

The vegie garden at Glenmore House

Our series on this inspirational, teaching vegetable garden, begun last autumn, continues with the harvesting of the last of the winter crops. It's a busy time in the garden as owner, Mickey Robertson, prepares the newly cleared beds for the enormous variety of vegies she can now plant for spring and summer.



For details of Kitchen Gardening Days at Glenmore House visit www.glenmorehouse.com.au or call (02) 4654 5484.

Top: The delicate flowers of apple and pear trees blossom as days get longer and warmer. They'll be heavy with fruit by summer's end.

Above: To other gardeners keen to learn, Mickey opens her garden once a month for a day of practical gardening lessons.

Above: Picked straight from the plant, tender young broad beans can be steamed and eaten whole or the beans themselves extracted. Cooked the day you pick them they are nutty sweet and tender, nothing like the tough, chewy frozen product.

The garden at Glenmore House is a picture of fragile beauty in spring as the almonds and apples blossom, and the pruned olives, lemons and figs send out tender new shoots. In the vegetable garden the winter crops are coming to an end with a spring feast of beans and peas. Owner Mickey Robertson continues to experiment with different methods of growing vegetables in a bid to understand the most productive ways to grow beautiful produce with the least effort.

Each month her discoveries are shared with gardeners keen to get first-hand information on edible gardening. Together with expert Linda Ross, Mickey hosts a Kitchen Gardening Day at Glenmore House. While the practical knowledge being passed on is appreciated, the highlight of the day may well be lunch, prepared from freshly picked produce, and enjoyed in the glorious surrounds of the Glenmore House gardens.



Above: Delicate apple blossom is a beautiful precursor to the juicy fruit.

Above right: Winter crops continue until the weather turns warm. But as crops are finished the beds are prepared for spring.

Right: Lettuce likes cooler weather and is an excellent, fast-growing crop in the mild times between late winter and mid-spring.



FENNEL



Fennel

Fennel that is grown for its swollen bulb of overlapping leaf bases is different from wild or herb fennel which is grown for its seeds. The latter type has become a weed in some parts of the country due to its rampant self-seeding. The vegetable fennel, or Florence fennel, is much better behaved and is appreciated for the subtle aniseed flavour of its bulb and leafy tops.

Mickey's tip

"I allowed one of the fennels to flower and enjoyed its large heads of dainty yellow blossoms all through summer. The flowers became a haven for ladybirds and offered helpful, broken shade to the delicate plants beneath".

Sowing

At Glenmore, seed is sown direct in the ground in autumn for a harvest in spring. In cooler summer climates, fennel is sown in spring for autumn harvest, but the 40°C+ days at Glenmore House send it bolting.

Cultivation

Mickey has the greatest success with plants in groups rather than rows and says that her main problem is with slugs. Some writers recommend wrapping the developing bulbs in cardboard to whiten and sweeten the bases of the leaves though Mickey hasn't bothered and the flavour has been fine.

Food ideas:

MAIN: Shaved fennel salad

Black nigella seeds, also called kalanji, and sometimes, wrongly, black sesame seeds, add a lovely fragrance to this refreshing salad, which is delicious alongside a pork schnitzel.

- 1 fennel bulb
- 2 handfuls of young frizzy endive, washed, picked and dried
- 1 tbsp nigella seeds
- Juice of half a lemon
- 100ml extra virgin olive oil
- 1 heaped tsp of honey
- 1 heaped tsp Dijon mustard

- Wash the fennel bulb, then quarter and cut off the base and core. Use a mandolin or sharp knife to thinly shave the fennel. Toss through the endive and scatter over the nigella seeds.
- Make the dressing by putting the olive oil, lemon juice, honey and mustard in a screwtop jar. Shake until well combined, then taste and adjust to your palate.
- Use your hands to gently toss some of the dressing through the salad. **Serves 4**

MAIN: Fennel baked fish

You can use any whole fish but a large bream, snapper or jewfish is ideal.

- Oil
- Fennel bulb, chopped
- 2 French shallots, chopped
- 5 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp fresh coriander finely chopped
- Whole fish, 2kg
- 3 tbsps dry white wine
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- Salt and pepper

- Preheat oven to 150°C. Heat 4 tbsps oil in a frypan over medium heat. Add the fennel, French shallots and three-quarters of the chopped garlic. Stir until the fennel is cooked soft. Add parsley and coriander, stir through and remove from heat.
- Season fish with salt and pepper. Stuff with fennel mix and tie fish with string.
- Lay fish in oiled baking dish, drizzle with wine, lemon juice and a little oil and rub remaining garlic over.
- Bake until done about 25 minutes. **Serves 4**



BROAD BEANS

Broad beans are one of the first of the spring crops, flowering through winter, with pods ready to eat by late winter. The beans can be podded and eaten with their pale green coats on, or else blanched and the outer skin popped off to reveal the soft bright green inner beans.

Mickey's tip

"Of all the broad beans, 'Aquadulce' has the best flavour and texture and the young pods, picked when they are the size of your little finger are delicious eaten pod and all."

