

# Everyday Alchemy

At a Neighbourhood House in Melbourne’s north, an inclusive gardening group is transforming a regular suburban park into a healing oasis of connection, community and belonging.

LOCATION **WURUNDJERI COUNTRY / COBURG / VIC**

TEXT **KATH DOLAN** / PHOTOGRAPHY **TAMSIN O’NEILL**



• This place is not just a job,” says Reynard Street Community Garden facilitator Nathascha Subero. “There’s something about what we do that’s healing. Not just for me, for other people too.” Reynard Street Neighbourhood House in Coburg and its community garden’s inclusive gardening group “attracts people from different backgrounds, different ages, different cultures and different abilities,” she says. “We’re coming together to work with the land, caring for each other, seeing the change of seasons and life cycles, and staying connected with life as it changes. There’s all the usual Neighbourhood House fare on offer here: playgroups, life-skills classes and facilities for hire. At the suggestion of students from Coburg West Primary School down the road, a new indigenous pollinator corridor was planted recently. Fruit, veggies and herbs from the garden feeds a community kitchen, which fuels a social enterprise café that provides volunteers with hospitality training, including a free community lunch on Fridays. It’s a popular ritual that brings together locals of all ages, cultures and backgrounds while also addressing food

insecurity. Café vollies turn donated produce into snacks and drinks for sale, and garden vollies feed food scraps and coffee grounds into the worm farm and mega composting system that’s improving soil health. At the suggestion of students from Coburg West Primary School down the road, a new indigenous pollinator corridor was recently planted by the inclusive garden group. The school visited during Science Week to learn about soil and returned with questions about how to start community projects of their own. The cross-pollination of ideas and activities here is endless. Colourful mosaics and multi-lingual signage that bring the garden to life are created by students in the low-cost craft classes. Fundraising and volunteer recruitment is fueled by plant sales made possible by seeds collected and propagated on-site. Unlike many community gardens, this one has no fences, fees or individual plots. Labour, challenges and rewards are collective. Everything and everyone in this circular skill-share economy is hardworking, full of heart and valued deeply. >



Garden Coordinator Nathascha Subero in the greenhouse.

**opposite:** The corner site is part productive garden, part pollinator corridor.





**top** Fruit trees got the whole ball rolling here.

**bottom** Yours truly squishing kitchen scraps ready for composting.

**opposite top left** Margy with Gianni, who celebrated his 86th birthday with the group.

**right** Volunteers plant, propagate and water the garden year-round.

**bottom left** Sam takes a break while Eddie weeds.

**right** Poonan credits the garden with teaching her about people as well as plants.



“It’s amazing – like a whole package that’s constantly moving and changing, but it just fits,” says Nathascha Subero, the gardening group facilitator who’s currently acting House manager. “This Neighbourhood House and community garden attracts people from different backgrounds, different ages, different cultures, different abilities,” she says. She’s a veteran of many community gardens, including a five million dollar project she co-founded at the University of Queensland. So when she calls this place special, I believe her. “This place is not just a job,” she says. “There is something about what we do that is healing. Not just for me, for other people too. I think it’s working with the land, nature, plants, but also coming together to do that. Not just doing it on your own at home. Caring for each other, and seeing the change of seasons and life cycles, and staying connected as life changes.”

The garden began in 2017 with funding from the House, Merri-bek Council and Corrections Victoria. Local green thumbs and people in the justice system established a small orchard and filled six hand-painted garden beds with edibles. In late 2021, after two fallow years of COVID lockdowns, the House secured funding for new infrastructure and a part-time garden facilitator to run activities and an inclusive gardening group.

Paid positions like this are transformative, and a rarity in the sector. Nathascha leapt at the opportunity, launching a two-hour inclusive working bee each Friday that segues naturally into the community lunch. Its infectiously enthusiastic, impressively multi-skilled regulars range in age from 9-year-old Sam to his best friend Gianni, a retired industrial chemist whose 86th birthday was recently celebrated by the entire group. “The first thing I learnt was to prune,” Sam recalls. “Propagation is my favourite thing. I just like helping. You’re doing one small thing for climate change, but it can lead to a big impact.” >





**top** The fledgling pollinator corridor is enhancing biodiversity in a suburban park.  
**bottom** Volunteers in the social enterprise café put the garden's herbs, veggies and fruit to good use.



Local mum Margy and her support worker Eddie, a naturopath, joined the group over a year ago as a free outlet for their shared passion for gardening. “I’ve made good friends,” Margy says. “Being in the garden, having lunch, getting out of the house, getting my hands dirty – it’s good because it gets me going. I do weeding, watering, whatever needs doing.” It motivates her to care for her flourishing garden at home, too. Eddie says the group provides “a sense of belonging, connection, community and purpose”.

Agricultural studies graduate Poonan moved from India to Melbourne in July 2023 and joined the group for volunteering experience to help with job-hunting. Now, just seven months later, she’s facilitating while Nathascha’s managing the House. Though nervous initially, she’s realising how much she’s learned about caring for plants and for people. “I really love this place,” she says with a smile. “When I see something we’ve planted isn’t doing well, I feel bad for that. In the same way, if someone’s sad, you get to know that.”

Meanwhile, it’s Sravni’s last day in the gardening group. She’s landed fulltime work after four months of volunteering here and feels grateful but overwhelmed to be leaving. “They’re all like family to me now,” she says. “Before gardening I used to apply for jobs, but I was in a stressed-out mindset. Working around the garden helped me get out of the stress, and people here are so positive and encouraging. I feel like everything is on track now. I’ve been working out, I’m eating healthy food, I got used to waking up early because of the garden. Gardening has played a major role in all of these changes that I’ve made in my life.” ●

[rsnh.org.au/get-involved/donate](https://rsnh.org.au/get-involved/donate)

arper



## Catifa Carta Chair

Designed by Lievore Altherr Molina

Catifa Carta features a re-engineered shell made of PaperShell, a revolutionary new material made of composite wood by-product. A first of its kind innovation, PaperShell dramatically reduces Catifa Carta’s impact on the environment by doing what trees do: sequestering carbon dioxide.

### Showrooms

Adelaide Brisbane Canberra Melbourne Perth Sydney

stylecraft

[stylecraft.com.au](https://stylecraft.com.au) 1300 306 960