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O fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden, that goes to seed



Max Dingle

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In the early 1980's after acquiring my property I had visions of being self sufficient in fruit and vegetables. The thinking started with apples and pears, lettuce and broccoli, tomatoes, corn and beans, and so started a garden regime along traditional lines. However one year after a difficult and dry winter, I managed against all odds to produce a huge crop of broad beans, but in the midst of this bounty, I found that so had everyone else, and broad beans were practically being given away at the markets. This was on top of the previous year's olive disillusionment, a lot of effort and time picking and pickling against the cheaper, and to be honest, better, bulk olives available in the local Lebanese corner store.

Yes, you can comfort yourself with the knowledge that your garden produce is fresh and all your own work, but in the end it still irked me that my garden always managed to produce a glut of produce at the same time as the markets being awash with the same, fresh and cheaper.

So I decided that I would no longer compete, I would set up a gardening and cooking challenge by growing things that were not available, at least not available on a regular basis, and because of an interest, instilled as a child, in using local food resources, and having identified the food plants that grew naturally on the property, as well as planting Macadamia nut (*Macadamia integrifolia*) and Finger Lime (*Citrus australasica*), I decided to concentrate on indigenous edible plants, and then, due to a lack of regular garden maintenance or possibly sheer laziness, I added weeds to the menu.

I had introduced a bewildering variety of weeds when I made the mistake of buying bags of horse manure from some children trying to make pocket money from a roadside stall, I compounded the purchase error by adding the manure to what I call my compost heap, which in reality is just a pile of vegetative material that slowly rots never producing any heat to kill off weed seeds. My "lawn" is now mostly Couch (*Elymus repens*), Clover (*Trifolium repens*), Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), Kikuyu (*Pennisetum clandestinum*), Lambs Tongue (*Plantago lanceolate*), Paspalum (*Paspalum dilatatum*), thistles (*Cirsium* and *Silybum*) and other unknown weed like plants. Of those I recognise as edible, I usually do not bother with Clover and thistles, I have a set against thistles, despite them being edible and I try to eradicate them, while Clover is left because it sets nitrogen in the soil. Some people say Clover is edible but while I have tried a few flowers in salads and leaves as tea, I have never taken to the taste. However the young leaves of Lambs Tongue and Dandelion leaves and flowers perk up a salad and work well in a weed pie. I do like to add Dandelion flower petals to baking, they add a savoury note to cakes and muffins.

I have allowed Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), Mustard Greens (*Brassica juncea*), Oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), Rapini (*Brassica ruvo*) and Rocket (*Eruca*

sativa) to go to seed and these, showing off their inherent weed like natures, invade the garden beds on a regular basis. Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*) just arrived and established itself, just as it does anywhere in the world, and this is why it is a favourite plant for foragers, especially in the city. After rain has revived the garden, all these self seeded plants pop up all over the place, and I must admit that to plant anything else, such as more conventional lettuce or carrots requires the removal of wheelbarrow loads to the compost. Though at this point I have given up even trying to plant the more conventional, if I have a hunger for cauliflower or broccoli I just buy it at the market. What I do make room for is indigenous food plants such as Vanilla Lilies (*Arthropodium milleflorum*), Native Leeks (*Bulbine bulbosa*), Yam Daisy (*Microseris lanceolata*) and Coastal Saltbush (*Atriplex cinerea*); with varying degrees of success. The main problems involve finding the right treatment required to get the seeds to germinate and then recreating a suitable growing environment.

Germination methods include the seeds being smoked or soaked in smoke infiltrated water, others need boiling water poured over and 24 hours of soaking, or sand papering the hard outside coating and then there is the occasional advice that the seed will take anything from 6 months to 2 years to germinate and really I do not have the patience to maintain a seed tray for 2 years waiting for something to germinate.

As an example, Yam Daisy seeds, we are told, are only viable for about six months and only if they are stored in the refrigerator at 4 degrees. The seeds are to be laid on top of the seed raising mix and only covered with the barest minimum of soil, kept moist and in sunshine. Try as I might following various instructions to the letter and improvising methods of my own, nothing worked, in the end, after going through two packets of seed purchased via the internet, I hurled the remaining seeds on to the garden and a few days after watering up they came, but of course they were the wrong variety, instead of large dandelion sized plants with large tubers, they were a miniature version. Getting the wrong variety is one of the hazards of buying on-line via non professional seed sources, as is getting non-viable seed. I should also add that 18 months later I decided to re-use the old seed trays in an attempt to germinate tuber seeds from Kakadu in the Northern Territory, only to find that not one of those seeds germinated, but I did get a lot of Yam Daisy seedlings that had failed to germinate 18 months before.

