



Toowoomba Community Organic Gardens

Association Inc

Members Handbook

The Toowoomba Community Organic Gardens Association (TCOGA) acknowledges the Wakka Wakka, Giabal and Jarowair peoples, the Traditional Owners who have walked upon and cared for this earth for thousands of years. We pay respects to Elders Past and Present and Emerging.

TCOGA extends its thanks to the Toowoomba Regional Council for its ongoing support and assistance in the development of the gardens.

We also acknowledge and thank the many members and office holders who founded the gardens and have devoted themselves to developing and nurturing them for the good of all.

Origin

The gardens were established as a project of the Darling Downs Natural Growers Group which was Incorporated in 1982. The first plantings at the site occurred in the early 1990s and, in 1995, the Toowoomba Community Organic Garden Association (TGOCA) was incorporated.

Vision

Our Vision is that the Toowoomba Community Organic Gardens is a welcoming and inclusive community space where people come together in a spirit of friendship and cooperation, to learn, implement and demonstrate sustainable, organic food growing practices, which support the health and well-being of participants, preserve, and improve the site for the benefit of the local community, and have a positive environmental impact.

Objects

- Create a welcoming, supportive, and flexible environment for organic gardening activities and social connection, fostering a culture of collaboration which values and respects the different perspectives, opinions, abilities, and characters of all participants.
- Develop, trial, and build upon practices for organic gardening, including the sustainable use of soil, water, and other resources, which support healthy and resilient growing systems, in a context of continuous learning.
- Facilitate and promote opportunities for learning by members and the community, through formal and informal knowledge sharing and hands-on experience.
- In partnership with the Toowoomba Regional Council, maintain an inviting, green space for the community, and preserve and extend vegetation for food production, habitat protection, increased biodiversity, and enrichment of the local ecosystem.

Gardens Layout and Infrastructure

Founders Garden

This area was established in the early 1990's when the gardens commenced. In 2021 it underwent a revitalization, utilising grant funding. Garden plots were rebuilt, and paths widened to improve access. There are 12 garden plots in this area and additional communal spaces.

Member Gardens

This area was established in 2010 with funds from an Ergon Energy grant. There are 8 raised garden plots and 6 other plots for private use, with a few communal plots also in the area. This is the site of a large concrete rainwater tank which is the primary source of water for the plots.

Accessible Garden

Built in 2021 using grant funds, this garden, within the public area of the gardens, has 8 raised wicking beds. These plots were specifically designed to enable members of the community who require additional height or have issues accessing other garden beds to be able to garden easily.

Field Plots

There are five field plots (formerly known as the maize gardens) within the communal area of the gardens, which are available for hired use.

Forage / Permaculture Garden

Located in the original part of the gardens, this area was developed in the early 1990s. The principles of permaculture continue to be used in the maintenance and development of this area.

Orchard Area

This is part of the communal area of the gardens and contains a wide range of fruits trees of varying ages.

Wildlife Garden

This contains various native plants and trees, with a pond to attract wildlife into the garden.

Native/Bush Tucker Garden

This area comprises bush tucker plants and trees indigenous to the area and was established for the purpose of learning about and utilising traditional bush foods and remedies.

Main Shed

This is the central point of the gardens and the gathering area for morning teas, meetings, and other small social events. It houses facilities for tea/coffee, a notice board, a sign-in book, a health & safety incident logbook, a first aid kit and the gardening tools, wheelbarrows, and hoses. The Minutes of TCOGA meetings, membership forms and associated documentation can also be accessed there.

Storage/Shipping Container

Located next to the main shed, the container stores large equipment and other items.

Greenhouse

Located within the Founders Garden, the greenhouse is irrigated to facilitate water saving when growing seedlings and plants for the gardens.

Facilities

A single toilet is located on site.

Social Area/pizza oven

This area is used for events as authorised by the TCOGA Management Committee.

Member responsibilities

General

All TCOGA Members are required to:

- Comply with all requirements in this handbook, particularly ‘required gardening practices’ and ‘safety in the garden’.
- Sign the sign-in book upon arrival at the gardens.
- Pay membership fees on time.
- Keep contact details up to date.
- Read emails/correspondence from TCOGA.
- Complete an induction process.
- Be accountable for any keys in their possession.

Members are encouraged to attend morning teas held on Wednesday and/or Sunday mornings. Those attending are asked to bring along a plate of food to share with others.

