

Waverley's market gardens and gardeners



Market gardens were originally set up and farmed by European settlers. This changed after the late 1850s, when Chinese immigrants gradually took over these gardens and also established vegetable markets. They became so involved in running market gardens that the gardens became almost synonymous with the Chinese themselves.

The Chinese involvement in market gardens at this time reflected their move to the cities from the bush, where they had immigrated in large numbers during the gold rushes of the 1850s.

Like many Europeans they found the promised riches from the gold fields illusory and moving to the cities found a natural home in small scale agricultural production on the city's fringes.

The story of Waverley's largest and longest running market gardens started in 1844, when three individual land holdings along Bondi Road were consolidated and fenced into one large rural property owned by T. D. Edwards and called Flagstaff Farm. This farm is now broadly the area now occupied by Waverley Park.

The north-eastern corner of the farm was a flat area of ground with rich soil, which from the 1860s-1887 was a fruit and vegetable garden worked by local Chinese families. Known colloquially as 'the cabbage patch' the garden flourished and became an important source of affordable and accessible fresh produce for Waverley residents.

A second garden was created on the south-western side of the park opposite Henrietta Street. A natural pond, near the present Pavilion, provided a fresh water supply for the gardens.

Cricketing organisations had their eye on Waverley Park and sought to have exclusive use of this land, increasing pressure on Council remove the market gardeners.

On 4 July 1882 a motion before Waverley Council sought to give the market gardeners three months to quit, but this was defeated. Further attempts to remove the market gardeners came up the following year at Council, and the year after that, but efforts were unsuccessful.

Waverley residents have always enjoyed eating locally grown produce and they made it clear they wanted their market gardens to remain; when the removal of the gardens was raised protest meetings were held and objections sent to Council.

Three years later the issue again came before Council and on 4 March, 1885 and after a long discussion the Councillors voted. The vote was hung and the Mayor, William Simpson, used his casting vote with the 'noes'. The Chinese market gardeners had again been saved.

The market gardeners hung on until 31 March, 1887 when they were finally forced to leave so that the area they occupied could be incorporated into Waverley Park.

We know little of the local Chinese market gardeners and their lives. Although many people worked the Waverley Park site, only two names appear in official records: On Lee and Ah Yam.

We do know the gardeners lived on site in the park, but many other intriguing questions remain: where did they come from before they settled in Waverley? What did they think about the attempts to oust them from Waverley Park – and the local residents attempt to save them? And where did they go to when they left?

In May 2011 a no-dig community organic garden, the Waverley Park Communal Garden, opened in the park within sight of the original market gardens.

As well as the extensive market gardens in Waverley Park, which operated for decades from the mid-late 19th century, an early reference exists to an early market gardener called 'Duffy'. In the 1870s he had a market garden on land which ran between Bondi Road and Birrell Street, about midway between Ocean Street South and Watson Streets.

A significant market garden also existed in Tamarama Street and in Farrelly's Avenue Tamarama, also run like those in Waverley Park by Chinese gardeners. Reports have the Tamarama Street garden operating until about 1909, when the land was sold to become the stables of a Kensington racehorse trainer.

Today community gardens exist across Sydney, including a number in our local area. The oldest is the Waverley Community Garden (formerly the Eastern Suburbs Community Garden) which has been operating since 1999.

A former rubbish dump, the site has been transformed into a productive organic garden growing fruit, vegetables, herbs and other plants. It has composting facilities, a rain water tank, and a pond and provides a meeting space for sympathetic public activities such as environmental education.

The garden also has a social function. It allows local residents to meet other people with a passion for gardening and provides an opportunity for those living in Waverley's densely populated suburbs to get their hands dirty, grow their own food and practice the principles of permaculture.

The garden is located on the lower slopes of the south west corner of Clementson Park in Bondi Junction. Waverley Council oversees the applications for individual plot licenses and financially supports the garden.

In 2006 the garden won an award for excellence from the Australian City Farms and Community Gardens Network, recognising the innovative work of the garden and their role in advising and mentoring other community gardens.

In a fascinating historical twist the Waverley Community Garden was visited by 21 Chinese Government representatives in 2005. They were part of an official delegation examining production methods used in small, self-sustainable gardens. Maybe the early Chinese market gardeners were looking on with approval?

Long time Waverley residents have memories of Chinese market gardens in our area; here are some of their reminiscences:

'There were a lot of Chinese market gardens where Military Road is now. What is Military Road now was only a bush trail then. It was pretty rough in patches for the horse and buggies which used it.' (*Edna Archer, Oral History Collection, Waverley Library*)

'...a Chinaman used to come down the back lane and he had his two baskets across his shoulder. Mother could get anything she wanted, any kind of fruit of any description [from him]. At Christmas he'd always give each customer a tin of ginger...My father bought little bells from him for Christmas decorations.' (*Barbara Podmore, Oral History Collection, Waverley Library*)

'I remember a Chinaman's garden over in Queens Park. There was a creek used to run down there.' (*Eric Shakes*)

'There used to be a [Chinese market garden] in O'Brien's Bush at Bondi Beach. (*Eunice Tucker*)

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