

Project: North Moreland farming network - a model for efficient and local coordinated food production

Background

Growing Farmers Inc. is a community project based in Merri-bek working to develop regenerative farming capacity in urban communities and to support and enable a new generation of aspiring urban farmers.

Running from July to December 2022, this project was a collaboration between Growing Farmers (GF) and Fawkner Food Bowls (FFB), working closely with Merri Food Hub (MFH). It aimed to increase the amount of nutritious food that is socially and equitably available to the north Merri-bek community. By coordinating the growing and harvesting of crops between the existing 5 farms in the GF Backyard Farmer Project and the larger farm at FFB, it aimed to create a network of 6 farms and develop a model of networked farming that can ensure cost effective practices, short supply chains, diversity of growing spaces and the ability to add further growing spaces to the network in future years.

Project Purpose / Objective(s)

Objectives

To grow and distribute more fresh produce by building in efficiencies at each stage of the farming process and collaborating with partners to inform crop coordination and demand, create a central propagation hub at FFB, create short supply chains via hyperlocal availability of seedlings and hyperlocal harvests for distribution, and shared local cool storage to keep produce fresh.

Project plan

The project planned to:

- Develop a collaboration between Fawkner Food Bowls, Merri Food Hub, and Backyard Farmers to identify demand co-ordinate the production of relevant produce for distribution via MFH.
- Support production with assistance to producers around crop planning, propagation, production skills, and land access.
- Develop infrastructure sharing arrangements for cool storage to support production and distribution

Resourcing

FFB Co-ordinator - crop and propagation management	\$6,825
Growing Farmers Co-ordinator - Project coordination	\$6,825
Materials/Admin	\$1,338

Project outcomes

Objective 1: Distribute more fresh produce informed by community demand

5 farms were supported with mentoring, propagation and harvesting skills development, and networking for access to land and distribution channels to sell produce, which enabled the producers in the project grow and distribute 236kgs of locally produced food to Fawkner Food Bowls and Merri Food Hub

Objective 2: Create short supply chains via hyperlocal availability of seedlings and hyperlocal harvests for distribution

The Growing Farmers co-ordinator facilitated land access relationships for local farmers to access land locally via agreements with landholders on residential land, and supported producers and landholders to address issues that arose during the relationship to ensure productive relationships. This included in one case identifying a new land opportunity for a producer after difficulties with the original landholder stalled production, allowing the producer to significantly increase their production.

Producers were provided with a process and tools for planning crops, propagation and seedlings, and efficient harvesting and packing, addressing skills gaps identified by a co-design process, and supported to meet the crop requirements co-ordinated with FFB and Merri Food Hub.

This helped to increase the efficiency and capacity of local producers to supply local food needs, using local resources through a short supply chain.

58 crops were provided from supported producers to Merri-bek distributors and customers. Growing Farmers' producers successfully networked into distribution, mentoring and infrastructure networks with FFB and Merri Food Hub, and two farms still currently supply Merri Food Hub following the end of the project.

Objective 3: Develop infrastructure sharing arrangements

Growing Farmers coordinated the sharing of a cool room with Fawkner Food Bowls to facilitate aggregation and distribution of supported local producers' product and FFB produce for distribution through Merri Food Hub - a key infrastructural point for the networked short supply chain.



Learnings: What worked well and what didn't?

The project demonstrated the relevance of networked local production, with collaborations between residents, food hubs, and producers successfully supporting local production and sharing of expertise and infrastructure. The potential to produce culturally relevant food for local markets by coordinating with local hubs, and thus increase the availability of culturally-appropriate fresh produce, was also demonstrated.

- The backyard land access model achieved successes in engaging local farmers and providing land access and skills to improve production efficiency. The need for skills development and crop planning management was emphasised by growers and

project co-ordinators of all partners. However, it does not work reliably as a larger scale source of supply. Market gardens are a better model for local production.

- There is an opportunity for Fawkner Food Bowls to scale up food production for food security buyers. From an infrastructure perspective, Fawkner Food Bowls are well placed to scale up production as a market garden, however their business and pricing models need greater clarity to be able to supply food security projects.
- The project found it necessary to pivot from focus on high production to additional management of relationships between land owners and farmers, which highlights the challenges of smaller scale networked production compared to a larger market garden.