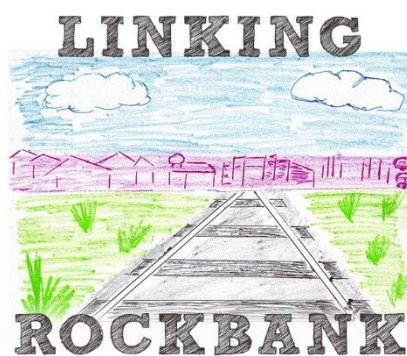


Magic Harvest

Magic Harvest Winter 2021 evaluation



An initiative of:



Key Partners:



Executive Summary:

The Magic Harvest program was an initiative under the Linking Rockbank project which sought to increase social connection, healthy eating, physical activity and food security through the vehicle of a gardening program. Aimed at beginner gardeners residing in Rockbank and the surrounding estates, the program ran over the course of a growing season (May-September 2021) where participants received starter packs of seedlings, compost and fertilizer generously donated by Bunnings Caroline Springs to plant up a small garden plot of approximately 1 meter square in their backyards.

Participants would meet monthly for workshops facilitated by the DJHS Health Promotion officer and We Love Aintree/ Eat Grow Garden founder Jono Ingram, teaching gardening and cooking skills using home grown produce. These workshops were conducted at the Aintree Café Garden utilizing demonstration plots to teach gardening skills and harvest for cooking sessions. In between sessions, participants could keep in touch with the facilitators and each other through a private Facebook group which was used to ask questions, share gardening progress and recipes. The Facebook group also helped to maintain social connections between participants which proved valuable due to the Covid-19 pandemic interrupting scheduled workshops throughout the season.

The Magic Harvest Winter 2021 program has been overwhelmingly successful, with participants gaining confidence, knowledge and skills in gardening and cooking. Pleasingly, it appears that the program has also resulted in increased social connection, with group members reporting enjoying the social interactions with others in the program and importantly, also sharing the learnings and produce from Magic Harvest with their friends, family and neighbours.

The Magic Harvest program is well positioned to continue into a new season with new participants. The majority of the current group have expressed eagerness to continue in the program as senior members and mentors for new participants and the facilitators are also keen to carry on. Covid-19 restrictions pending, it is hoped that a summer season of the Magic Harvest program will soon begin. Helping to reach the goal of building a food growing network in Rockbank and Middle Melton to improve social connection, nutrition, physical activity and food security in the community.

Background and rationale:

Linking Rockbank is a placed-based community project that was established by Djerriwarrh Health Services (now Western Health) in 2017 in response to the emerging challenges of rapid population growth and the associated lagging development of community infrastructure. This community has pockets of significant disadvantage and therefore experiences higher rates of social exclusion resulting in growing inequity in health outcomes.

The Magic Harvest program was established as an initiative under the Linking Rockbank project, for residents of Rockbank and the surrounding estates within Middle Melton. It aimed to increase social connection, healthy eating, physical activity and food security through the establishment of a food growing network utilising the program 'Magic Harvest' as the driver. Magic Harvest is a gardening program that supports people to learn how to grow and cook their own food and encourages them to share this knowledge with others. Magic Harvest works by encouraging beginner gardeners to start small, with just a 1-meter square garden plot which allows participants to enjoy the pleasures of gardening and cooking their own produce without creating a burden through starting a garden that's size could quickly become overwhelming. The program runs with participants meeting at a central 'hub' where a demonstration garden plot is planted to be replicated in each person's home.



The group then meets for monthly workshops to discuss progress through the growing season and learn gardening methods. As the gardens reach harvest period, the workshops teach methods of preparing and cooking home grown food. Magic Harvest also emphasises the importance of 'passing it on' in terms of knowledge gained and the sharing of produce with others. The program continues over the course of an entire growing season; with the Rockbank Magic Harvest pilot program being undertaken through winter of 2021 from May-September. Partners of the program were We Love Aintree, Aintree Café Garden and Bunnings Warehouse Caroline Springs.

