

sabrina's

little ABC book of

gardening

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Sabrina Hahn



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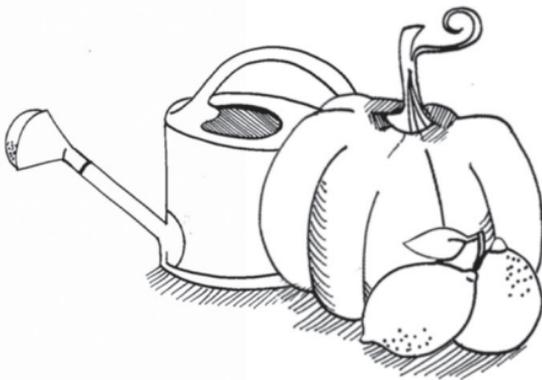


# Foreword

Let's face it, gardeners are an insatiable lot, always thirsty for information and new ideas. I know, I'm one of them and whilst I've never resorted to ringing Sabrina Hahn at the ABC on a Saturday morning, I am certainly guilty of cornering her on a few occasions to pick her brains about plants and other things horticultural.

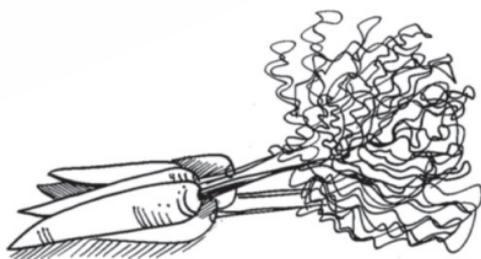
Sabrina's gardening knowledge combined with her wicked sense of humour and passion for the environment guarantee an amusing and practical answer to almost any question and this fantastic little book provides a taste of it!

**Josh Byrne**



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# Introduction

My addiction to gardening and obsessive love of plants developed at a young age, when I began crawling around the jungles of New Guinea sticking most of what I found growing on the ground or in leaf litter into my mouth. Apparently my mother gave up trying to stop this behaviour and figured that what didn't kill me would build up my immune system. To this day I have a cast-iron stomach and there's very little I don't eat.

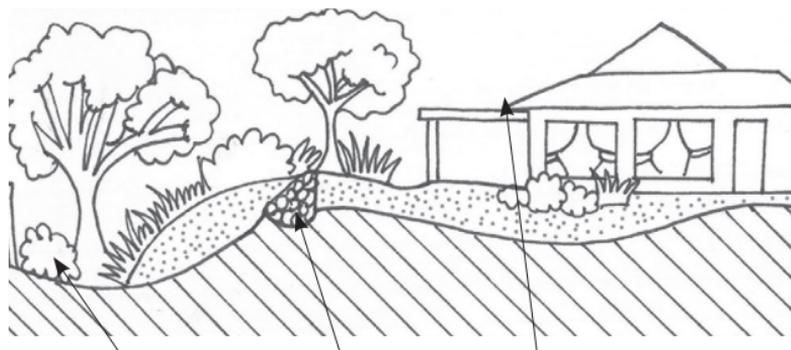
My father was a wonderful bushman and used to take me out of school to accompany him on 4-day excursions into interesting bushland. He instilled in me a deep love of the Australian bush and taught me to see the intricate relationship between plants and the animals that live in, under and around them.

Both my grandmother and mother were backyard botanists, and passionate and creative gardeners with a keen eye for design. They carved out the most wonderful gardens, from the jungles of New Guinea to the snow-covered mountains of Kankoubin in the Snowy Mountains. There wasn't a place on the planet where my mother couldn't create a garden. She seemed to know instinctively what would and wouldn't grow, and even then managed to break the rules and do the impossible.

We grew all our own food, mostly with rainwater tanks and recycled laundry and bath water. Gardening was not only exciting to us, it was creative and

rewarding. For me it provided a place to discover and create make-believe worlds where I vanquished evil while stuffing my face with fabulous home-grown food. Heroines need to eat too!

### *Water harvesting*



plant water-hungry in the lowest area to make maximum use of rainfall

a stone-filled trench temporarily catches run off

roof run off directed to lawn areas of garden beds

## **Philosophy behind this book**

This book is a very simple and practical gardening book that will answer many of the questions I've received from ABC listeners over the past 10 years, but I've deliberately excluded any information on cocos palms and diosmas. If your cocos palm or diosma is crook, good. Rip it out and put in something that doesn't breed rats, drop endless amounts of rubbish into your pool and look bloody awful all year round.