Indigenous plants that I have added to the garden and the table:



Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*)

Purslane is mostly looked at as a weed, as you could guess by one of its common names "pig-weed". However in places such as Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Mexico and Asian countries it is grown as both vegetable and edible medicine and Australian Aboriginal people were known to use the seeds of the local variety to make seed-cakes.

There are numerous varieties, it is a plant that has made itself at home world wide so I am not sure whether the variety I grow is indigenous to Australia or a recent import. I do know that it is easy to grow, in fact if you have it you certainly will not need to plant seeds. Purslane will grow in any soil, the current foraging movement in the cities find it growing in cracks in the pavement, but I like to have it in my garden beds - however it does need constant attention to stop it taking over the whole garden. If you have it in your garden then eat it, it is one of the most healthy plants around, having probably the highest Omega 3 content of any plant, as good a source of this essential fatty acid as is fish. Purslane also contains other fatty acids, antioxidants, vitamins A, C, E and some B plus minerals, magnesium, calcium, potassium and iron.

The whole plant can be eaten, stems, leaves, flowers, seeds. Eat as is, in salads or on sandwiches, use as you would spinach, use in stir fries, and is also good as a thickener in soups. A favourite is my version of a Weed Pie, use the recipe for a standard fetta and spinach pie but substitute Purslane, dandelion, wild rocket, mustard greens for the spinach. Another is asparagus, peas, purslane and pasta dressed with olive oil and lemon.

Warrigal Greens (*Tetragonia tetragonoides*)

Or New Zealand spinach, is native to a number of places around the Pacific and was introduced to Europe by Joseph Banks who collected samples while on the Cook expedition in 1770. Its greatest attribute, at least in my garden, is its weed like ability to self seed and once introduced to your garden you will have it forever. I introduced Warrigal Greens by the tried and true method well known to our mothers, take a cutting while on a walk and pop it in the garden when you get home.

The young greens can be added to salads if using in very small quantities but as the leaves contain oxalic acid, it is best to blanch in boiling water before using; the leaves also contain vitamin c and anti-oxidants. Use as you would spinach or silverbeet.



Finger Limes (*Citrus australasica*)

I have two varieties of this citrus native to northern NSW and Southern Queensland, one that has yellow /pale green juice vesicles and the skin turns very dark green, almost black, when ripe and the other has red vesicles and the skin turns from green to almost black and finally to red when ripe. If the ripe fruit is left too long on the tree it will eventually split open exposing the flesh and then drop off the tree. Fruit sprinkled with finger lime 'caviar', really compliment each other. I also use the limes on fish, on lamb chops, in salads as well as on and in desserts. Something that is really simple and extra wonderful is combining limes with vanilla ice cream, the pop of the frozen globules and the flash of citrus is sensational. A pear, rocket, purslane, macadamia nut, finger lime (all from the garden) salad, dressed with extra virgin olive oil and shaved parmesan, is also something that is difficult to go past

Tubers

I have not had much success with indigenous desert plants like Bush Bananas (*Marsdenia australis*) and various sweet potato like tubers. They are very difficult to either germinate or to grow, as they need specific conditions which are hard to replicate in a temperate coastal climate. However I do grow :

Vanilla Lily (*Arthropodium milleflorum*)

The tubers are eaten, usually roasted, they are relatively small so need a few for anything other than a taste and are not really economically viable, ie the time, effort and space taken in a garden bed to grow any large quantity is not equal to the taste result. They can be eaten raw, so when in the garden I tend to dig up one or two as a snack.

Native Leek (*Bulbine bulbosa*)

Also called Golden Lily is easy to grow and easily available from nurseries. As a single plant from a nursery can be reasonably expensive, I have found the best way to increase the number of plants is by division, after a year one plant can be divided into four or five. The edible subterranean stem, called a corm, is roasted and has a subtle sweet taste of onion.



