants provided by local residents for anyone - we need to grow food where we live and work."

Gardening for food has had a chequered history in this country, ever since the First Fleeters almost starved to death from a skill vacuum. Most of the grand and luscious creations in Colleen Morris's new book, *Lost Gardens Of Sydney*, emphasised handsomeness over productivity (though some, like Alexander Macleay's fabulous Elizabeth Bay House gardens, attempted both).

The vegie patch was something of a backyard norm in the first half of last century, but these days some people feel lucky to get a sad-looking robinia between their place and the next-door neighbours' games room, much less a row of beans and a chookhouse.

There in the tiny backyards and nature strips of narrow Chippo terraces, you get beans, chooks and more.

Chippendale has made headlines recently for its proximity (and, on the whole, opposition) to the Frasers redevelopment of the Broadway brewery site. And Mobbs is renowned as the solicitor-turned-sustainability coach who made his terrace "almost entirely self-sufficient" in water, waste and energy. This was quite an exercise, undertaken experimentally over 10 years, involving reed beds, worm farms, chooks and perforated stormwater drains for on-site soakage.

Now, though, Mobbs calls the house a "trivial, well-intentioned failure" and turns his subversive attentions to food. Housing and construction contributes 11 per cent to our eco-footprint; food, 41 per cent, most of this from meat. You can save 60,000 litres of water a year by not eating red meat one day a week.

The nutritionist Michael Pollan's rule, for the health of us and the planet, is "eat food, not too

much, mostly plants, especially leaves". But there's also the way growing our own food enhances our health, mental as well as physical, well before we eat it, by recalling our "ancient evolutionary bargain with these ingenious domestic species".

People, it seems, are way ahead of government on this. Out there, well beyond the latte line, they see the wall scrawl. They know what governments are still trying to sidestep or fudge: it's change or be changed.

The NSW Department of Primary Industries website notes: "indiscriminate subdivision and urban sprawl ... has severely impacted the Sydney food bowl". Over in Planning, they're still busy chucking good farmland under the bulldozer.

The last city Chinese market garden is a seven-hectare patch of bok choy and garlic chives at La Perouse. It's Crown land, having been farmed under lease for 160 years, but it's zoned residential and is now under threat to house not the living but the dead, expanding Botany Cemetery.

That's bad, but not the worst. Sydney's main food bowl is now the Hawkesbury. Leppington, Austral and Kellyville disappeared, then Pitt Town - where Frank Sartor recently approved a massive increase in a development he himself told residents had "no planning merit" while its developer, Keith Johnson, dribbled and drabbed \$286,981 into the ALP NSW begging bowl (and gave \$86,000 to the Liberals). Then, it seems, Richmond.

One obvious answer is to avoid supermarkets, which ruthlessly dictate eating, gardening and planning policies without regard for human or planetary health. If you must go there, says Pollan, shop the periphery where the fresher food hangs, avoiding at all costs the processed-food doldrums in the middle.

Subversive enough, perhaps. But Mobbs goes a step further, setting up Food for the Future. An amalgam of 1960s food co-op, grower's market and traditional Sydney vegie-man, Food for the Future will turn grungy, working-class Chippo into a model of urban feeding. Bringing in a food truck a week - and carting out inner-city coffee grounds and food scraps - it will make a direct link from Hawkesbury grower to city customer, sidelining the supermarkets. Now that's grassroots.

It will also establish community gardens, lobby for productive street trees, help people leakify their storm drains and hold a Hawkesbury growers' fair, scheduled for October. This takes money, and Frasers, which has trucked in its own Paris-based architect, Jean Nouvel, to green the new development (with non-food crops), has offered sponsorship, though the quantum is still at issue.

Money, yes. But it doesn't need government. This makes Mobbs happy. "So happy I'm revolting," he says. But maybe it's the other way round. He's so revolting, he's happy. And maybe that's his bloomin' lot.

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