Method:

Planning for the Magic Harvest program began in March 2021 with a conversation between the DJHS Health Promotion officer and Jono, the We Love Aintree/ Eat Grow Garden founder where the idea of utilising the Magic Harvest Program was agreed upon.

The founder of the Magic Harvest program Tori Arbon, was contacted to attain project planning resources which were shared at no cost. The One Magic Square, Beyond the Magic Square and Magic Little Meals books were purchased from Wakefield Press to serve as additional resources for the program. Contact was also made with Bunnings Caroline Springs Activities Officer and an application completed for in-kind sponsorship with the donation of seedlings, seeds, compost and liquid fertiliser secured.

Initially, the location of the program was set to be the Aintree Community Garden however, the Community Garden was scheduled to be disassembled from its current location at some point during the growing season to be re-established in another location. It was deemed therefore that there was no point in planting the demonstration plots in the garden if they would be dug up and therefore not able to be harvested. Instead, the location chosen was the Aintree Café Garden, which have garden beds adjacent to the café. 2 of the beds were allocated for use by the program and an electric frypan was purchased for cooking demonstrations to avoid using the Café's commercial kitchen which would already have been cleaned and tidied ready for the next day's food service.

The criteria for the Magic Harvest program was that participants were residents of Rockbank or the surrounding estates. The target group were beginner gardeners although more experienced gardeners were also welcomed. As this program was a pilot for the region, as well as concerns about Covid-19 restrictions and limited funding, a maximum number of participants was set at 20 households.

Promotion of the Magic Harvest program was done through social media posts on Facebook, the Linking Rockbank newsletter, posters in key Rockbank and Aintree locations including Timbertop Community Centre, Aintree Café Garden, Rockbank Preschool and Rockbank Primary School. Word of mouth was also an essential promotional element to raise awareness of the program which was made possible through Jono's connections within the Rockbank/Aintree community.

An information session was held in mid-April 2021 at the Aintree Café Garden where a small number of community members attended. The session provided catering, an explanation of the program and a viewing of the Magic Harvest gardening documentary. Registrations were taken at the event, but due to small numbers, further promotion especially through word of mouth was essential before the first session at the beginning of May.

The first session was held on the first Wednesday evening in May 2021. 17 people from 14 households attended the first meeting. The combined population of these 14 households was 48 people, meaning that these 48 would be directly impacted by the programs. The households received a starter pack that included an array of winter vegetable seedlings and seeds, a bag of compost and a bottle of liquid fertiliser. The first session involved the whole group planting the 2 demonstration garden beds that incorporated the same vegetable seedlings that participants would plant at home. After the beds were planted, the group moved indoors to the Aintree Café Garden to discuss preparing a garden bed and gardening basics. This included information about sunlight, watering and soil health. The whole session was approximately 90 minutes and the participants were sent home with their starter packs and encouraged to share updates of their planting on the private Facebook group that was created.

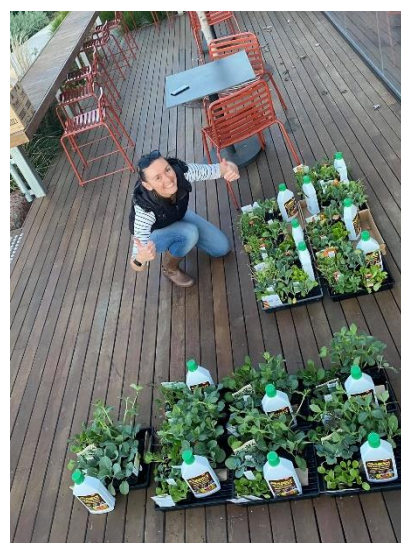


Image 1: Participants planting up the two demonstration plots. Image 2: Starter packs (minus bags of compost) generously donated by Bunnings Caroline Springs.

Following sessions, when Covid-19 restrictions allowed, followed a similar process with each session beginning with observations and activities in the demonstration garden plots, where participants could ask questions and compare how their gardens were growing. Jono, as a landscaper and educator, facilitated activities in the garden and answered any questions from participants. After time in the garden, a cooking demonstration was held inside the Aintree Café Garden utilising produce from the demonstration plots to create salads, stir-fry's, soups and roasts.

