



Ready and willing

Established in 1971, the international WWOOF program allows organic farmers to share their home and experience with travellers willing to work and learn – it has been life-changing for many, writes **Simon Webster**.



PHOTOS: WWOOF AUSTRALIA

Mchaley Ho, from Washington DC in the US, had no intention of WWOOFing when she came to Australia. The 21-year-old had just graduated from university and had time to spare after attending the Australian Open in Melbourne with her best friend, a tennis pro.

"I was looking to get outside my comfort zone and do something I had never done before," McHaley says.

"I looked into WWOOFing because I have always wondered what it takes to be self-sustainable and grow your own food. I'm fascinated by food, and I appreciate good, locally grown food, more than anyone I know."

McHaley signed up with WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms, formerly called Willing Workers on Organic Farms – see 'What is WWOOF' on page 76), spending 15 days at Namoorook Farm in Leongatha, Victoria.

"I learned a ton," she says. "Every day was different, but every morning started the same. I ate breakfast with my wonderful host, Neil, and afterwards I tended to the animals."

"From then on, I did whatever needed to be done. Some days that looked like turning over vegetable beds, and others looked like working with bees."

McHaley learned plenty of gardening skills, as well as cooking techniques and recipes.

"Neil was one of the most talented home chefs I have ever met," she says. "The food was one of the most incredible parts of the experience."

For anyone interested in WWOOFing, she has no hesitation in recommending it.

Facing page: During her stay at Leongatha, McHaley Ho from the US did whatever needed to be done and loved it – here she's extracting honey from honeycombs.

Left: McHaley soaking up some chook affection.

WHAT IS WWOOF?

WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) is a volunteer exchange program. Volunteer workers, known as WWOOFers, provide four to six hours of farming or gardening per day in exchange for all their food and accommodation.

“We have hosts located all across Australia who use organic, biodynamic or permaculture techniques,” says Tameson Linsen, the manager of WWOOF Australia.

Travellers can search for hosts on the WWOOF website.

“They contact the hosts that interest them,” Linsen says. “They might be interested in bamboo. They might be interested in yoga. They might be interested in only going to hosts who are vegan. We have all these keywords people can search by.

“They contact the host and say: I’m coming through in a few weeks. This is a bit about me. Would you have room for me?”

The minimum is two nights and the average stay is one to two weeks, Linsen says. Some hosts want people to stay for three months.

WWOOFers might find themselves weeding, planting or propagating. They might help with bush regeneration, digging drainage ditches for flood mitigation, cleaning up for bushfire safety, making tinctures from a herb garden or harvesting and preserving food.

Launched in England in 1971 by a London-based secretary who wanted people to learn about organic farms and sustainability, WWOOF is now a global movement. The Aussie branch (established in 1981) has 4,500 WWOOFers travelling around the country, visiting about 800 hosts.

While most WWOOFers are international travellers, the organisation would like to see more Australians having a go, to improve their gardening skills.

“We’re really encouraging people to WWOOF locally,” Linsen says.

“A lot of people are getting back to grassroots with growing their own fruit and vegetables. By going out locally, even if it’s just for a weekend, they can learn those skills.”

➤ **A one-year WWOOF membership costs \$70 for one person or \$120 for two people or a family travelling together. Host memberships cost \$35–\$70. For more information, visit: wwooof.com.au.**



Jonathan, a WWOOFer from Germany, working with host Neil Barrett.



Jonathan feeding the chooks.



Host Geraldine de Burgh-Day loves being self-sufficient and showing others how.

“I would say make an educated decision about where you stay and go for it,” McHaley says.

“The skills and experiences you will have will be one of a kind, and there is nothing like staying in someone’s home. Being able to live a different pace and style of life was an absolute privilege.

“One piece of advice: video chat with your potential host before you commit. Ask them any and all questions you have. This will make you appear more serious and give you and the host a better idea of how you will fit into their life.”

Learning experience

McHaley’s host, Neil Barrett, is on his own learning journey. He quit his corporate life in the food services industry to move to his 30-hectare (75-acre) property in 2020, at the start of COVID.

“I really wanted to better understand the challenges of growing food in a sustainable way,” he says. “It’s hard work.”

Neil has fruit, vegetables, chickens, beef cattle and dairy cows.

“I really wanted to understand if it was possible to become self-sufficient,” he says. And he discovered that it was.

“By the ninth month I could have lived off what we had grown and raised.”

Neil shares the work with his partner and WWOOFers, who come from all over the world and stay anything from one to six weeks.

“There’s no shortage of to-do lists on the farm, and many hands make light work,” he says. The work can be everything from feeding the animals to harvesting or planting in the garden.

“It’s a great learning experience for both the host and the WWOOFer,” Neil says. “I think there’s enormous benefits that you can get out of the experience from both sides.

“You make connections with people you otherwise wouldn’t meet. We’re still connected with the first WWOOFer from three or four years ago. These are initially strangers that quite often become friends.”