Additional responsibilities of plot holders

In addition to their responsibilities as members, plot holders must also:

- Maintain plots regularly (attending them at least fortnightly)
- Inform the Plot Coordinator or a committee member of any significant pest management or other problems, discussing proposed approaches and agreeing on strategies.
- Work in shared garden areas for a minimum of **two hours** each month, including for example:
 - Working in communal gardens.
 - Helping to maintain facilities.
 - Participating in fund raising activities.
 - Participating in managing the association and its activities.
- Inform the Plot Coordinator or a committee member if they are unable to attend the gardens for any period (e.g., due to illness, holiday, family, or obligations).

Compliance process

- Failure to meet any of the responsibilities above will result in a written warning letter being sent to the plot holder specifying a proposed action and a period for compliance.
- If there is no appropriate response to the issues raised in the letter, the plot will be reallocated to the gardens.

Key Gardening Principles

- Build and maintain soil health by viewing soil as a living structure, which needs to be skilfully handled and nurtured like the plants it supports.
- Use resources wisely and sustainably, anticipating future needs in garden design, and adopting water wise practices and closed loop systems for managing organic materials, minimising reliance on materials from off-site.
- Employ organic growing methods, relying on strategic planting practices (e.g., selective, companion and rotational planting) careful observation, and good garden hygiene based on early intervention and natural approaches to create and maintain

healthy growing areas.

- Keep the broader garden environment in mind, recognising that individual gardening choices and practices can have implications for the site.
- Encourage biodiversity in the understanding that all life forms, by way of plants, microbes, insects, birds, and mammals, have a role in maintaining a resilient ecosystem.

Required gardening practices.

Planting

- The planting of communal plots is guided by the wishes of gardeners and collective learnings about what to plant, and where and when.
- In planting out private plots, consider discussing options with other gardeners. Due to the limited space, smart choices as to the type and number of plants grown will result in a more satisfying harvest.
- Plant seeds in from edges so that the fully grown plant does not intrude onto other plots or paths, and remember that vines like pumpkins, melons and chokos can quickly overwhelm a space and create issues for neighbouring plot holders.
- Avoid planting large plants that will cast shade over your (and/or neighbouring) plots. Larger plants also require more water to establish than herbs and vegetables.
- Consider the shade a trellis will throw and how it will affect your and neighbouring plots. If other plots will be affected, limit the height of trellises to one metre.

Soil health

- Consider soil condition, suitability for plants, and short- and longer-term strategies for any remediation required.
- Practice crop rotation and inter-planting to avoid nutrient and microbe imbalances.
- Enrich with organic matter especially well-rotted (finished) compost, worm castings and nitrogen rich plants (legumes), slashed at the end of the growing season and left in situ.
- Protect with mulch; soft mulches benefit soil more, while hard mulches such as woodchips (unless aged and decomposing) should ideally be placed over a layer of soft mulch rather than directly onto soil where they leach nitrogen to aid decomposition.
- To maintain soil structure, avoid tilling too vigorously, layering organic matter where required.

Wise water usage

- Members must comply with Toowoomba Regional Council water restrictions, which TCOGA extends to its rainwater tank supplies.
- Consider water needs when choosing plants and expected conditions (rainfall and temperature) for the growing season.
- Reduce water consumption by:
 - Creating and maintaining good soil health by adding organic matter and mulching.
 - Deep watering to encourage deeper root growth.
 - Watering only early in the morning or at day's end.
 - Potentially using wicking systems or root spikes (pipes to hold water buried at root depth), taking care to prevent mosquito breeding, or wetting agents/surfactants if

desired (but only under the mulch layer through which water needs to pass and not be retained) .

- Using only handheld trigger nozzles on hoses and **never leaving a tap or hose unattended.**
- Use of sprinklers is prohibited, except with permission of a committee member.
- Providing shade if appropriate for soil and plants in the hottest parts of the day (cast by taller plants or structures).

Weeds

- It is important to keep communal areas and private plots free from weeds particularly before they flower and disperse their seeds (this can happen in a matter of a couple of weeks); weeds in one plot can easily spread, to the detriment of other plots.
- Plot holders are required to weed the pathways around their plot and along the fence line near their plot.
- Weed infestations in neighbouring gardens should be reported to a coordinator or committee member.
- Inorganic fertilisers, synthetic herbicides and inorganic insecticides and fungicides must not be used. These can be toxic to people, degrade soil fertility and harm beneficial microbes, insects, and animals.
- Unless otherwise instructed, the following weeds must be removed from communal areas and private garden beds and placed in garbage bins for removal off site:
 - Nut Grass
 - Cobblers Pegs
 - Onion Weed
 - Oxalis
 - Asparagus Weed
 - Diseased Plants
 - Any fruit or vegetables stung by fruit fly, including any fallen fruit.
- Other weeds, grasses and small branches are to be placed in compost bins.

