



TYPE garden

While I was attempting to plough a straight row in our farm paddock recently, a brilliant orange Flame Robin, a frequent visitor, popped into view at the far end of the paddock and proceeded to hop about just off my line of vision. As the old 'Red Fergie' roared on, this interloper drew my eye further and further to the right, in cunning little hops, before flying off – and leaving me with the crookedest row I've ever ploughed. I spent the next few minutes thinking about how the incident was like the young people we worked with - you know, easily distracted from the task at hand by more attractive alternatives...

—Paul Newland 1990

GARDENS are places of hope and care. We bring together earth and water and seeds and then we hope. With the right conditions we make something that will feed us or that will simply give pleasure for its aesthetic beauty. For those for whom life has seemed out of control, being a tiller could bring great satisfaction. For those who have no skills or experience of the routine and demands of regular work, a garden could be a place they could begin.

In 1984 the Commonwealth Employment Program provided funds to Four Flats to start a garden project. The Good Shepherd Sisters at Abbotsford made available a vacant piece of land. Paul Newland was the first supervisor of the Garden Project. He remembers selecting the first six young men, treating them as though they were going for a job interview, giving them a sense of what they might expect in the future.

They built up the soil, bought equipment and sowed seed. They watched their efforts rise out of the soil. This was a kind of therapy. They were at the mercy of nature, forced to deal with its seasons and cycles. Growing plants need care, nurturing and patience. They need time. Just like these young men who worked in that garden. When the plants didn't flourish the way they hoped, they had to try again.

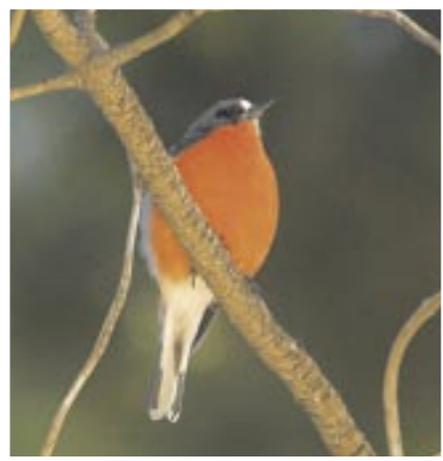
Their efforts were rewarded and they soon decided to make this a commercial enterprise selling fresh organic fruit and vegetables. This wasn't just mucking about, filling

in time, pretending to work. It was serious. In 1985 they moved across to the rich alluvial soil on the river flats in the grounds of the Abbotsford Convent down by the Yarra, in the sun. It was spring and the summer crops grew quickly. The boys were happy – they could see it all taking shape in front of them. It was a real job for them. They had all the gear a real worker has – overalls, boots and equipment. They caught the tram or the train to work in their work clothes. They looked like workers and they felt like workers. They felt part of the community. By the end of the first year, eighteen young people were employed.

But it was not all easy. Heavy rain flooded the garden on one occasion and their hard work and hopes were washed down the river and out into the bay. They had to start again. This was a test of their persistence and some could not stay with it. Some came and took up where others had left off. Sometimes the boys argued, feeling that others didn't pull their weight. There were some testing moments. But in the outdoors, some of the tensions were let go.

Federal funding lasted only a year. The garden continued with support from the Victorian government until 2003. For many who worked there over those years it was an oasis from which they could move forward into a life they had never experienced before. For others it was a glimmer of what life could be like if only they could break away from old ways of being.

They watched their efforts...



They watched their efforts rise out of the soil.

“ ...being a tiller could bring great satisfaction. ”