No supermarkets here

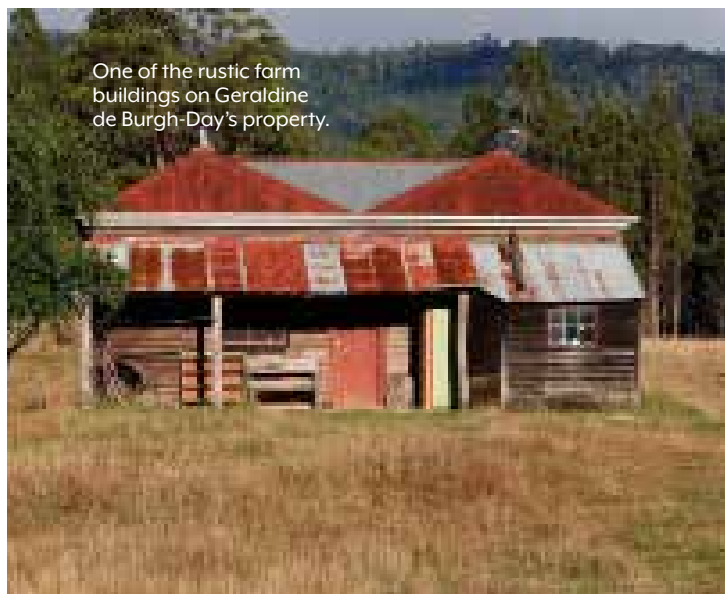
Geraldine de Burgh-Day says she gets “a lot of satisfaction showing people what is possible”. And this self-sufficient, 79-year-old Tasmanian is definitely what you’d call a ‘can-do’ person.

She has a big vegie patch and an orchard, milks her own dairy cows, makes cheese and butter, and raises beef cattle, which she kills and processes on the farm herself.

There’s plenty to be done, and over the past 25 years she’s had help from hundreds of WWOOFers.

PHOTOS: SKYE LINSEN, WWOOF AUSTRALIA

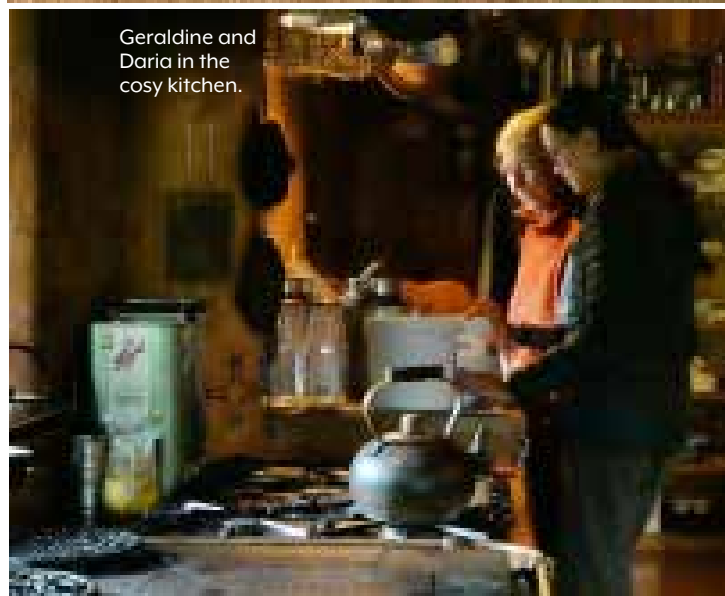
PHOTO: BRUCE HUTCHISON



One of the rustic farm buildings on Geraldine de Burgh-Day's property.



Geraldine shows WWOOFer Daria, from Singapore, through the garden.



Geraldine and Daria in the cosy kitchen.

"I'm a little bit selective," Geraldine says. "I only want to take people who are really interested in what I'm doing, because I'm pretty flat out."

In exchange for their labour, WWOOFers get an education in food growing, and often get sent away with a couple of packs of seeds at the end of their stay. The experience can change lives.

"I've had a remarkable number of people that have come and spent time with me, and they've gone away, and I've thought, I wonder if anything hit home there," Geraldine says. "A couple of years later, I suddenly get a photograph or an email out of the blue."

From the English nuclear physicist who moved to a remote part of the UK and grows his own vegies, to the visitor from Hong Kong who went home and set up a community garden, Geraldine's ex-WWOOFers have taken what they've learnt in this little community of Lorinna and spread it to all corners of the globe.

"I'm not claiming to be into permaculture or environmental this or that or anything else," Geraldine says. "I'm just about growing really healthy food with absolutely no nasty stuff, no chemicals at all. I've been certified organic for 25 years, and I'm absolutely passionate about that."

"I've not been to a supermarket for years – I don't go anywhere near those kinds of shops. I'm healthy, and I haven't got a doctor, because I eat good food."

Geraldine doesn't hold back when it comes to showing WWOOFers the reality of producing that food.

"I recently had two young girls that wanted to come for three days," Geraldine says. "I said, well, I'm cutting up a cow that I'm shooting next week, and I'll be boning it and packing it."

"One of them said she was a vegetarian. I said, well, that's the job. They opted to come, and the vegetarian put away some of the biggest steaks I've seen; she just loved them. She said: 'I'm very comfortable to eat meat when I know the history of the animal.' And I said to her, well, if, if I were out in the big, wide world, I probably wouldn't eat meat either."

Usually, Geraldine wants WWOOFers to stay longer.

"There's so much going on here," she says. "It takes a week of me slowing down to explain what's going on and also getting something of a reading of the individual: How interested are they? How responsible are they? Safety is really, really important."

Geraldine says sometimes it doesn't work out but generally it does. And she is all too happy to share her passion and skills.

"My generation has had a hell of a party on this planet," she says. "And I think we have an obligation to put a little bit back into the generation that's inheriting the mess. If I can do that – and it seems to be working with quite a lot of young people – I get a great deal of satisfaction. I show people that if they can imagine something, they can do it." **og**