Natural weed/pest controls

- Options to control weeds and pests using natural methods may require more thought, planning and perseverance, but a holistic approach is more sustainable over time, e.g., weigh the merits of a disease-free crop now against a compromised growing system in the future. Methods include:
 - Companion planting – certain plants provide beneficial qualities when planted together, e.g., marigolds control nematodes (minute worms in the soil) that attack many plants, especially tomatoes.
 - Mulching, which can suppress many weed species.
 - Maintaining healthy plants, which are less susceptible to pests and disease.
 - Manually inspecting plants for bugs such as grasshoppers and caterpillars which can be removed by hand if necessary (noting they can be beneficial as identified in the last point below)
 - Using makeshift traps containing natural products, e.g., using apple cider vinegar for fruit fly-control
 - Discovering natural remedies such as coffee grinds and saucers of beer to kill snails.
 - Encouraging biological control, for example, lizards eat grubs and insects, and can be encouraged through the provision of rocks/other habitat; birds also control many pests.

- Discuss problems and approaches with a committee member, coordinator, or other gardeners.

Compost Bays and tumblers

- There is an 8-bay open ‘hot composting’ system next to the main shed which is regularly maintained:
 - The hot composting method of open bay management requires the materials to be turned regularly, as opposed to slow, unturned composting; as well as providing aeration, the compost in a hot system can be checked for appropriate moisture content.
 - Regular turning also discourages rodents from setting up home in the bays.
 - Members are encouraged to follow the instructions attached to the bays when adding materials.
 - All materials must be reduced to small pieces; the smaller the pieces the quicker the compost will be ready for use.

Worm Farms

- There are several worm farms located in the Founders Garden near the steel rainwater tank; these provide worm tea which is a source of rich liquid compost and a soil improver.
- Members may deposit kitchen scraps in the farms provided they follow the signage about what food scraps are suitable for the worm towers.
- Worm tea should be diluted to 1 part worm tea to 10 parts water or to the colour of weak tea and applied to plants every 1 to 2 weeks in the growing season.
- This area is managed by a coordinator. If worm castings are required for the garden, please see the coordinator or a committee member who will assist in providing these.

Weed Teas

- There are large tubs of weed, comfrey, and borage teas also available for members to use; weed teas are created through a fermentation process which produces a liquid fertiliser rich in soluble nutrients and a diversity of beneficial microbes which can boost productivity in the garden as well as increase resistance to disease and insects.
- Weed teas are quite strong and may need to be diluted, usually 1 part tea to 10 parts of water; please refer to the signage for more information on how, when, and where to use in the garden.

Wood chips/Mulch

- Wood chips and Mulch are available for members use from the mulch / wood chip pile.
- Some mulches are quite dusty and can contain fungal spores; wearing a dust mask when turning compost or digging and spreading mulch is advisable, particularly if you suffer from a respiratory condition.
- Always water down the mulch once it has been spread over the area.

Harvesting, seed saving and foraging:

- Gardeners are encouraged to let some plants flower and go to seed, choosing the healthiest, best producing plants for next year's crop and for sharing with others, as well as providing food for pollinators.
- Foraging from communal areas is one of the many rewards of volunteering at the gardens, but naturally requires consideration of others:
 - Pick only ripe, edible produce.
 - Take a modest amount.
 - Detach produce correctly (ask if unsure) so as not to damage plants.
 - Never walk on garden beds or allow children to play in them.

Safety in the Gardens

The gardens are to be maintained in a condition conducive to their safe use by gardeners and visitors. Garden safety is very much about common sense and being mindful of what we are doing.

Health and Safety Incident Logbook

- A Health and Safety Incident Logbook is located with the sign-in book in the main shed and members are required to record any injuries they sustain in the gardens; they are also encouraged to enter any health or safety concerns they may have.
- After making an entry in the logbook, a committee member should be advised so the matter can be followed up and any issue or concern raised addressed to prevent future incidents.

