



re-growing together

Last summer, almost half of South Australia's Kangaroo Island was burnt, claiming lives, homes, businesses and infrastructure, and inflicting deep trauma on its residents. Knowing how therapeutic it is to get your hands in the dirt and grow things, and how healing it is to pick home-grown produce, Sophie Thomson set in motion the rapid build of a portable community vegie garden. Here's how the intense preparations and six-day build unfolded

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What would I want if I lost my garden to bushfire? It's something I thought about a lot last summer as I sat glued, like many Australians, to a fire map, watching towns that I know and love succumb to flames. On December 20, it became personal when the Cudlee Creek fire in the Adelaide Hills – all of which I consider part of 'my patch' – came close to my town. The town right beside ours was evacuated, and then the fire was blown in a new direction, leaving us deeply relieved but also guilty that what had saved us went on to hurt others.

Another fire that started that day was the one on Kangaroo Island. This is a place I cherish, a biodiversity hotspot where

I'd been filming only a month earlier for *Gardening Australia*. I knew that on top of the loss of life, homes and businesses, a lot of the residents grew their own food and would have lost their gardens, too.

Within a few weeks of the Adelaide Hills fire, I was back in the burnt-out zone several times a week for kids' activities and sport. I drove around looking at what vegetation and gardens had burnt and what hadn't. The smell of the fireground took me back to Ash Wednesday in 1983 when the Adelaide Hills was ablaze and, as a high-schooler, I couldn't get home because all the roads were burnt out. There was that ride on the school bus the next day when the driver tried to drop each of us off at our home, or as near to home as possible.

I'd never seen such devastation. Walking up my street to get to my home seemed to take forever, as I didn't know what I would find. But our house was still there – and so were Mum and Dad, extremely glad to see me walking up the driveway.

I'd given recovery talks to survivors of the 2015 Pinery bushfire north of Adelaide, and we acknowledged how devastating the loss of a garden can be, and how important it is to reconnect with gardening for our health and wellbeing. We sourced some plant donations from nurseries, and a cubic metre of compost for each gardener, just to get the survivors gardening again.

But driving home from that recovery event, I remember thinking how pathetic what we'd sourced for them was, and how

FROM ABOVE

The community members and volunteers who created the Parndana Community Garden, a reGrowth Garden Recovery project, celebrate its completion in March; an artist's vision of the finished garden.

ILLUSTRATION GEORGE COOPER
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we should have asked more people in the gardening industry for more. I think it was that sensation of regret, of feeling I hadn't done enough on an earlier occasion, that started to feed into the emotions of last summer. Something about the scale of the fires, fearing for my home and garden and loved ones and those in my community, the memories of fires past, guilt at being spared again, watching beautiful Kangaroo Island burn... it all coalesced into a steely determination to do something to help. ►



BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

Rolling around the question of what I'd want if I lost my garden to fire, the answer was I'd want somewhere I could play in the soil and grow things. Ideally, I'd want to have my garden back again. However, if that wasn't possible immediately, what would help to give me some sense of normality and reconnect me to the earth would be gardening and growing food.

I also knew the role that community gardens can play to help build strong, connected, resilient communities ('more grows in the garden than the gardener sows') and I realised that when you've lost your garden, simple things like being able to pick a bunch of parsley can be profound.

A chance comment by a friend over a cuppa at my kitchen table sealed it. She'd heard that gardeners on Kangaroo Island needed seeds. And that was it. I saw that I could make a difference, and the reGrowth Garden Recovery project was born.

where to start?

Because of the island's isolation and the high cost to have food freighted across on the ferry, a large percentage of residents grow their own fruit and vegies. It saves them money, and it's much better quality. Many wouldn't even consider themselves gardeners – it's just part of island life.

Having heard they needed seed, I tried to get in touch with people on the island who might be able to give me some direction. I spoke with Anne Morrison, president of the Kangaroo Island Garden Club and a wicking bed fan, and we germinated the seed of the idea for reGrowth Garden Recovery. I suggested I could get seed sent to Anne to share with those who needed it, and extra sent to the existing community garden adjacent to the Community Centre in Kingscote. That way they could grow excess produce and share it.

