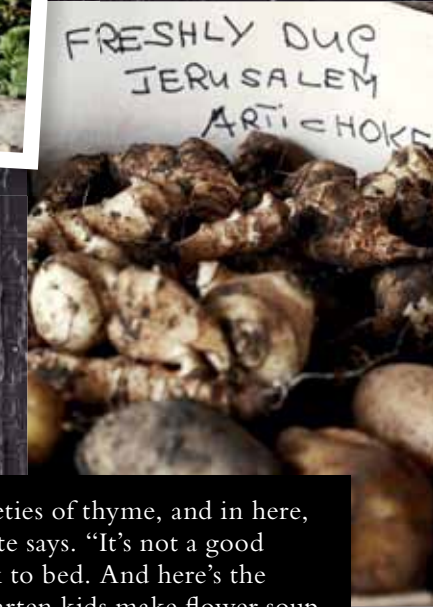


COTTAGE INDUSTRY

A HISTORIC PROPERTY TAKES ON NEW LIFE AS A COMMUNITY HERB GARDEN.

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CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT Kate Spencer leads the volunteer gardeners; productive beds hold (front, from left) nasturtiums, lemon balm, peppermint geranium, (rear) a quince tree, dill, calendula and globe artichokes; Jerusalem artichokes are delicious roasted or in soup; there's room for flowers too, like this 'Bonica' rose. FACING PAGE One of two slab-built cottages on the property.

A TINY PLAQUE HINTS at the past of Penola's National Trust Herb Garden: 'In memory of all the children who have lived and played in Petticoat Lane.'

Fifteen of those children belonged to Irish bootmaker Christopher Sharam and his wife Ellen. Somehow, they all squeezed into the two timber-slab cottages he built on the property from 1850, and head gardener Kate Spencer has a box filled with unearthed mementos of this pioneering family, including many fragments of china and glass.

"They *did* seem to break a lot, but I guess they had lots of children," she muses.

You don't step back in history in this heritage-listed area on South Australia's Limestone Coast, you walk with it. The fig and pear trees planted 150 years ago by the Sharams still bear fruit; bees and ladybirds fill the crisp air, and life goes on.

The National Trust was thinking of ploughing the land back into a paddock when Kate convinced the organisation to give her 12 months to turn it into a community enterprise. A former restaurateur in the UK and life member of the British National Trust, she considered it a fine retirement pursuit. And besides, hydroponic herbs are Kate's pet hate.

"I object to the lack of flavour and, although they're given liquid nutrients, it's not the same as foraging in the earth. Finding their own nourishment makes herbs so much more robust — and they don't go slimy."

Six years on, the district's restaurants, cafés and home cooks are the garden's best customers. Delighted travellers passing through Penola are encouraged to pick their own, using the bags and scissors provided; if they're lucky they may also get a guided tour.

"I've got sage, several varieties of thyme, and in here, hiding, is lemon thyme," Kate says. "It's not a good time for chives; they go back to bed. And here's the bird bath where the kindergarten kids make flower soup, and — oh, listen to those frogs! Aren't they amazing? And there are the bad guys, the snails. I'm afraid I squish those and give them to the chooks."

There are also useful cooking tips to be garnered from this graduate of Le Cordon Bleu's London cookery school. We learn that lovage is the perfect stand-in when celery is out of season, nasturtium flowers and leaves are superb shredded on pizza, while the scent of a peppermint geranium leaf infuses beautifully in a chocolate cake.

The morning *Country Style* visited, a small group of helpers was battling some tarragon decreed "a little too leggy", while the vigorous lemon balm had also been put on notice. "Ro, don't overtax yourself, sweetie pie, it's too big a job," Kate calls out to volunteer Rowena Fennell, who has been helping out for the past five years.

A mother of two young children, Rowena believes more youth — and muscle — is needed for the garden to survive. "But I couldn't think of a better place to spend time; we're just growing some stuff and having a yak," she says happily.

The herb garden operates on an honesty system and all donations are put back into the enterprise. Kate empties the money box each afternoon when she locks up the Sharam cottages and, every now and then, discovers a note that makes her smile. "A recent one said, 'Whoever you are, you're wonderful' — that's the greatest reward for being here." *

The National Trust Herb Garden is on Petticoat Lane, Penola, South Australia. Admission is free. (08) 8737 2855.