

Sharing earth

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During the second Covid lockdown, I decided to start a veggie garden. In those days, home had become our world; the street, our universe. And I wanted to make our home one that was growing and thriving—a place that nourished our family.

So I ordered some soil—four cubic metres, to be precise—which arrived the next day in one big dump in front of our side gate.

As it turned out, that was far too much earth.

For a couple of weeks, the mound just sat there—warm, dark and full of worms. To be honest, I wasn't quite sure how to move so much soil. Until one afternoon, when the kids from our street had come to our front yard to play. I interrupted their chalk drawing to ask, "Who wants to help me fill up this wheelbarrow and start shifting the dirt?" A chorus of voices responded with bright enthusiasm. One of the girls even ran home to get another shovel.

And so we made a start—me, my kids and the neighbours'—one spring afternoon in our street.

We made quite a few trips to the backyard with that awkward barrow. It was difficult to direct something so heavy—it kept keeling over to one side as we tried to push it up over the lawn and tip it out into a garden bed. The kids took turns to shovel, push, tip and spread out the new earth, ready for planting. I walked beside the wheelbarrow, keeping it steady with my hands. It was hot and heavy work.

After a while it was time to stop and take a break in the shade with some ice-blocks. I thanked the kids for their help. We had certainly worked hard, but when we looked back at the mound, we had barely made a dent. There must have been a dozen more barrowfulls of soil still sitting out the front of our house.

While we were resting, one of the girls saw some succulents growing in a pot. "I love succulents!", she said. So I went to the shed and found her a small pot. We filled it with earth from the pile and popped a cutting in the top. Well, that was one more way to move a bit of dirt.

Over the next few weeks, I spoke to all the neighbours in our street. "Take some earth!", I'd say. "I ordered far too much." My miscalculation was clear for all to see.

Gradually, the neighbours' polite laughter turned to genuine interest.

First of all, our neighbour from Number 10 came with his empty wheelbarrow and transported a few loads back to his garden. He was planting some cherry tomatoes, beans and cucumbers. I know this because he would later bring us bags and bags of produce to share. That summer we had so many cucumbers between us that I taught myself to make pickles!

Next, the family from Number 12 came over for a load. They had never seen behind our fence before, so I showed them around. Here's where we moved the washing line, that's where my husband made the flower beds, this is our ugly, overgrown raspberry bush. Those neighbours were taking soil for their flower beds. Later I would witness the colours of a cottage garden come to life around the edges of their yard, crowding pinks, purples, yellows, whites—even blues. My favourites were the soft pink hydrangeas that reminded me of my grandmother. (Our neighbours sent me home with a big bunch the day I told them that.)

Around that time, I started noticing a beautifully kept garden that I passed on my way home each day. They had strung up neat rows of hanging pots spilling over with splashes of green, purple and red. I thought maybe something like that would look pretty at our place. One day, on a whim, I stopped outside the house to take a closer look. It so happened that the couple who lived there were out working in the garden. I told them I had been admiring their garden and they invited me to come in and look around. By the time I left, I had two new friends and a box full of cuttings.

The next week I bought some hanging pots, filled them up with more of our soil and planted the cuttings I had been gifted.

That first experience of 'green generosity' made me bold. From then on, whenever I noticed a plant that I liked growing in the garden of a neighbour or friend, I would ask them for a cutting. No one ever said no. I think we all recognise that whatever springs up from the earth is a gift to us—it's not really something we own or control in the first place. As the earth—and its Creator—have been generous with us, so we can be generous with our neighbours.

So now, most of the plants in my garden started life in someone else's. And many of our neighbours' plants started life in our excess soil. To me, these green, growing things symbolise the tendrils of human relationship that bind a neighbourhood together. We gratefully receive; we generously give.

And so, there's a kind of trust building in our street with every passing year. Funnily enough, I think it was lockdown that really got us started. Now it's not just our home, but the whole street that's growing and thriving; it's a place that nourishes not just our family, but the whole neighbourhood. And to me, living in a neighbourhood that's grounded in gratefulness and generosity is the very best thing about Wyong.