Dressing to garden

- Wear a hat and apply sunscreen.
- Consider wearing a lightweight shirt with long sleeves as well as long trousers.
- Always wear enclosed shoes or work boots.
- Consider wearing gloves to protect your hands and to avoid blisters from handling garden tools, and when doing garden construction, spreading compost and mulch, weeding, or removing pest insects from plants manually.
- Wearing a mask when handling mulch or compost is strongly advised.
- If in the garden for some time, remember to:
 - Drink water to avoid dehydration.
 - Avoid sunburn.
 - Have rest periods – or down tools altogether - during high temperatures to avoid any risk of sunstroke.

Trees and Wildlife

- Wildlife is in abundance in the gardens which are enriched with grasses, ground covers, shrubs, trees, and many native plants which provide food and shelter for many creatures.
- The provision of habitat supports an environmental balance between food plants and wildlife.
- Changes to trees, shrubs, perennial plantings, structures, signs or changes of a long term or permanent nature will require Management Committee approval.

Care with creatures

- Be aware that reptiles, such as snakes and goannas, might venture into the gardens.
- Do not try to pick up reptiles, insects, spiders, or other creatures as they might defend themselves by biting, stinging, or scratching.
- Look before lifting buckets, watering cans, boxes, timber, or other site materials; redback spiders sometimes nest in them and a bite from them can be dangerous.
- Report sightings of vermin, pests, weeds, and anything in need of protection to a coordinator or committee member.
- Cover standing water, such as in a pond, to reduce the incidence of mosquito breeding.

Tool Use

- Mechanical equipment and machinery can only be used by members who have completed relevant safety training and have the consent and approval of the committee.
- Everyday tool usage should be managed as follows:
 - If you take more than one or two tools into the garden, carry them in a wheelbarrow, bucket, or basket so there is a predetermined place to put them when they are not in use.
 - Before using a spade, garden fork, rake, or other long handled tool, look to make sure there is nobody behind or beside you who could be accidentally harmed.
 - When you have finished using a garden tool or when you put a tool aside for a moment, place it out of the way of others.
 - Never lay a tool across a path or place it in long grass where it is concealed, causing a trip hazard.
 - Lean a garden rake or long handled tool against something when you put it aside; if you need to lay it down, place it away from where people might walk and place it with the pointed prongs or blade facing to the ground, not pointing up.
 - When putting a garden spade, shovel or fork aside, push it into the soil so that it remains upright and visible.
 - Carry tools such as spades, garden forks and rakes in your hand rather than over your shoulder. When carried on the shoulder, it is easy to hit someone accidentally if you turn around.
 - Clean all tools before returning them to their allocated place in the shed.

Lifting and storage

- When lifting something heavy, bend your knees and crouch down, then lift the item by straightening your legs. To avoid back injury, do not bend over to pick up something that is heavy.
- Ask for help to lift and move heavy or bulky materials or objects.

Proper Lifting Technique

Wednesday, Oct 17th, 2018



Caring for children

- Children are the responsibility of the adult accompanying them and must be always supervised and not left unattended.
- Children should also be supervised to prevent unintended consumption of plants, e.g., chillis or unripe produce, and to prevent accidental damage to plants.

Discouraging Rodents

- Rats and mice are a part of our urban environment and are seldom a direct danger to gardeners.
- If you are concerned about rodents, do not lay baits or traps, but speak to a committee member or a coordinator so a garden-wide strategy can be agreed upon.
- Habitat denial is the preferred strategy, e.g., minimising entry points to compost and hot (rather than slow) composting.

Care with organic chemicals

- Any use of organic controls for garden pest and plant disease management (sometimes called ‘botanic’ controls because they are derived from plants) should be done under the guidance of a committee member or a coordinator who has experience and is knowledgeable of the precautions to be taken in production, handling, and application.
- Some organic pesticides can cause injury; when making, handling, and applying chilli- based insecticides such as chilli spray, wear gloves and keep hands away from your face (chilli in the eyes is painful).
- Avoid getting botanic sprays and other controls in your eyes or in cuts on your hands or legs. It is best to wear gloves when applying any botanic or synthetic control.
- Wash your hands after making, handling, or applying organic pesticides, herbicides, or other organic controls.

Animals at the Gardens

- Dogs are welcome at the gardens; they are to be on a lead and the owner must ensure that they are always with the dog.

Personal safety

- There have been incidents of vandalism at the gardens, often caused by small groups of young people.
- It is recommended members consider their personal safety when attending the gardens outside of group activity times (Wednesdays and Sundays), particularly if they are alone or night is approaching.
- If a plot holder needs their garden watered, consider asking someone to do this at a scheduled activity or leave a notice on the noticeboard at the shed to this effect.