After lots of calls, emails and Facebook messages with Anne and many others on the island, I became aware that because of the massive infrastructure loss, it would be a long time before many of those who'd lost their gardens would be in a position to

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replant vegies. Also, not all the islanders get to Kingscote regularly, so another hub for shared excess vegie growing in the centre of the island or towards the fire-ravaged western end was needed.

A connection was made with Madelyn Kelly from the agriculture-focused Parndana campus of Kangaroo Island Community Education in the heart of the island. The school owned some unused land on the other side of the oval. It had a separate entrance and could be fenced off, which meant everyone could visit without needing the police clearance required on school grounds. After a phone chat with campus head Matt Linn and groundsman Daniel Dunstan, the seed of reGrowth started to grow its first leaves.

So reGrowth had a site, but it came with a few challenges. Because of wildlife under pressure, it wouldn't be possible to grow food well without building a completely netted enclosure to keep out wallabies, roos and possums. It wasn't going to be as simple as improving the soil and planting a few vegies. Fortunately, Daniel had just designed and ordered the materials for a cage structure using wooden posts and wire netting to go over the school's vegie patch and orchard. I was able to use his design and materials list, and simply scale it up. Also, the site wasn't level and had to be cleared of feral pine trees. The army, which was working on the island's bushfire recovery, cleared and levelled the land.

the vision

I came up with the idea to build a portable community garden in case it's decided down the track that people don't need a community location to grow vegies (even though I secretly hope it remains there!).

We chose materials that could be relocated or repurposed, including white plastic intermediate bulk containers (IBCs) like the ones I use extensively at home to grow vegies. On Kangaroo Island, we planned to build wicking beds from IBCs using commercial wicking bed inserts in the reservoir layer to make them lighter than if we used my usual scoria or gravel. Down the track, if desired, they could be forklifted onto a truck and delivered to people who needed vegie gardens when their homes were rebuilt. The wildlife-exclusion cage could also be used by the school to grow more fruit trees, should the wicking beds be rehomed. So, everything was recyclable.

Just one month after that first phone call to Anne at the Kangaroo Island Garden Club, I was successful in applying for a grant from the South Australian Department for Environment and Water to "help gardens and communities recover from bushfire from the ground up". Specifically, I was to create a new community garden at Parndana, expand the existing community garden at Kingscote, and run a series of six garden talks and on-site workshops on the island to support the landholders who were rebuilding their gardens after fire.

I designed the new community garden with in-ground herb beds around the perimeter, and wicking beds positioned around a central seating area. My vision was for people to feel enclosed, safe and secure in this space, surrounded by beauty and produce. We had just two weeks from the final completion of the grant paperwork to bring it all together and make it happen, so there was no time to waste.

There was a pile of red tape to push through to get the project up and running in such a short time, and there were also ►



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Sophie Thomson among plants destroyed by fire on Kangaroo Island; the army, which was on the island helping with the bushfire recovery, cleared the site for the community garden; a ute loaded with seedlings from the mainland; the site has a separate entrance from the adjacent campus of Kangaroo Island Community Education, which owns the previously unused land.

EXTRA PHOTOS COURTESY OF SOPHIE THOMSON

BUSHFIRE RECOVERY

a number of people who didn't see the point, or understand why I was in such a hurry. I insisted we needed to plant while the ground was still warm so things would actually grow – the sooner we could get that happening, the sooner we could start producing vegies for people.

From my experience with many other community gardens, I also knew that the ongoing success of the garden would depend on it having strong guardians. So Madelyn helped me to connect with Denis and Maree Perkins, who lived across the road at Parndana.

the logistics

Everything was more complicated because we were doing it on an island. Where possible, we bought what we needed from local businesses, however there was no soil, suitable compost or food-grade IBCs available – these had to be trucked and ferried over. The freight costs are huge, and the ferry was constantly booked out with trucks carrying other recovery materials being shipped over to the island. So I called the trucking companies that were already engaged in the bushfire clean-up, and one generously backloaded a semitrailer tipper truck with what we needed for free.

Then there were pallets of wicking bed inserts, worm farms, compost bins... and the list went on. All needed to be freighted over to the island. Yet again, a local freight company owned by a gardener took care of them at no cost to us.

