

06 May 2020

In conversation with a producer and member of the artisan agriculture project advisory group

In the coming few months our Artisan Agriculture Facilitation Specialist, Sharon Hebbard will be having conversations with some of the artisan agriculture project advisory members on what makes them passionate about being a small-scale farmer, what brought them to work in the sector and on this project. They will share insights into what might be learnings to come out of the Global Pandemic of COVID-19 and what are some of the opportunities they see for small scale farming in Hepburn Shire and the broader Central Highlands in the future.

To kick start this series we would like to introduce Sharon; who caught up with Darren Rose of Two Good Acres of Newlyn North at a local farmers market recently (with social distancing and plenty of hand sanitiser adhered to of course).

Q: (SH) What brought you to wanting to run your own small-scale farm "Two Good Acres"?

A: (DR) "Well that's going to be a long story.....Career Change really!" My background as a landscape architect has seen me travelling and living overseas including 10 years in London but when I came back to Australia, I knew I wanted a break from sitting at a drafting board all day!

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Q (SH): What do you grow on the property at Two Good Acres?

A (DR): Well as I mentioned garlic is my main passion and I currently grow 12 different varieties. (In Australia there are about 100 different recognised varieties being grown.) Also, on the property we grow rhubarb, and seasonal fruits and nuts which came with the property. We have future plans to produce seasonal flowers for the local market.

Q (SH): Wow twelve (12) different varieties which are your two favourites and why?

A (DR): Spanish Roja and Dunganski. The Spanish Roja which belongs to the ‘Creole’ group of garlics is notable for its long storage capacity. Also, the robust flavour is exceptional in Winter slow-cooked dishes. Dunganski garlic, from the ‘Standard Purple Stripe’ group, originates from Uzbekistan, and therefore thrives in a cold climate like our Victorian Central Highlands. A mild sweet and nutty tasting garlic makes it perfect in roasted dishes.

Q (SH): What made you interested in the Hepburn Shire Artisan Agriculture Project and the project advisory group?

A (DR): Having had an interest in planning for most of my career, I have been aware that for small scale farmers, planning regulations can be a big impediment to market entry. I am hoping to bring that experience to the project advisory group to open conversations on how Shire Planning can be better aligned to support small-scale agriculture in general and enable new enterprises, especially young farmers, to enter the market.

Q (SH): What do you feel might be the top two learnings for local small-scale agricultural producers from the Global Pandemic of COVID-19?

A (DR): Firstly, the outbreak and subsequent market restrictions at both state and federal levels have meant that producers have needed to be highly creative in how they get their produce into the hands of their customers. Whether this has meant going online to sell product; setting up pre-ordering systems that minimise social contact; or joining forces with other stallholders in co-operative sales arrangements. The learning has been that the static market stall cannot be relied on as the only sales outlet during a National Emergency.

Secondly, the heartening classification by government that Farmers' Markets are an 'essential service' has given confidence to small scale producers that they are, indeed, very important in the local food chain. This has been a great psychological boost to these very hardworking and under-recognised food producers. By the same token, the Government recognition of this sector has sent a clear message to local consumers that farmers are indeed, extremely important to the preservation and continuation of local family's health and wellbeing. Overall, the result has been very positive in raising the

profile and reputation of the small-scale food producing sector. Hopefully these gains will not be eroded once things return to the 'new normal' whatever that will look like.

Q (SH): Darren, thank you so much for your precious time today and I have one last question. What do you see as the future opportunities for small scale agriculture producers in the Shire and Central Highlands?

A (DR): As the Pandemic environment has shown, there are many options for greater collaboration with other small-scale producers to get their product into the hands of local consumers. To build further on this would benefit everyone and make for marketing and logistical efficiencies. Also, there are lots of opportunities for young people to enter the industry, either for employment and on the job learning, or to start their own businesses. However, to fully realise opportunities for the next generation of farmers we need to ensure that entry barriers are reduced, and opportunities are provided for the collaboration of knowledge, shared and affordable education forums, marketing and equipment to aid start-up farmers, and that planning assists rather than hinders those wanting to realise their farming dream.