Karkalla (*Carpobrotus glaucescens*, *Carpobrotus rossii*, *Disphyma crassifolia*)

This indigenous plant commonly called 'pig-face' (with some imagination the fruit could possibly resemble a pig face), normally grows on sandy coastal areas and does OK in my garden but, understandably does not quite have the salty taste of the plants that grow near the sea. Being a low growing plant it also tends to get smothered by the wild excesses of the rocket, mustard greens, rapini etc unless I am there to rescue it. I have 3 varieties growing, the local NSW version (*Carpobrotus glaucescens*) grown from cuttings taken while on a beach walk, a similar variety from South Australia (*Carpobrotus rossii*) and a small leaf version from Victoria (*Disphyma crassifolia*). With the first two the very young leaves can be eaten, usually roasted, but it is mainly the fruit that is the attraction; a sweet salty treat to use in fruit salads or with a cheese course. Only the leaves of the small leaf version are eaten, I use them fresh in salads and in sandwiches and with grilled meat, the Karkalla quickly braised in a pan while the meat is resting.



Apple dumpling Berries (*Billardiera scandens*)

The Apple Dumpling Berry is an Australian indigenous vine with edible berries. The ripe berries, like a Medlar have a mushy texture with numbers of small seeds and quickly fall to the ground or are taken by birds, the green berries can be eaten after being cooked and from my point of view are better for it. The usual advice is for the green berries to be roasted. However from experiments they make lovely glace fruit, they are not suitable for jam. They are really great in muffins which have a savoury fruit background taste rather than sweet, with berry pieces providing unique flavour hits.

The berries have a distinctive but reasonably subtle flavour which varies from vine to vine, ranging from lemon through apple to a non-taste I find hard to classify. I suggest that they would be lost if added with too many or strongly flavoured ingredients. Have found that grated apple, dandelion flower petals and apple dumpling berries added to muffins are a great combination.

Rosellas (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*)

Growing up in Queensland I can remember my Mother growing Rosellas in the garden, mainly for making jam from the red fleshy calyx or "fruit" that holds the green seed pod in its centre. I found my seedling at the Sydney Wildflower nursery in the native food plant section, although while many think it is native to Australia, like a lot of us it is an immigrant that has been around so long it is an "Aussie".

Very fast growing, in three months it was fully grown, nearly 2 mtrs high and fruiting, it is an annual and will die off in winter.

Have been experimenting with cooking, only with the calyx to date but the whole plant is edible or usable young leaves as a green vegetable, the seed apparently can be ground into a flour and the fibrous stalks made into string. I made jam with the first light crop. Fairly

simple remove the red calyx from the green seed pod, discard the seed pod and simmer the red flesh in a small amount of water, when tender add equal quantity of sugar and boil until setting point. Some recipes suggest that the seed pods should be boiled to extract pectin and some of the water then added to the calyx pot to aid setting. Alternatively add lemon or commercial pectin. I found that setting was achieved without any extra effort, just the calyx, sugar and water. (NB Like Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), also related to Hibiscus, Rosellas have a thickening quality when added to stew or sauce.)

Have also used the red calyx with some apple as a sauce with pork, (apple and rosella calyx and a dash of red wine give a tart fruit sauce) Great with chops and with traditional English pork sausages; would also go well with roast pork. Have made an apple and rosella pie and in fact just treated the crop in ways that rhubarb is treated. The "fruit" can also be made into a sweet syrup used for cocktails or added to sparkling white wine, or as a cordial but at this stage I am happy to use in less sweet recipes. I understand the calyx freezes well and will leave some to dry out on the plant to give seeds for next years plants.



Bauple Nut (*Macadamia integrifolia*)

Most people know this nut by its scientific name, Macadamia, however growing up in Queensland where this plant is endemic we always called it Bauple Nut after Mt. Bauple and the town of Bauple. Either way I originally grew one from a seed taken from the tree in my Mother's backyard but unfortunately it was destroyed by the 2001 bushfire. I then purchased a grafted plant from a nursery, which in fact grew faster and produced its first crop much earlier. The nuts are great but have thick shells and require some effort to extract and while there are various mechanical inventions, I still use the old fashioned method of resting the nut on a depression in a rock or concrete and hitting it with a hammer.

Lilli Pilli (*Syzygium smithii*)

The Lilli Pilli is a very common garden tree or shrub and often a street tree. There are over 60 species, the fruit can range from white through to scarlet, and taste from spicy through to sweet. The fruit is very versatile and can be used in sauces, jams, cakes, chutney and even

flavouring for gin or vodka.

