

Plant wisdom

Helen Dew has spent a lifetime
growing – and sharing –
the bounty of her edible garden.



Helen Dew, 85, is world famous in the Wairarapa town of Carterton. Her 400sqm garden is packed with edibles and she runs workshops on edible gardening.

Helen is a founding member of the Carterton Farmers Market and a board member of the Living Economies Educational Trust, an organisation that researches and encourages the use of local currencies. She has appeared in a feature-length documentary, *Living The Change*, about people doing inspiring things to mitigate climate change. She has also had a children's book, *Good For You, Helen Dew*, written about her lifestyle.

"I think my way of life makes a lot of sense; it's just what I do. Other people seem to think it's remarkable," she says.

What drives Helen is not status or accolades. It's making things grow. "Gardening is how I express my creativity," she adds. "It's my happy place."

Helen says she has been a gardener since she could walk, and illustrates her connection to mother nature with an early memory of picking white camellias as a four-year-old while on holiday with her family in the Marlborough Sounds. "I knew that one shouldn't touch the petals because they would go brown. On the boat on the way home I realised we didn't have them. I was devastated they would die because they wouldn't be looked after."

Helen's family first moved to Carterton when she was eight. Her father was a farm labourer during the Great Depression, and Helen and her five younger siblings became accustomed to moving frequently as he sought better working conditions. "I formed the idea very early on in my life that when I grew up and got married, I was going to stay in one place," she says.

She kept that promise to herself, buying a section in Carterton's Costley St with her husband-to-be, where they would eventually live for 62 years.

But before the house was built and the four children came along, there was the garden. "We started growing vegetables two years before we had a house," Helen says. "We used to bike down there after work and do some cultivation and harvesting."

After Helen's husband died in 2018, she stayed on at Costley St for another four years before "a wee stroke" led her to reassess and downsize to her current home. But still, out went the lawn and in went the hothouse, raised garden beds and fruit trees. Now, the entire property is dedicated to food production.

As we tour the garden I quickly lose count of the number of different crops.

"I manage to feed myself and have some to share," says

Helen, who became a vegetarian after her children left home. "I buy a bit of stuff at the farmers market rather than the supermarket because I want to know what I'm eating and where it's been."

The compact orchard at the front of the house is a wonder to behold, and features black raspberries, nectarines, black peaches, oranges, blackcurrants, tayberries, apples, plums, grapes, blueberries, crabapples, three varieties of pear and thornless blackberries. Grow bags keep each tree and its roots in check.

Meanwhile, at the back of the property, the hothouse ensures a plentiful supply of lettuce, beetroot and spinach in winter, and good growing conditions for crops such as capsicum in summer.

The raised garden beds support a diverse range of crops including, on the spring day I visited, broad beans, elephant garlic, red cabbage, lamb's lettuce, mizuna, cauliflower, leeks, broccoli, potatoes and stinging nettle ("it's a very good tonic").

Helen mostly looks after the garden herself, with a helper coming in to (literally) do the heavy lifting. Her commitment to self-sufficiency extends to having her own water bore and using her fruit tree trimmings as kindling for the fire.

Her home-based edible gardening workshops are focused on vegetable growing, compost making, seed saving and pruning. "I don't have a set curriculum for each module; it's just what comes up."

She believes the key to successful gardening is close observation and timely action. "I'll notice a leaf and think, 'Ooh, that's a bit droopy' and immediately do something about it. You have to tend to the garden when it needs it, not in two Saturdays' time when you feel like it."

Helen's interest in complementary currencies is driven by a passion for local enterprise. She was a founding member of the Wairarapa Green Dollar Exchange, a local exchange and trading system that began in 1991, and is still "ticking along" today.

"I think the global money system has a lot to answer for, because interest-bearing debt requires that the economy grow," she says. "But that puts more pressure on resources and people, so you get a social cost, an environmental cost and eventually, an economic cost."

"A complementary currency is the ultimate loyalty scheme. If we have a local currency say in the Wairarapa, we can choose to use that and support local suppliers." ■



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.