

YURRI MANDIGA INDIGENOUS GARDEN

Summary

Communities across the Loddon Mallee are supported to live healthier lives through place-based prevention and population health initiatives delivered in partnership with local organisations. Aboriginal communities in the Loddon Mallee region are a priority population for the Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit (LMPHU); and Healthy Food Systems are also a priority focus area for 2023-2025.

The objectives of the LMPHU Healthy Food Systems are to:

- Improve food equity across the Loddon Mallee region and enhance social support systems
- Support regional and local initiatives that improve access to locally produced, fresh, healthy plant-based food
- Support the availability of healthy fresh food where people live, work and play

Food insecurity has been identified as a priority for communities in the Murray sub region of the LMPHU. Limited availability and access to healthy fresh food in the region places many people at risk of food insecurity. In particular, Aboriginal communities may experience high rates of food insecurity due to systemic social and economic inequalities (2). Furthermore, native Indigenous foods have been displaced by colonisation of the food system, making the availability of culturally appropriate foods scarce for many communities. Whilst having access to native Indigenous foods is important to a healthy diet, Indigenous foods also support cultural empowerment and knowledge sharing in the community. Re-orienting regional and rural food systems to incorporate Indigenous foods is important to raise awareness of what native Indigenous foods exist; and enable a more equitable, culturally appropriate and healthy food system.

Interventions

The Murray Prevention and Population Health team of the LMPHU met with Njernda Aboriginal Corporation to discuss healthy eating priorities for the Wolithica people of the Yorta Yorta Nation and other Aboriginal communities in the local government area of Campaspe. Food insecurity and lack of access to Indigenous foods were identified priorities for the community. LMPHU provided a small grant to the Njernda Aboriginal Corporation to support the regeneration the existing garden in Echuca.



“A successful day and lots of fun! Looking forward to getting more plants in and getting the garden back up and running for the community.”

The aim for the garden is to be a place to grow Indigenous and non-Indigenous food, and share knowledge on Indigenous and non-Indigenous plants, their significance, and healthy eating benefits. An existing garden site was identified that could be rejuvenated, replanted, and set up as a shared space for Aboriginal community to access and enjoy.

Working group meetings were held every fortnight to develop a plan with timelines, and a community communication approach to promote the project and encourage community volunteering in the proposed garden. The garden was named **Yurri Mandiga** meaning fresh food in Yorta Yorta language.

A working bee was held in November 2023 to clear the old garden beds, set up new irrigation, fertilise and plant a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous plants. Weekly visits to the garden by Njernda and LMPHU supported maintenance and harvesting. In May 2024 an additional working bee was held to install 10 new garden beds, plant over 10 new types of Indigenous and non-Indigenous plants and set up a green house and garden shed.

Outcomes

- Twenty people from Njernda and LMPHU helped out across both working bees, including some from Njernda's Mens group.
- Indigenous plants included cinnamon myrtle, aniseed myrtle, lemon myrtle, finger limes, native thyme, native basil, salt bush and Davidson's plum. Other plants like strawberries, watermelon, cantaloupe, pumpkin, radishes, capsicums and tomatoes, broccoli, beetroot, lettuce and silver beet have been planted.
- Over 250 fruits and vegetables have been grown in the garden and provided to community via the medical centre which have all been taken home.

The anticipated benefits of the Yurri Mandiga garden project includes:

- Supporting improved access and availability of culturally appropriate foods for Aboriginal communities in the region
- Encouraging healthy eating in Aboriginal communities, to improve overall health and wellbeing
- Providing opportunities for cultural empowerment and self-determination in Aboriginal communities in the region
- Enabling stakeholder partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities
- Increasing cultural awareness in non-Indigenous stakeholders
- Providing opportunities for community connectiveness

Project learnings

- When planning and implementing projects with Aboriginal communities, it is important to consider the cultural load, in addition to time and resource constraints on Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation staff.
- Surveys were not considered an effective way to engage with the Aboriginal community and gather their feedback, and usually produces low response rates. More suitable and culturally appropriate approaches should be considered.
- Ensuring someone can visit the garden for maintenance is essential to the sustainability of the garden

Next steps

- Establish regular gardening maintenance working bees throughout the year.
- Invite local groups and run small community activities/events in the Yurri Mandiga garden.
- Provide future Indigenous food education workshops for community.
- Ensure environmental sustainability through composting and waste reduction initiatives around the garden.
- Promote the Yurri Mandiga garden and its significance to community.
- Explore how the garden produce can contribute to local food relief options.