We chat to three leading female horticulturists about the present and future of food. 

WOMEN IN HORTICULTURE

SONJA CAMERON
Owner of Cameron’s Nursery in Arcadia, Sydney, is a nursery and garden industry expert in sustainable infrastructure.

You’re an industry leader when it comes to sustainable infrastructure. How do you bring this into your nursery?

In this early planning stage of Cameron’s Nursery, we reviewed how our business would or could impact on our local environment and beyond. We have a recycle, reduce and reuse policy, which follows through all of the business. We continue to review this each year and adopt new practices that engage our business partners to help us achieve our goal. We monitor our water and electricity use as well as our transport, management of internal vehicles and our business waste. We also make it mandatory to reduce chemical usage within the nursery by choosing natural alternatives.

What do you think the future of farming looks like in Australia?

I hope people start to value primary producers just as they do other professionals. Often our work and products are not valued highly enough for the risks, investment and time taken to produce our products. As the world’s population grows and impacts on our environment, green spaces and food production will become more and more important. The fundamental design and accessibility of green spaces promote the health and well-being of people, therefore it’s imperative that green-belt areas are available for farmers into the future.

How can city dwellers — who might only have the space of a small balcony — grow their own food and fresh produce?

Everyone can grow some form of their own food, depending on the space and aspect of their balcony. Container gardening is very popular and gives people living in apartments and spaces, the ability to sit and enjoy while having the benefits of eating their own crop. Selecting the right food crop, the correct container and using good-quality potting mix will give the best outcomes for people living in small spaces.

BREI MONTGOMERY
Brei Montgomery is the National Sales Manager at the Organic Farm Gate, one of Australia’s largest growers, packers and marketers of Australian-grown certified organic produce.

Please share the story behind the Organic Farm Gate.

The Organic Farm Gate was born from a passion to share organic produce with the world. We believe in the power of organic and the positive change it can have on our land and people’s lives. So we built a company that unified the organic industry, allowing growers to pack, market and share their organic produce globally.

Every farmer in the Organic Farm Gate family views their business as an extension of themselves. This is crucially important as it encapsulates the passion and devotion that goes into every crop.

How does buying Australia-grown organic produce benefit the grower and the consumer?

In my point of view, our certified organic growers are soil health biologists who look after our planet — our living environment — for all of us.

There is no need for our growers to use synthetic agricultural chemicals, including pesticides, fungicides and herbicides, on their crops because their plants are healthy and won’t be attacked by diseases and pests. This in turn allows customers to buy food that’s full of nutrients while looking after our planet Earth.

By buying organic, you are looking after workers’ rights as the Australian Certified Organic Standard upholds the principles of Fairtrade. Choosing to support certified organic means supporting organic growers, producers and processors who are doing the right thing for our environment as well as building a sustainable future for food production.

What is the Organic Farm Gate’s stance on plastic packaging and fruit stickers?

We love if our certified organic produce didn’t require any packaging or labelling by our buyers and customers. Our produce has been grown in its purest form and has its own protective skin, and therefore doesn’t need any labelling. Some of our customers require packaging on our produce to differentiate between conventional (non-organic) and organic produce and to protect the integrity of the product.

In the last five years, there has been progress in using compostable trays and taping fruit instead of wrapping it, but there is still a long way to go in being more innovative in this area.

We challenge our industry to consider why conventional produce doesn’t need a requirement to disclose what chemicals were used to grow it, yet certified organic produce must be audited and tested. Our growers must pay to have this process in place and then they are requested to label their product to ensure integrity for the consumer.

How can we use our money wisely when it comes to purchasing produce? 

My best advice would be wherever you buy your produce, value it. Value the energy, time, love and care that someone has put into growing food that will nourish your body and soul. If your produce doesn’t have a certification attached to it, then ask where your produce has come from. And, if you can, let your growers know you are thankful for all that they do.

LISA BRASSINGTON
Lisa Brasington, Land and Quality Manager at Peninsula Fresh Organics, recently received the prestigious Women in Horticulture award for 2017. Her passion lies in strengthening the leadership of women in agriculture and encouraging them to share their stories.

Your passion is in strengthening the leadership of women in agriculture. What can women bring into the industry?

Generally speaking, women have an instinct to hurt for nutrition. Women seek out seasonal flavours and have a deep appreciation for the beauty in nature, as nature has a unique sensory marketing campaign that accompanies all fruit and vegetables. This quest for dietary nutrition united with foraging talents and an understanding of lifecycles, whether from seed to salad or paddock to plate, is at the root of agriculture. The industry of Australian Certified Organic (ACO) horticulturists have a good representation of farmers who are women who are passionate and proud to grow Australian produce.

Why do we need to be thinking about sustainability when it comes to horticulture?

It’s all about the soil; keeping our soil alive, rebuilding our soil and access to water. The healthier the soil, the healthier our horticultural harvests.

What advice do you have for our readers if they’re wanting to make changes that support biodynamic agriculture?

Seek out accredited farmers’ markets and meet your local farmers and biodynamic and organic groups. Ask if they have a farmgate shop and understand what produce your region grows. Then ask for other horticultural referrals to buy what’s remaining on your shopping list. The ACO has an organic food directory that you can read at home and plan your foodie daytrips. Most importantly, make sure you know the farmer’s accreditation so you know you are buying authentic Australian biodynamic and organic produce.

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A plant needs natural sunlight, soil and water for a full cycle, excellent quality and great flavour. The rise of agricultural technology and crop protection intervention in farming is, in some part, to support the changeless role of the available land suitable for horticulture.

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