

Tuesday 25/6/24 – Kaz Phillips at Westside Community Garden about the Peppercorn tree.

Kaz - So although the peppercorn tree is not the best tree to have in the desert, in terms of seeds being taken by birds and then popping up in other places. This tree has been like the social centre of the creation of this garden. It has been amazing, because of the shade that it offers. Because of the location of this garden, we get south easterly breezes so even on the hottest day, if you come in the afternoon this is in shade over here and there's this incredible breeze that comes through. So, it's a delicious microclimate to hang out in, if you're not actually out doing the work.

Me – (Bee sounds) Sounds like there's lots of pollinators as well, so the tree is attracting bees.

Kaz - It's also a workshop space as there's a poor amount of undercover space in this community garden. So, the amount of space that is now underneath the canopy with shade is huge. We have gigs here too where bands will play, and people are sitting. When we had some workshops in the early days of course it ended up being 40° day with northerly wind. So, we grew branches downward to give a bit of extra protection from that.

Me - So you've done a bit of work in cutting out the dead bits and letting different parts grow.

Kaz – We initially had a heap of dead branches cut out to make it safe. It also offers frost protection for the worms during winter and shade protection during summer. This garden began three years ago as a space that was just full of buffel and couch grass. So, there was a big buffel busting working bee which got used to make a giant hot compost. We organised truckloads of cow manure. So, we got rid of the buffel but it's an ongoing journey to get rid of the couch grass. The community decided they wanted the garden to be more like a food forest, more communal gardening, based on permaculture design principles.

Me - So shared space, not individual plots. So, did you have a meeting to decide that?

Kaz – We did. We had a community consultation process and a facilitated design workshop. It's incredibly fertile, partly because when the school was a high school it had more students and had a big horticulture program. Like a mini farm here, loads of fences with animals. We have lots of people pop in and tell us stories about the things they loved about it when they were at school all those years ago. We also do loads of hot compost making.

Me - In terms of food forest are you hoping this will grow large?

Kaz – Starting over here there's a carob tree and some citrus and the date palm. It's dependent on resources to buy the trees. There is a Burdekin plum, an Australian native plum that will grow quite huge. We don't have a lot of money to buy plants. There is citrus here (orange, finger lime, mandarin), zinnia flowers (they survive the heat and freely reproduce), a feijoa and cherry guava. This is the carob.

Me - Wow that's doing well, isn't it?

Kaz - Yeah there must be another tree somewhere nearby because we've had pods growing which means there's been some sort of fertilisation happening (you have got to have both male and female). This is the Burdekin plum...

Me - I haven't heard about this...

Kaz – It's an evergreen from central Queensland and was a little self-seeder, from Bruce's property. The idea was that in the long run could be an alternative to the peppercorn tree. It has a plum that's good for making tart preserves. One olive tree here. Mulberries over there.

We have planted loads and loads of natives all around the outside as you would have noticed coming in. Trying to get the higher tree structure in and the plan is to get a whole lot more bush tucker incorporated.

Me – Is that mainly for wind protection, the natives around the edge?

Kaz – It's also for habitat support to the garden. These were original in- ground wicking beds, The wicking concept was developed in a desert environment using clay as the base.

Me – There is a bit of mallow.

Kaz – Yeah, the mallow has gone nuts this year. It needs to be cut back...

Me – before it seeds. It's edible, you know?

Kaz – Yes, I do know and it's like comfrey it mines lots of minerals.

Me – I used to leave a plant so the harlequin bugs wouldn't eat my raspberries. They would just be very attracted to the mallow and harbour there overnight. I don't do it now as I have chooks, and they eat the bugs.

Kaz - The other thing I was told years ago, and I don't have any experience to know whether this is an old wives tale. With stone fruits if you hang a whole lot of mallow in the tree it helps to prevent curly leaf.

Me - Yeah, my friend reckons it doesn't work, but maybe she only tried it once. I don't know. I might be worth another try.

Kaz - It looks like green manure has been sewn here, fabulous! This is the compost toilet we are proud of. In 3 years, there has been no damage in this garden.

Me – Is this part of the composting toilet?

Kaz – In this environment it's more like a dehydrating toilet. A big tank with a slotted base, and baskets go in underneath. For most of the year all the moisture just evaporated out and you end up with dried out powder that is appropriately dealt with.

Me – This is an interesting plant, are these just seedlings that have popped up?

Kaz - This is Cassia, one of the varieties. Senna is another name for it. They are everywhere in Alice. We did have some Yulka here (bush onion).

Kaz - The plan has always been to get heaps of wicking beds dispersed amongst the food forest, once the trees start growing. So that we plant annuals in wicking beds rather than in the ground, so we don't use as much water.

Me – Is this town water? Are there water restrictions?

Kaz - No I can't believe that we don't have restrictions on how much water can be used in this town. People still use water to grow a lawn!

Monday 01/07/24 – Kaz Phillips at home in Ilparpa about the river red gum.

Me - Okay so Kaz tell me a little bit about why this beautiful river red gum is so intriguing to you and what kind of relationship you have with it.

Kaz - The most important thing in summer particularly is the shade. That time of year, when the sun is in that trajectory coming into my home. So, it's magical that I have some respite from the pelting hot sun coming from the west. And over time the amount of vegetation is growing sideways and expanding so I'm feeling optimistic that that's only going to keep improving, as a shade structure. So that's fabulous, but most importantly is the life that exists in that tree that's a total inspiration. Every kind of bird you can imagine comes and hangs out. Most of the birds that I've identified in this area have spent time in that tree. There's a beautiful hollow there and lots of competition for the hollow. Lots of antics that go on with different bird species that aim for it and get it or not get it! It's beautiful, its *colour*, its *shape*, yeah, it's pretty special. I can't imagine this vista without it.

Me – Does the light hits it in different ways at different times of the day?

Kaz - Yes absolutely, the sunrise and sunset times, sometimes it's golden and sometimes it's just pink and gorgeous. Sometimes the leaves are sparkling.