We're living in challenging times and the whole nation is experiencing the consequences of climate

change. We have to garden smarter, more sustainably, and adapt our gardens to the changing environment, otherwise the consequences will be devastating. Western Australia has the most stunning and unique plants in the world and yet we are the ones who plant them the least. Our climate will not sustain the English or European garden model any longer. We need to plan our gardens to meet the changing demands of increasing population, severe water shortages, hotter and longer summers, and smaller block sizes. We need to rethink the notion of large shade trees being a danger or nuisance to the house. As the climate heats up we'll need more and more upper-canopy shade to shelter our houses and our gardens. We must plant upper-canopy trees to protect the garden and house from the searing summer heat. If you do nothing else, for God's sake *plant more trees!*

These challenges are an opportunity to recreate the Australian garden based on water conservation and recycling. This dynamic garden design, using Australian plants, can create habitat corridors on front verges and build green microclimates that provide sustainable, cooler and more attractive places to live in.

Every household should be recycling their greywater for lawns and fruit trees, and installing a rainwater tank to water the garden or supplement the laundry and toilet water. I think it's criminal that all our precious rainwater is diverted to soakwells. If people knew the cost of installing soakwells compared to installing rainwater tanks they would be disgusted that it isn't

offered as an alternative. Did you know that a single household can harvest 160,000 litres of water per year by installing a rainwater tank? A 2500-litre tank plumbed into the household can cut water usage by 25 per cent.

I've heard the argument that people cannot afford to install rainwater tanks and greywater systems, but it works out cheaper than installing soakwells and paying for water to refill toilets and washing machines. Not only that, it ensures that future generations will have the option of growing their own food and having an outdoor area where they can relax. Future generations of children should be able to climb a tree in their backyard, roll on the lawn, inspect insects, pick flowers for their mum, pick peas off a living plant, watch corn grow and, most importantly, have some connection to the natural world.

# Vegetables: doing it organically

Nothing beats home-grown veggies — the thrill of the chase against bugs, watching and waiting for the green to turn to red, flowers that develop into zucchini, ladybirds pigging out on aphids. It's so exciting to watch things grow from seeds into a crop. Remember, your veggie patch is part of a natural system. Insects don't understand that you have sole rights to all green matter, so be a little giving and share what you have with others.

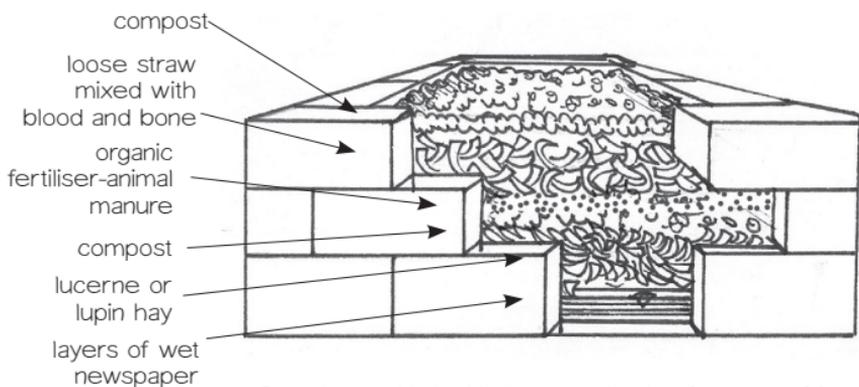
The best way of watering your vegetable garden is with sub-surface irrigation, which delivers water directly to the roots and prevents fungal diseases in the leaves. It also cuts down on evaporation. *It is against health regulations to use untreated greywater on leafy vegetables where the leaf tissue comes into contact with greywater.*

*Waterwise tip: The combination of good-quality compost, sub-surface irrigation and thick mulching makes for a waterwise veggie garden.*

<b>Dos</b>	<b>Don'ts</b>
build up the soil with compost, rock dust, pea straw or lucerne hay, and animal manures	line beds with black plastic or arsenic-treated pine logs
make liquid fertilisers out of manures, worm juice and seaweed	use fast-release chemical fertilisers high in nitrogen and phosphorus
plant flowers and herbs among your vegetables to attract beneficial insects and bees	plant citrus trees in the veggie patch as they don't like their shallow feeder roots disturbed
practise crop rotation and green-manure cropping	grow any vegetable in the same place year after year
pH test the soil to make sure it's the optimum growing media	throw fresh lawn clippings on top of veggies
let pest populations build up a little to encourage beneficial insects into your patch	spray insecticides indiscriminately on every vegetable as they kill the predators as well as the pests
plant natives to attract insectivorous birds to help control pests	take out every tree on the block unless you don't want birds to come into your garden

