

**HOME GARDENER****Gardening a delight for all**

GARDEN AT ST PAUL'S AFRICAN HOUSE BRINGS COMMUNITY TOGETHER THROUGH THE SHARING OF PRODUCE

By Caitlin Cassidy

Head out the back of St Paul's African House, Shepparton, on a summer evening, and you'll almost always find a buzzing scene of children nicking lemons, birds nesting and mothers tending to a community garden.

The open garden started four years ago to bring the community together through the sharing of vegies and fruit.

"They put the urban garden there for everyone to come; if you like to get some vegies you can take it to your house," community member Sikujua Boliko said.

"Anyone can come — any community, it's not just Congolese, Sudanese — anyone who likes the vegies can come, get some and go cook."

During the COVID-19 lockdown the garden lay dormant, but now silver beet, tomatoes, pumpkin and lenga lenga have all sprung back to life from last season's seeds.

"It's a very informal garden system . . . people just come when they like and water, weed, plant or pick," African House partnerships and programs manager Kate Radevski said.

"A lot of our folks are in rental properties — they don't have the ability to do home gardening, so this offers them a space to come and plant things.

"But the most popular things are definitely the lenga lenga and the pumpkin leaves."

Ms Boliko said when cooked, pumpkin leaves, particularly young leaves, made a delicious addition to any meal.

"People are surprised we eat pumpkin leaves," she said.

"We clean them, take the tough stuff off, use a knife to cut it, put it in the boiling water with salt . . . add fresh tomatoes, onion and hot chilli, and you can put dry or smoked fish with the pumpkin leaves."

Pumpkin leaves may be a rather foreign concept, although if you haven't heard of lenga lenga either you wouldn't be the only one.

Community member Helena Ntamakiriro brought the lenga lenga seeds to plant in the garden



**Tasty garden delights:** Kathleen Mills, Kate Radevski and Sikujua Boliko in the community garden at St Paul's African House.

when she couldn't find any in Melbourne shops.

The leafy green comes all the way from Burundi, and is wildly popular among African families.

"It's pretty special to this garden," Ms Radevski said.

Ms Boliko is such a fan, she's even taken seeds home to plant.

"You can cook it with dry, smoked fish or take the fresh fish, put it in the oven or fry it in the oil with onion and tomatoes and cook with it," Ms Boliko said.

"It's very nice."

Ms Boliko, who learned to cook as a child from her uncle and his wife, said at home in the Congo it was common to have a garden of lenga lenga, African eggplant and pumpkin in your yard.

"In our country we planted every

single plant," she said.

Now, many of the plants she picks at the community garden remind her of home.

In the past, the planter boxes have been full of eggplant, spring onion, okra and garlic.

During the months of lockdown, the garden was unoccupied — but now the plants that are ready to harvest are from seeds that dropped to the soil and sprouted new life.

"COVID-19 affected not just the garden, but our whole community," African House coordinator Kathleen Mills said.

Worship services were cancelled during lockdown, and all events had to be run over YouTube and Zoom.

"The virtual doesn't fit with

African communities — people want to be together, they love being together," Ms Radevski said.

In place of the community garden, African House worked with FoodShare across the pandemic to distribute fresh fruit and vegetables to community members that African House had connected with through church.

"They'd been to church once or twice, and then we closed," Ms Mills said.

Now, life is slowly returning to normal, so too will the rituals of the garden.

"When we ran a Friday youth program at African House, kids would come and play soccer and basketball while the mothers flocked to the garden doing the tending and the picking," Ms Mills said.

"We'd have five or six of them out here on a Friday evening, working together."

"They love the lemon tree," Ms Boliko said.

"Even my children — if I bring lemons, they come and go 'can I have this lemon?'"

Underneath the lemon tree, a pair of hooded plovers returns every year to mate, unmoved by pandemics or the ebb and flow of human affairs around them.

"It's a game, the kids run and try to get a lemon off the lemon tree while getting swooped by the plover," Ms Mills said with a laugh.

"They almost never survive, the babies.

"But they come back every year and try."