

## MEET THE GARDENERS



# preserving with purpose

Transforming their garden produce into delicious preserves is helping to support remote communities in more ways than one, writes **SALLY FELDMAN**

It's a common conundrum for gardeners: what to do with excess fruit, vegetables and herbs after a productive season. For cultures around the world, traditionally that has meant preserving produce to sustain them through the leaner months – be that winter or, in the case of Australia's northernmost regions, the wet season.

Donna Donzow is operations manager at the Katherine headquarters of the EON Aboriginal Foundation. Established in 2005, EON has already worked with some 40 schools in remote Northern Territory and Western Australian communities to combat endemic health problems, such as type 2 diabetes. Its five-year EON Thriving

Communities (ETC) program gives children and their families the skills to grow and cook their own produce and local bush tucker, and learn about their nutritional value. The results have been impressive, with a recent report showing that type 2 diabetes is in decline in communities where Donna and her team have been delivering ETC, including Jilkminggan (on Mangarrayi Country) Minyerri (on Alawa Country), both south-east of Katherine in the Northern Territory.

In 2023, as their ETC programs were near completion, Donna sat down with the communities to find out what EON could do to help build on the success and knowledge they'd passed on.

"All the mums and dads came back to us and said, 'We'd really love your guys to teach our kids skills, especially the high schoolers,'" Donna recounts. "In Aboriginal culture, that's when they're coming up to getting married and starting their own families, and they'll need work to be able to support that. So, we looked around the communities and found out what jobs were available. Then we designed four extension modules – EON Healthy Eating, EON Edible Gardening, EON Micro-enterprising, and ▶

**Top** This giant zucchini grown at Barunga School is destined for preserving. **Left** Jars of preserves. **Opposite, clockwise from top left** Staff and students at Barunga admire the fruits (and veg) of their labour; inspecting produce; EON's Donna Donzow picking makrut limes; students make pesto at Purnululu School, WA; harvesting lemongrass at Jilkminggan School, NT.



PHOTOS ISTOCK, EON ABORIGINAL FOUNDATION, MATT SAV

## MEET THE GARDENERS



EON Hospitality – around food and hospitality, aged care, childcare centres, and working at the stores, so the students leaving high school can stay in their community and gain employment.”

In designing the modules, Donna also asked the communities if they wanted to learn how to use their excess garden produce: to turn it into chutneys, jams and sauces. The answer from the children and community elders was a resounding ‘yes’.

“Our growing season is from March to September, so when we’re coming to the end of that season and have massive amounts of tomatoes, lemons, mangoes, we go into preserving and stockpiling everyone with passata and lemon juice, and the chilli chutneys,” she says.

“They started making marinated eggplant, sweet chilli sauce, mango chilli chutney, balachaung [a Burmese onion and dried-shrimp relish], Thai green curry paste, and a basil, boab and green plum pesto – all from ingredients they’d grown, apart from the mangoes, which they harvest each year from Katherine Research Station.”

EON is involved with 13 communities in the Big Rivers region and Central Australia, many of which are using local bush tucker to complement the produce growing in their gardens. “In Ngukurr, there’s rosellas growing everywhere, so we’ve made rosella jam with them,” Donna says. “At Barunga, they have native plum, which is high in vitamin C.

“We know that young boab leaves are high in iron, but for humans to be able to absorb that iron, it needs to be eaten with vitamin C – so that’s why we do the basil, boab and green plum pesto. It’s all done with purpose.”

At the front of Minyerri School is a huge orchard maintained by the community, which is brimming with an array of fruit trees. “It has Panama berry, which brings down heart disease and diabetes, native



## THE PRESERVES HAVE BEEN SO SUCCESSFUL, STUDENTS HAVE SET UP MICRO-ENTERPRISES.

apple, mango, chilli, mulberry, mandarin, star fruit, custard apple, avocado, lime, orange, makrut lime, and passionfruit. It’s beautiful,” Donna says.

The preserve recipes came from various members of the EON team, including Donna. “The balachaung is my family recipe, which has a few secret ingredients!” she says. “We won a competition this year [2024] for it at Katherine NAIDOC Week.”

The preserves have been so successful, students from several communities have set up micro-enterprises, selling their wares at their schools and local shops, or at events such as the annual Barunga Festival and the Mataranka Markets, which are held weekly in the dry season. “The kids at Jilkminggan came in every Sunday to Mataranka and sold their produce and preserves, then went to the local store to buy fresh meat and other things to take back to the community members,” Donna says.

These micro-enterprises don’t just add value to community health outcomes and the students’ future work prospects, says Callum Brown, the principal at the all-ages Jilkminggan School: “The knowledge, skills and confidence the students gained from completing the EON Micro-enterprises is invaluable ... Jilkminggan School supported this each week by continuing to teach all aspects of the business side of the module in our maths class.”

But the last word goes to Isaac, a senior student at Jilkminggan: “Can we do this every weekend? I love coming here and selling our stuff.” **GA**

For more, visit [eon.org.au](http://eon.org.au)

**Above** A student tends cauliflower in the Ampilatwatja School garden. **Opposite, clockwise from top** A barrow of bounty at Ampilatwatja; inspecting the growth of produce in the school garden; communities now have access to abundant fresh vegies and herbs such as this basil.



PHOTOS ISTOCK, EON ABORIGINAL FOUNDATION