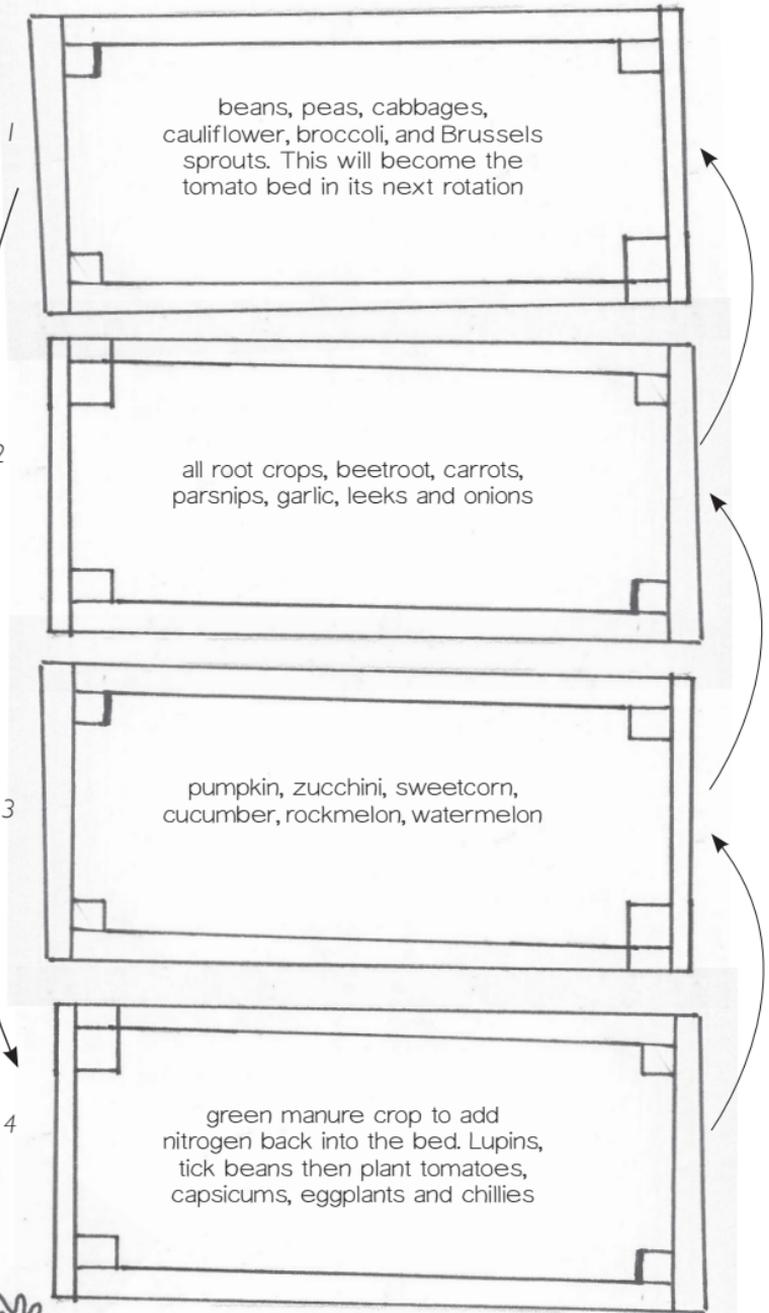
Dos	Don'ts
use a preventative organic fungal spray such as chamomile tea or Condy's crystals	assume all fungus is bad for plants (strong fungicides harm beneficial soil fungus)
let the kids plant out seeds and seedlings as they have a natural gift for gardening	assume humans are the only species on the planet that matter
mulch all vegetable beds with lupin, lucerne hay or pea straw	mulch with woodchips

### Raised vegetable bed



*Raised vegetable bed built up to a height of minimum 20cm, made out of railway sleepers, limestone, sawn-off rainwater tanks or rocks. Choose a spot in the garden that gets at least 6 hours sunlight a day. If you have no space in your garden think about doing this on your verge.*

### Four-bed crop rotation



## Climbing beans

Don't be tempted to grow your bean crops too early as they won't produce good crops. Beans are a robust little crop but they don't like the cold, or heavy soils; they need good drainage. The ideal time to sow seed is when the weather is heating up around September. Grow them in slightly alkaline soils with a good dressing of blood and bone. These plants produce their own nitrogen nodules and you should never over-fertilise with a fertiliser high in nitrogen. Don't grow beans if you have salt-affected land or water.

Apply the support system when the plants are young, about 10cm. Once they begin producing pods, keep harvesting them every day. If you fail to do this they will stop producing. You can hill the base of the plants once they start producing pods heavily. They can be harvested 12 weeks after sowing.