Some years my tree bears fruit over a long period, in other years there is only one flush of fruit and its over and done with. Though always more than enough fruit to make jam. The recipe I use is very simple, just fruit water to cover and the same weight of fruit to sugar. Some people add lemon and / or pectin, I find it sets with out and prefer to have the pure flavour tone of this native fruit.

First remove the seed, not all fruit are fertilised, but all need to be broken open to check. I weigh the fruit then just cover in water and bring to the boil, once the fruit is tender I add sugar (same weight as the fruit) then boil until set. I do not like the set to be too firm, as apart from its use as jam, I also use this as a sauce on ice cream. The colour of the jam is a beautiful pink red with violet highlights.

Midyim berry (*Austromyrtus dulcis*)

An easy to grow small shrub that bears a considerable number of tiny berries, white with purple to black spots, giving an overall mauve appearance. The berries are sweet with a spice background note, that work well fresh in a fruit or berry salad or just by themselves with some cheese and while they can be used in pies, because they are so small, this requires a considerable quantity.



Coastal Saltbush (*Atriplex cinerea*)

The seeds of this small shrub are very hard to germinate so I found it easier to purchase tube stock from a wholesale landscape supply nursery. The downside of this is that you usually have to purchase a minimum quantity of plants, and while I try to make up numbers with different food plants, if necessary I purchase other plants that can be accommodated on my large property. I have found that my Coastal Saltbush needs heavy pruning more than is necessary to eat, I use the young tips and leaves braised with garlic, lemon and olive oil but my favourite is to rest, in a warm oven, grilled or roast meats on top of a bed of leaves to soak up fat and juices.

Other indigenous plants:

Davidson Plum (*Davidsonia johnsonii*), Sand paper fig (*Ficus coronata*) and Native Guava (*Eupomatia laurina*) Are new introductions to the garden and am waiting for the first fruiting season.



While I have added some herb species, Coastal Rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) and a couple of species of Native Mint bush (*Prostanthera* sp.) to the general planting around the property, there are also a number of other edible plants that grow naturally. Some such as ground orchids I prefer to have the flowers rather than destroy the plant by digging up the tubers, others are just too difficult to process. I do make limited use of **Wattle flowers** (*Acacia* species e.g. *A. longifolia*)

While the seeds of a lot of Wattles are edible, it is easier to buy wattle seed than to harvest and process yourself, however I do make use of wattle flowers. Usually added to pancakes or to cakes and occasionally as decoration on desserts.

Sarsaparilla (*Smilax glyciphylla*) and **False Sarsaparilla** (*Hardenbergia violacea*)

Both of these plants grow naturally on my property. Sarsaparilla leaves are used to make a tea with a sweet taste. False Sarsaparilla leaves can also be used to make tea and the flowers used as a dye.

Blue Flax Lily (*Dianella caerulea*) produce bright blue berries during a short season. The berries are very attractive to birds and lizards so you have to be quick. While I have a variety with edible berries growing naturally, it should be noted that the leaves are toxic and that there are some species of *Dianella* with toxic berries and leaves.

I also have a number of European fruit trees including apples, plums, apricots, figs, mulberry, olives and various citrus so with all of this I am almost self sufficient in fruit and vegetables. The garden can only be seen as totally self sufficient as long as I am happy eating mostly weeds as they are abundant. Apart from Warrigal Greens and Coastal Saltbush which are

prolific, the other indigenous plants can only be seen as an interesting addition, they take too long to mature and production in any quantity would require a much larger investment in time and effort than I am willing to provide. Also I am aware that a lot of people are reasonably conservative so, apart from slipping some greens into dishes where they are camouflaged, I tend to reserve the indigenous foods for my own meals.

I am happy with this limited production, it is sufficient to make my own table an interesting place to be, a different place than that dictated by the foods available in our markets; A table that reflects the seasons, the soil and the land I live on.

Max Dingle OAM

An artist, curator and writer and a National Art School graduate, who until 2008 was Deputy Director of the Australian National Maritime Museum whose interests resided in food in maritime history. Since 2008, Max has authored a number of books and writes for South Coast web-sites and magazines, on art, culture, food and wine.

Notes -

*Title *Hamlet* William Shakespeare

Images are from a photographic series produced for the exhibition and performance art work
Mouth - What the body knows (but may have forgotten) shown at the 2019 *See Change Art Festival*, Huskisson, Jervis Bay NSW
Max Dingle