The response to my calls to strangers out of the blue, asking for help, continues to blow me away. It was their kindness and generosity that made the reGrowth Garden Recovery program on Kangaroo Island possible. While we did also receive a government grant to make this happen, the value of the donations from generous small businesses and individuals in and around the horticultural industry well exceeded the grant total. ►



the build

MONDAY-THURSDAY (2nd–5th March)

Erik Johansson, my handyman, works in my shed to pre-make wooden panels to clad the

wicking beds. On the Tuesday, my husband, Richard Elston, and son Toby head to Kangaroo Island for the day and cement in all the posts for the garden enclosure.

SATURDAY (7th) & SUNDAY (8th)

Two members of my team (Erik and my son Rowan) travel to the island with a trailer-load of the pre-made wooden panels, and anything else we could fit in the trailer. Erik (*here with me*) and Rowan cut and plumb the IBCs for wicking beds.



MONDAY (9th)

Felicity Playford (my behind-the-scenes IT gal and admin legend at Sophie's Patch), Toby and I go over to the island looking like travelling hillbillies with two utes laden with everything from vegie seedlings and seeds to wheelbarrows and garden tools. We position and level the wicking beds, and start to install beams at the top of the enclosure's posts.



TUESDAY (10th)

We run a wicking bed workshop to fill the beds. Team Rubicon starts putting the wire netting on the enclosure's roof, while members of All Hands and Hearts help with the wooden structure.



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BUSHFIRE RECOVERY



WEDNESDAY (11th)

Community members, All Hands and Hearts and Team Rubicon continue to install wire netting to keep wildlife out, and prepare the wicking beds for planting.



THURSDAY (12th)

The All Hands and Hearts team works with members of the Clontarf Foundation to spread a path of mulch from the road to the garden entrance. We have a surprise visit from Governor-General David Hurley, who pops in with his staff, and Kangaroo Island Mayor Michael Pengilly when he visits the Parndana campus of Kangaroo Island Community Education next door.



FRIDAY (13th)

Helpers finish constructing the wire cage and preparing the beds, and we start planting. Over at Kingscote, I run a wicking bed workshop and organise a working bee to revitalise and expand the community garden there.

SATURDAY (14th)

We finish planting at Parndana and share a celebratory lunch. Leftover herbs, veggie seedlings, seeds, gloves and fertiliser are given to those who have lost their gardens or have the capacity to grow extra plants to share. A seedbank is left at both locations, with spare seeds given to the Garden Club to share among gardeners who contact president Anne Morrison.



an afterword

The way we built this community garden is not the usual way to do it. It would normally be driven by a team approach, with consultation and collaboration... But sometimes we have the opportunity to bring something together for the common good. As I step away, I am forever changed by the experience of being among Kangaroo Island's strong, connected, resilient community.

The residents were amazing. From the moment I stepped onto the site on March 9, I was greeted by smiling helpers ready to work. And work we did – long, tiring days in dust and heat. Often, there were 20 or 30 people at a time on shovels and barrows, digging trenches, connecting irrigation, helping out. Some had lost homes and gardens, some were locals, and some lived at the other end of the

island but came each day to support those affected by the fire. There were laughs and smiles, and a tear or two.

Reflecting on why I was so pig-headed about getting the project going, and going quickly, I come back to this: always trust a gardener's gut feel! At 5.30pm on March 14, 2020 BC (Before Coronavirus), we drove onto the ferry to head home. By March 16, public events were being cancelled. Just one week later, and we wouldn't have been able to do any of it. We wouldn't have even been able to source seeds or seedlings!

While the new garden won't totally feed the community, it's a start, and it has given residents a chance to get their hands back in the soil. When the world returns to normal, I encourage you to visit Kangaroo Island and call in to the

gardens. The reGrowth community garden is on Anzac St, Parndana, (opposite Wheaton St) and the Kingscote Garden is at 16 Telegraph Rd, Kingscote. In the meantime, visit [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/ParndanaCommunityGarden) and search for 'Parndana Community Garden' to follow its progress. **GA**



EXTRA PHOTOS GEOFF & MARGI PRIDEAUX