## Tomatoes

The most popular homegrown vegetable is the humble tomato. I guess the reason is that they give the highest yield of any vegetable in the smallest space. And as there are so many varieties of tomato, I'll give you general growing tips that will apply to all types.

Most questions surrounding tomatoes are to do with bushes flowering but not producing fruit, fungal diseases, and pests that love eating them as much as we do. Tomatoes are a warm-season vegetable and

resent frost; their ripening is mostly dependent on the soil temperature. The most important thing to do to get your tomatoes to fruit is to treat them rough when they're little. When you plant them into the ground, apply a liquid fertiliser of either a fish and seaweed brew, or liquid compost. Once the seedlings reach 10cm, starve them of water until they wilt. Continue the starvation until the first flowers appear. When you see the flowers, then you can tend them with loving care. From this point on the plants must be watered every day because if the root system dries out they will develop blossom-end rot.

*Tip: Be aware that the different varieties are called early, mid and late tomatoes for a good reason and each type will perform better in the appropriate season.*

## **Early–mid tomatoes**

### **Tommy Toe**

Heritage variety with a sweet fresh taste. Considered by many to be the most delicious of all.

### **Bragger**

Large flat disease-resistant fruit; tall grower.

### **Mellow Yellow**

Large yellow fruit; medium height.

### **Honey Grape**

Juicy oval-shaped fruit; short grower.

## **Beefsteak**

Large round juicy sweet fruit; tall grower.

## **Acid Free**

Elongated juicy red fruit suitable for those on low-acid diets; short grower.

## **Apollo**

Large red fleshy fruit; good for colder climates; tall grower.

## **Pot Roma**

Small pear-shaped fruit with smooth skin and sweet firm fruit; small stake.

## **Tumbler**

Large cherry-size fruit great for pots; small grower.

## **Mid-late tomatoes**

### **Top Dog**

Large, sweet, very disease-resistant tomato with sweet fruit; tall stake.

### **Royal Flush**

Gourmet sweet fruit; needs tall trellis.

### **Black Russian**

Heritage tomato with large, sweet, firm charcoal-coloured fruit; tall stake.

### **Tickled Pink**

Round, sweet-flavoured, rose-coloured fruit with thin skin; tall stake.

## **Sweet Cherry Gold**

Low-acid, sweet, orange, cherry-size fruit; short stake.

## **Money Maker**

Heritage tomato with firm, sweet and very productive fruit; tall stake.

## **Improved Grosse Lisse**

Very large and fleshy sweet fruit; tall stake.

## **Siberian**

This cold-tolerant compact trailing tomato produces masses of 7cm fruit. Because of its dwarf habit, the Siberian does well in pots.

## **Green Zebra**

One of the top for taste and yield, magically striped green and yellow when ripe, not attractive to birds. Like the Siberian, it is frost tolerant.

*Tip: Companion plant with marigolds, calendula and basil to attract beneficial insects to help control pests.*

*Tip: Mites on tomatoes can be safely treated with dusting sulphur.*

*Tip: Remember, tomatoes can get sunburned. If you're in for a really hot spell, pick the fruit before they fry or put up a temporary umbrella.*

# Lettuce

Lettuce can be grown all year round in the Perth and the Southwest. There are many different varieties that suit certain times of the year. Lettuce will not tolerate frost or temperatures above 36°C. Lettuce needs to be grown fast with plenty of moisture and regular (fortnightly) feeding with fish emulsion and rich compost, in friable, well-drained soil with good moisture-holding capacity. During mid-summer you may need to water your lettuce up to twice a day because it will bolt to seed as soon as it gets water-stressed. Feed regularly with a high-nitrogen fertiliser to ensure quick growth. From seedlings to maturity, you can harvest your crop in 5 weeks.

*Tip: if you get a bitter lettuce, it's because it has been grown too slowly. Remember, lettuce needs a short but indulged life!*

# Herbs

Every good household should grow its own herbs. Many of the culinary herbs come from the Mediterranean and are therefore suited to the Western Australian climate. They can be grown in any type of container as long as they receive 5 hours of sunlight a day. No extra water is needed during the rainy season. Use quality potting mix, slow-release fertiliser, and water them once a day in summer. Herbs need to be harvested continually to prevent them from going to seed (unless of course you

want to save the seed — most herbs will self-sow).

