

Milkwood's abundant market garden, **opposite page**
A moment for some notes on the garden.



text: **Susanne Kennedy**
photography: **courtesy of Milkwood Permaculture**

One couple's vision, to develop a working small-scale farm based on permaculture principles, involved a pretty big leap of faith and some major upskilling. Just goes to show that multimedia artists can do anything.



top left Michael Hewins, Milkwood's market gardener, with his stash of home-grown aubergines. **right** Kristen Bradley and Nick Ritar, the couple behind the Milkwood vision. **bottom** Students exploring the market garden. **opposite page** Milkwood students on the go during a masterclass.



Around six years ago Nick Ritar and Kristen Bradley relocated from Melbourne to Mudgee, New South Wales, to found Milkwood Permaculture. Prior to this they were multimedia artists whose art practices were inspired by questions about nature and the built environment. Now, despite exchanging video cameras and urban galleries for composting heaps, greenhouses and rural living, their focus is in many ways unchanged. “The farming and the education is the art now,” explains Kristen.

Milkwood is a multifarious enterprise: simultaneously a work in progress, demonstration permaculture site, a small community and an education centre with collaborative links across the globe. “Nick had had plenty of veggie gardens before the Mudgee adventure, but hadn’t applied the theory of permaculture before our move,” says Kristen. And although it was a steep learning curve for the couple, the principles of permaculture were consistent with their belief systems and respective childhoods, which were nature-focused in their own ways.

“Permaculture was tied into our history, existing skill base and what we were interested in. Nick is a country kid, the son of a park ranger – like the boy from Skippy,” says Kristen. “Mudgee is where he grew up, and when his parents invited us to come and live on their property we decided to treat it like an experiment – to explore how much we could optimise the land.”

Kristen grew up on the NSW coast and as a sometimes soul singer, piano accordionist, multimedia and performance artist she, like Nick, had turned her hand to many different things and managed to make a good fist of most them. Changing tack was therefore not so daunting or unfamiliar. Nor were shared environmental projects.



“My parents were school teachers who were very involved in local and national environmental causes. I learned from them that if something’s not right, you should stand up and speak out. I also learnt that as activists we need to support each other for the sake of our families and our futures.”

Kristen, Nick and son, Ashar, have over the past few years extended their small family and business to include a motley crew of individuals, most of whom live on the Mudgee property. They all help to keep the Milkwood ship afloat and on course.

The farm is located on a twenty-acre property in central west NSW, nestled in the ridgeline hills of the Great Dividing Range. It consists of a long north-east-facing hillside, a north-facing alluvial creek flat and a ridge, all bordered by the beautiful Campbells Creek. But while picturesque, the land has presented some not insignificant challenges.

“The climate is mediterranean and gorgeous but the property was completely depleted from sheep farming,” says Kristen. “It was paradise if you didn’t want to grow anything!” The pair soon realised that if they could optimise this land, they could optimise any.

The website tells us something of the rehabilitation that was needed: “With the help of extensive water-harvesting earthworks, tree-crop plantings, food forests, animal systems and good design, Milkwood is being transformed from a pocket of clapped-out, dried-up sheep country into an example of how permaculture principles can be applied to create a productive, fecund, resilient and beautiful small-holding with plenty of water

and biodiversity, and dripping with good food, all year round.”

From the start, they documented their experiences in a blog. They also began to run courses on the things they learnt along the way, aided by Nick’s experience as an adult education teacher.

Now courses are run on a growing number of subjects, ranging from natural beekeeping, permaculture design, fermentation, dam building, aquaponics, mushrooms and small structure construction. Nick teaches half of these and the rest are taught by a range of local and international permaculture and regenerative agricultural pioneers. Sixty per cent of the courses are run in Sydney. “It’s easier to take the information to the people,” Kristen points out.

Despite putting individuals forward as experts and pioneers, the couple is determinedly focused on knowledge rather than personality. “We are not offering silver bullets. Just good solutions and principles that can be adapted to the situation,” says Kristen. “I think there’s a tendency to make god-heads from certain people we think have all the answers, and that can be rather dangerous in terms of effectively applying knowledge to different situations. That’s not what we’re about.”

Courses are designed to inspire and up-skill their students to create abundance by using what they’ve got. They are empowered to go away with their new tool kit and cobble together solutions that fit their own situation. Says Kristen, “Permaculture is ecological systems theory, a holistic design framework. How that looks depends on the situation – location, climate and resources. It is also a goal, and an outlook.” →



Courses attract a mixed demographic, although predominantly 25–45 years of age and more than half women, with many different knowledge levels. “We get a lot of landscape architects and university students. Then there are great botanists who want to learn about beekeeping,” says Kristen. “It’s fabulous because you always meet surprising people who challenge your perceptions. The learning goes both ways.”

Milkwood also runs day-long farm and property walks and provides permaculture advice through consultancies.

When asked what their biggest challenge was in the last six years, Kristen does not hesitate. “Building the house. We assumed that because we managed to do so many new things that the house would be the same. But it took five years and it was really hard,” she says with characteristic self-mockery.

The name Milkwood was unsurprisingly inspired by Dylan Thomas's radio drama, which invites the audience to listen to the dreams and private thoughts of its characters. "I discovered Dylan Thomas when I was sixteen and loved his bizarre and whimsical style, his vision of nature and humanity ... and the word aptly conjures up softness and strength, nurturing and fortification."

As far as long-term goals go, the Milkwood team aspires to build a resilient, versatile and sustainable business and community, true to the principles of permaculture. And judging from track records, they are likely to achieve this with their signature collaborative, organic and fearless style. 🌱

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