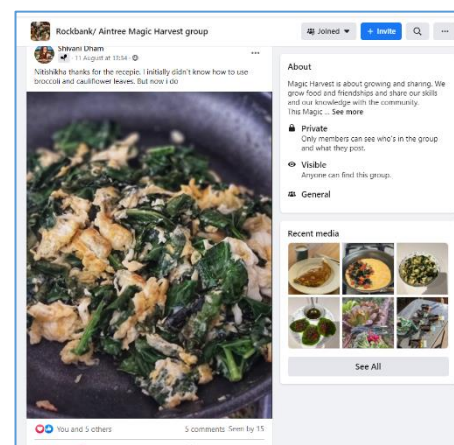
A celebration workshop was planned for September, however due to the Covid-19 situation deteriorating in Victoria, this session was held via Zoom as a short meeting to discuss planning for summer planting.

Results:

Process evaluation-

17 people from 14 households initially registered to be a part of the Magic Harvest program, which was less than the maximum number of 20 families. This is likely due to limited advertising as no budget was allocated and as a new project in the area influence via word of mouth was limited.

Engagement between sessions was maintained through the closed Facebook group 'Rockbank/ Aintree Magic Harvest' where all participants are group members and posts occurred multiple times a week from both facilitators and participants asking questions and offering advice, tips and recipes. Across the period of the program (May-September 2021) the engagement with the Facebook page has increased, starting with mainly facilitator led posts and building to incorporate more group member led posts sharing garden updates and recipe ideas for using garden produce.



Example post from the Rockbank/ Aintree Magic Harvest group. After another member had shared a recipe previously, this participant had cooked it and shared a photo of their creation thanking the member.

A key challenge through the Magic Harvest project was the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Melbourne's fifth lockdown occurred when the June workshop was scheduled. The facilitators asked participants whether they would prefer to meet virtually or postpone the workshop until restrictions were eased. Most participants voted to postpone the session rather than take part virtually, indicating the fatigue felt after a year of lockdowns for video conferencing. This however, meant that some information was not able to be taught to participants as when workshops resumed in July, the garden had grown to a point where cooking demonstrations needed to begin.

The loss of the second session may have also contributed to lower numbers in the successive sessions. With the initial workshop attracting 17 people and the other workshops averaging 5. Reasons for non-attendance included work commitments, caring for children and forgetfulness, however when queried whether the time of sessions was appropriate (6pm, on the first Wednesday of the month), all participants have indicated that it was.

The July and August sessions were thankfully able to continue as planned, however Covid-19 restrictions meant masks were required indoors in addition to checking in and sanitation practices. During these sessions, cooking demonstrations were included as the demonstration gardens had grown sufficiently. July's session first demonstrated a simple salad dressing, where volunteer participants created their own salad dressing using just olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper. This was a clever demonstration to show that even with minimal ingredients, there can be a broad range of flavours dependent on ratios and a person's taste. The session also took advantage of the salad leaves and Asian greens to create a kale salad and a simple Asian greens stir fry. Meanwhile, August's session had the theme of waste reduction, and focussed on composting and cooking other parts of the plant to get the most out of the garden, which involved a demonstration of cooking broccoli and cauliflower leaves.



Image 1: Workshop 2 Asian greens cooking demonstration. Image 2: Workshop 3 composting demonstration

Survey results from participants-

The response rate for the post program survey is 71% (10 of 14 households). The full survey results are included as appendix 1

Overall, the results of the program are universally positive with participants' confidence in both gardening and cooking increasing from their involvement in the Magic Harvest program. All respondents indicated that they had learnt new gardening knowledge and/or skills (90% strongly agree, 10% agree) and all but one had gained new knowledge/ skills in cooking (70% strongly agree, 20% agree, 10% disagree). Additional knowledge of note gained by participants not specifically related to gardening or cooking included a greater understanding of eco-systems in the garden, sustainability practices and nutrition.