*Tip: Curly parsley makes a great garden-bed border. It doesn't grow too high and it stays nice and compact.*

*Tip: Herbs make great companion plants for your vegetables.*

*Tip: Never sow coriander in summer. It grows best in all zones (except the Southwest, where you can grow it all year round) in autumn, winter and early spring. Grow your coriander from seed rather than seedlings and it will be less likely to bolt.*

*Tip: A fantastic hardy groundcover is the old-fashioned thyme (Thymus vulgaris). It will grow in full sun or part shade and doesn't need mowing. One plant will cover 1 sq m.*

## Peas

I have such wonderful memories as a child of going into the vegetable garden and picking peas for dinner. Half the peas never made it to the table — what I didn't eat during harvesting, I ate during the shelling process. Kids love growing peas as the seeds are easy to handle, and they love even more eating them straight off the vine.

Spring is the time for planting peas. Make sure the soil is well prepared before planting out the seeds. They need free-draining, slightly alkaline soils rich in humus and well-rotted manure. The easiest way to grow them is by trenching. Make the trench 40cm wide and deep. Line the base of the trench with newspaper that's been soaked in water and seaweed solution, straw,

old manure, dolomite, and blood and bone. Backfill the trench with compost and soil and water the area thoroughly. Leave it to settle for a few days and then sow the seed in 10cm wide drills, 4cm deep in a zig-zag pattern along the trench. Be careful not to over-water during this germination stage. Don't water for 3 days after sowing.

*Tip: Sow peas at a time when frosts are not prevalent when the plants come into flower, as this will damage the flowers and affect the pods' production.*

## **Strawberries**

Without a doubt the best way to grow strawberries is in a large shallow dish. This prevents slaters, snails and bobtails getting to them before you do. (But there's no way of childproofing strawberries.) Two dishes of around 60cm in diameter will feed an average family. Mix together a good-quality potting mix, compost, rock dust and slow-release fertiliser. It's imperative that you mulch them with pea straw or lucerne hay because they're very shallow rooting.

Grow strawberries in full sun and liquid feed them regularly, either with a fish-based or compost-based fertiliser. As the flowers are pollinated by insects, make sure the dish is placed near bee-attracting plants. You can plant recently dug runners from May to June, and seedlings from spring to summer. Virus-free plants are recommended and will give you good crops for three

seasons.

*Tip: If you have misshapen strawberries it's likely that pollination has not been successful and you need to attract bees to your garden.*

*Tip: For the truly black-thumbed gardener who wants to gloat at least once in their life, grow silverbeet. It's unkillable.*

## Sweetcorn

How delicious is home-grown sweetcorn? This is a vegetable that kids love to plant as it something they all eat and it's fascinating to watch the cobs grow. The most important element to success is a well-prepared soil rich in compost and chook poo. The soil must be free-draining and able to hold moisture. Make sure the ground is very moist before sowing seed. In most climates you can sow the seed any time from August on, but in warm northern areas you can sow from July.

Remember that corn is a wind-pollinated crop so the plants should be close together to allow the pollen from the male flower at the top of the plant to fall on the female flowers halfway up the stem. Increased humidity in the morning will assist in pollen drop, which usually occurs from the silks around mid-morning.

Corn prefers deep watering rather than shallow watering so give the plants a deep soak every two to 3 days. Once the plants are established, hill up the soil around the base with newspaper, straw and compost. This will feed the thick aerial roots that supply nutrients to the cobs.

Corn is ready for harvesting when the tassel browns off and the cob is at about a 30° angle from the stem. Open the top of the cob and if a creamy liquid exudes from the kernel, they are ready to be harvested.

*Tip: Sow corn in short rows close together rather than one long row to ensure cross-pollination between male and female flowers. Sow three rows 50cm apart.*

## **Rocket**

A fast-growing, tasty salad plant that grows well in pots in any soil type, but it must be grown quickly with plenty of water or it will taste bitter and/or go to seed. Beware, it will self-seed all through your garden.

## **Chilli pepper**

One of the most cultivated crops for the home gardener. They are annuals or biennials and will only grow in warm climates with free-draining soil. They are not frost-tolerant. There is an astonishing variety of chillies available.

## **Garlic**

Garlic is such an easy thing to grow in very small places that I cannot understand why more gardeners don't grow it. Garlic likes slightly alkaline soils in full sun. You can grow it all year round in the Northwest coastal areas and when the soil temperature begins to warm up

in other parts of Western Australia.

Garlic is one of the few vegetables that contain selenium, something we lack in our impoverished Western Australian soils. Select aromatic, organically grown bulbs for propagation from cloves. Pull off individual cloves and plant just below the surface. The garlic will be ready to harvest when the tops of the plants turn yellow, usually in early summer. Garlic takes a long time — around 7 months — to mature before harvesting.

*Tip: Do not use the bleached garlic imported from overseas as it will be sterile.*