Sowing

Mickey sowed both 'Aquadulce' and 'Crimson-flowered' broad beans at Easter. They went in following the root crops, and stored nitrogen in the soil for the leaf crops that would follow.

Cultivation

Broad beans need support to grow, and Mickey uses a square of bamboo poles, about 50cm apart and allows the plants to sprawl inside the square. "They become bushy but stay within the frame," she says. She grows about a dozen plants, feeding them fortnightly a rotation of Amgrow Harvest, worm wee and comfrey tea.

Food ideas:

MAIN: Fusilli with broad beans and prosciutto

The fresh nuttiness of the broad beans complements the salty crisp prosciutto and zesty lemon in this easy mid-week pasta. Serve with a green salad fresh from the garden.

500g podded broad beans
4 slices prosciutto
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tbsp olive oil
Leaves from a few sprigs of thyme
Zest of half a lemon
400g fusilli pasta
Fresh parmesan, to serve

- Boil a big pot of water. Add broad beans and cook for a minute. Remove, drain and cool. Add some salt to the water, then add the pasta.
- While it cooks, slip the broad beans out of their skins. Crisp the prosciutto in a dry non-stick pan, then set aside. Add the olive oil and fry the garlic, then add the beans and the thyme leaves. When pasta is cooked, drain, reserving some liquid, then toss pasta through the garlicky oil and beans. Moisten pasta with some of the reserved liquid.
- Add the lemon zest, and crumble in the prosciutto then serve with a hunk of fresh parmesan to grate. **Serves 4**

SIDE: Broad beans Provencale

This makes a delicious light lunch or serve it as a vegetable dish to accompany a main meal.

Olive oil
1 red onion, chopped
2 rashers bacon, cut into small squares
1 carrot, chopped
2 stalks celery, finely sliced
1 large potato, diced
60ml chicken or vegetable stock
Few leaves each thyme and marjoram
500g peeled broad beans

Heat oil in a frypan and sweat onion and bacon together. Stir in carrot, celery and potato and cook for a further 2-3 minutes. Add stock and herb leaves, cover and simmer until potatoes are cooked. Add broad beans and cook uncovered for 5 minutes. **Serves 2**

LETTUCE



'Freckles'



'Lollo Rosso'

Lettuce We think of salad as summer food, but lettuce is much easier to grow through the milder weather of spring and autumn. If you don't have much room, a mesclun mix is a good idea as you get plenty of variety. As the seedlings grow, pick and eat the thinnings.

Mickey's tip

"It's lovely to add some edible flowers to a spring salad. I like borago flowers which taste a little like cucumber, as well as the more peppery nasturtiums, and the tiny, but strong-flavoured chive flowers.

Sowing

Mickey grows many different lettuces, including several mesclun mixes, 'Australian Yellow Leaf', 'Buttercrunch', 'Freckles' and the red heirloom 'Mervielle de quartre saisons'. In warm weather they are sown direct, but to get a good start on early spring, seed is sown into punnets and planted out when strong.

Cultivation

The key to growing lettuce is to grow them as fast as you can, and to keep the snails and slugs away. Mickey uses her usual trio – Amgrow Harvest, worm wee and comfrey tea for the former, and Multiguard iron-based snail pellets for the latter.

Food ideas:

MAIN: Lettuce and lovage soup

Lovage is a herb with an intriguing, smoky, celery-like flavour. It's strong but once you develop a taste for it you'll want it often. If you don't grow lovage, substitute the soft pale leaves from a bunch of celery.

6 small butter lettuce
Handful young lovage leaves
1 tbsp olive oil
4 spring onions, chopped
1 potato, peeled and cubed
500ml water or light chicken stock
Freshly grated nutmeg
Salt and black pepper
Cream to serve

- Pull the lettuce apart and steam leaves with the lovage until just tender. Allow to cool then puree in a blender. Transfer to a bowl. Heat a saucepan, add the oil, then sweat the spring onions until soft.
- Add water or chicken stock and potato. When potato is tender, allow to cool slightly, then process in the blender. Combine the potato and lettuce mixture back in the saucepan, and season with sea salt, fresh black pepper and nutmeg to taste.
- To serve, ladle into bowls and top with a drizzle of cream and a few threads of thinly sliced lovage leaf. **Serves 6**

SIDE: Caesar salad

This classic salad is easy to make and delicious. It's a terrific light lunch or make it more substantial with the addition of sliced barbecue chicken.

4 thick slices crusty white bread
4 rashers bacon, cut into small strips
1 clove garlic, crushed
2-4 anchovies, finely chopped
1 tsp Dijon mustard
4 hard-boiled eggs, quartered
2 tbsp good mayonnaise

- Preheat oven to 200°C.
- Cut bread into cubes, bake until crisp.
- Fry bacon until crisp.
- Whisk garlic, anchovies and mustard through mayonnaise.
- Tear lettuce into pieces into a serving bowl.
- Add eggs, bacon, bread and parmesan and toss. Blend mayo through. **Serves 4**