Pleasingly, 70% of respondents had shared the knowledge, garden produce or skills gained through the Magic Harvest program with friends, neighbours or family with the remaining 30% planning to share. 'Passing it on' is a key value of the Magic Harvest program and sharing produce, skills and knowledge with others is built into the program. When asked whether participants would be keen to continue their involvement in the Magic Harvest program as mentors for new members 88% also said yes which bodes well for the future sustainability of the program.

When asked about future improvements of the Magic Harvest program, comments related to the impact that lockdown had had and that they had missed out on sessions with suggestions of what they would still like to learn more about; including pest and disease recognition in plants, more nutrition information and getting children to eat more vegetables. The other main suggestions were to promote the program more widely as not many people had heard of the program and to send out reminder texts that a workshop was upcoming.

The responses for participants' favourite parts of the Magic Harvest program contained a wide variety of answers. Some responses focussed on the gardening knowledge gained, whilst others enjoyed meeting with like-minded people and the social connections formed. There were responses that focussed on a particular session or topic covered and others that simply said that they enjoyed the whole thing.

Additional quotes-

From interviews with participants, some of the quotes include:

"It's been a really nice thing to do. It got me talking about it with my neighbours and I was invited around to their garden to see what they grow. We've had a bit more to do with each other now".

"I've been loving the interaction and learning new things from the group and their experiences. Better than reading from a book".

"I was new to the community. I'd only moved in a few weeks before the first session and had always lived in an apartment so I had never gardened before. It was great to meet people and the way you both taught the sessions made everything really simple".

"I loved learning how to compost properly. And I was scared of kale and didn't realise that you could eat the broccoli leaves. Now I'm eating them all the time"

Discussion:

Despite interruptions due to Covid-19 restrictions, the Magic Harvest program has made significant progress towards its aims of improving social connections, healthy eating, physical activity and food security through the establishment of a food growing network within the Rockbank community. The pilot group have conveyed their enjoyment of the program and have shared their learnings and achievements not only with each other but their broader networks as was hoped by choosing the Magic Harvest method as the program template.

Some improvements to be made in the next iteration, which is planned over the summer season if Covid-19 restrictions are lifted in time, would be to promote the program more broadly to raise awareness further and encourage more participants. More information is also hoped to be passed on in regards to gardening basics which were missed in the first program due to the second session being delayed which would have covered pest and disease management and companion planting. By the time that the July session was scheduled, the growth of the vegetable plots meant that cooking demonstrations needed to commence to ensure that the plants were eaten in their prime.

The venue of Aintree Café Garden had both positives and draw backs. The café garden has raised garden beds adjacent to the café which provided convenience for the gardening aspects as well as the ability of being able to retreat indoors away from the cold of the winter months for further discussions and/ or cooking demonstrations. Having access to the coffee machine also allowed for hot beverages to be made for participants as they arrived for the workshop (a welcomed addition with participants) and the wall mounted TV allowed for presentations using laptops and HDMI cables.

As the Café operates from 7am-3pm 7 days a week it did limit the times that the venue was available when determining the timing of workshops and the commercial kitchen was largely avoided to reduce mess that could impact on the next day's food service. Ideally, a community centre with a garden and kitchen area would be a more suitable venue but until the new Aintree Community Garden is established, the Aintree Café Garden will continue to be satisfactory.

Conclusion:

The Magic Harvest program was a successful pilot program which increased the knowledge and confidence of participants in both gardening and cooking. Importantly, participants shared the knowledge, produce and skills that they had gained through their involvement in the program with



others within their social network; expanding the positive benefits to others within the Rockbank community.

The use of a Facebook group was seen as beneficial by participants and assisted them to share their journey and new found knowledge with other group members, especially with Covid-19 restrictions cancelling some planned face to face sessions.

The short-term sustainability of the Magic Harvest program appears solid, with most of the current group members keen to remain involved as mentors for a new summer cohort as well as continued support from co-facilitator Jono and the Linking Rockbank program. It is hoped that a Summer program will build on the initial success with future plans for rolling intakes and a broader food growing network within Rockbank and the new estates in Middle Melton contributing to social connections, nutrition, physical activity and food security within the community.