

Masterclass Mickey



IT TOOK MICKEY ROBERTSON THREE ATTEMPTS TO CREATE a really thriving vegetable garden, but since then there's been no stopping her or the vegetables. Her success and passion for home-grown produce has even kicked off a business. Last year, she and gardener Linda Ross started running regular kitchen gardening classes where participants get to roam through Mickey's vegetable garden and enjoy lunch made from its produce.

The set-up is idyllic. Classes are held in The Dairy, a huge, rustically charming room with views to the vegetable garden. When the weather's fine, participants eat lunch outside its French doors under a loggia, looking out to the rest of the impressive garden.

But the Glenmore property, south of Camden, wasn't always so picturesque and Mickey insists her first attempt at the vegetable garden was a disaster.

Mickey and her husband Larry bought *Glenmore House* 22 years ago when it was home to a rundown 1840s sandstone cottage and a handful of derelict farm buildings. Over the years they have renovated and extended the colonial cottage, converted or removed outbuildings, and created a beautiful rambling and romantic garden.

In 1991, Mickey started the first vegetable garden. "I've got this thing about vegetable gardens being all lined up and the only area I could find that was vaguely symmetrical was the cattle yard," she says. "So underneath the vegetable garden it's all just rocky."

She began with an arch down the centre and two big square beds on either side. All still exist but today's beds look quite different from the initial version.

"I got carried away by all these gardening books, so I had rosemary right round the outside and dissecting crosses which made eight little triangles – it was all going to be so exciting! Then the rabbits ate the rosemary, the tomatoes got whitefly and oh my goodness. I had a baby and I was trying to drive to Sydney all the time for work (Mickey is an interior decorator) and I thought, this is too hard when I'm not here!"

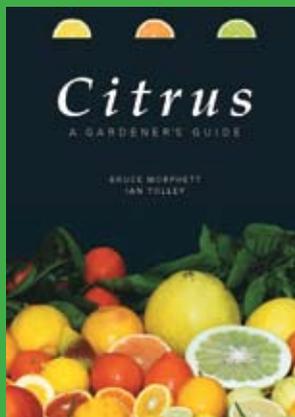
In 1996, Mickey planted a small vegetable patch just outside the kitchen, and turned the large vegetable garden into a "wildly romantic jumble" with two quince trees, old roses, nigella, Queen Anne's lace, borage and sunflowers. "It was divine, but when it came to working on the garden, this area was always tail-end Charlie."

Useful reading...

Citrus: A Gardener's Guide

By Bruce Morphet and Ian Tolley
Published by the Board of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium
RRP \$19.95 (pbk)

This publication is a must for anyone who would like to have, or already has, a citrus tree in their garden. For many people the backyard lemon, orange or lime tree is a valuable asset and so handy



when cooking, or making a cup of tea to help relieve a cold or sore throat. This little book contains a wealth of knowledge on all aspects of growing citrus fruit and tackles everyday problems like pests and disease. It tells how to care for citrus in containers, establish young trees, prune and care for this group, as well as how to store the fruit and make juice. The authors also explain how much water these trees need, as well as how and when to feed them. – MK

Then Mickey started reading more about genetically modified food and became serious about eating only organic produce. "I thought, what am I doing here and not growing my own vegetables? I've always found vegetable gardens enchanting – everything about them. Reading about them, looking at little illustrated diagrams of them. But this time I wanted to do it properly."

In 2007, she moved the quince trees and old roses and started a whole new vegetable garden with the help of landscape gardener Steve Batley, who "explained crop rotation to me properly for the first time".

As Steve came from a permaculture background "where they muddle things up", he and Mickey decided to have a competition to see which method worked best. On one side Mickey set up tidy rows and practised crop rotation while on the other Steve had a jumble of plants and concentrated on companion planting (planting things together so that one wards off pests from another).

The experiment continues and the result is basically a tie. "I'm obsessed with straight rows so I like my neat side better, but I often find some things are working better on the other side. Sometimes if pests are attacking a crop in one half, they may be ignoring it in the other.

"Having both sides is also a lovely way to be able to teach people, so they can choose between two methods and get a clear idea of how crop rotation works."

Crop rotation involves planting certain groups of plants after another group has been harvested and dug into the soil. Legumes follow roots which follow fruit which follow leafy greens. Then leafy greens follow legumes and so on. This is because each group has a different effect on the soil. Legumes, for instance, put nitrogen into the soil, and leafy greens need nitrogen. It's also a means of preventing soil-borne diseases.

Mickey throws herself into the other aspects of kitchen gardening as well. She has a three-section composting system, a worm farm, a hot bench for propagating seeds and a cold frame for seedlings. She waters the garden daily herself.

When the idea for running kitchen gardening classes occurred to her, everything fell into place. She already had The Dairy which was perfect for classes. She also had The Barn, a converted old barn that retains its old slabs. It's filled with "essential" gardening items to buy, such as baskets, watering cans and hand creams.

The classes are taught by Linda Ross, a horticulturalist who regularly hosts overseas garden tours (she's the daughter of Graham and Sandra Ross). Each month, Linda discusses vegetable gardens in general but also aspects specific to the following month. At the next class, on August 27, she'll talk about planning spring crop rotation, preparing the soil for summer vegetables, planting potatoes and caring for tomato seedlings.



"We also physically show people how to do things," says Mickey. "We'll put seeds into punnets or, if we're discussing compost, we'll be down there shovelling muck."

Mickey says participants come from varied backgrounds. Some want to start a vegetable garden from scratch, others are experienced, and some just come in specific months.

"One woman came to almost every class last year and when she came to first class this year, she said, 'You must think I'm stupid! But I just don't want to miss out. It's such a lovely day. And there's so much to take in'.

"Whatever we're doing is relevant to the season," says Mickey. "There's always more to learn." 

For information on classes at Glenmore House, email mickey@glenmorehouse.com.au or phone 4654 5484. Kitchen Gardening Days are held on the last Friday of the month and cost \$198. Mickey has also introduced a series of Seasonal Cooking Days.

The garden at Glenmore House will open to the public on October 16 and 17 as part of the Open Garden Scheme.