

Campfire sparks new life for spritely perma pixie



Taj Scicluna knew something was wrong with her life but she didn't know what. When she discovered permaculture she also found happiness, she tells **Brooke Geller**.

It's 8am on what is to be an unusually warm spring afternoon in the Dandenong Ranges. Many residents are preparing for the long drive to the office, grabbing their morning latte at the local café with eyes glued to their phone screens.

Twenty-eight-year-old Taj Scicluna is preparing for a different kind of day at the office. A floppy hat struggles to conceal the mighty mountain of dreadlocks atop her head as she laces up a beat-up old pair of army boots. Shovel in hand, she's ready to sink her hands in to the soil.

Known as the Perma Pixie, Taj aims to "inspire and educate people about different lifestyles, different ways of living to lead to a more harmonious way of living on earth

through permaculture education, design and implementation".

Whilst "reclaiming food and medicine and contributing to soil and food security" may be all she's known for the past nine years, it's far removed from the white walls of suburbia she grew up with.

"I grew up with a feeling that something was wrong, and I didn't realise what it was," she says. "Until one day, I realised that where I was, was what was wrong."

Despite an unshakeable fascination with the natural world from a young age, it wasn't until a farm stay in England at age 19 that she was introduced to permaculture.

"I was staying on a farm and I needed a fire for everything, and I'd never made a fire in my life – I'd never even made a campfire," she says. "I didn't know what to do at all. It was really confronting for me, because I realised that I was really an un-resilient kind of creature, and didn't know how to live in the world properly. As much as I was really interested in the natural world, I realised that I didn't know how to exist with it. Permaculture made me want to change that."

Permaculture is described by Permaculture Australia as "a design system for the creation of socially, economically and ecologically sustainable", which had its beginnings in Tasmania in the 1970s.

After taking the traditional route of completing a permaculture design course, Taj threw herself into her permaculture education. She has since completed three additional permaculture design courses, as well as a Diploma of Permaculture, a Soil Food Web course with leading soil biologist Elaine Ingham, a few advanced design courses, natural building courses and two permaculture teacher trainings with Rosemary Morrow and Robyn Clayfield.

Through it all, she supported herself with hospitality work. Whilst completing her Diploma of Permaculture and working in a local café, she met an older woman named Tamara Griffiths, also a permaculturalist. Little did she know that her life was about to take a turn.

"I met Taj in Upwey in The Old Magpie Café," says Tamara. "I was looking at photos of lichen on my laptop, and Taj saw it and said, 'oh my god, is that lichen? I love lichen! Do you know it's a symbiotic relationship between an algae and a fungi?' To which I answered, 'yes, its totally awesome! I've been photographing lots of it'. We then got talking about permaculture and we had both been processing acorns to eat. I said we should teach a class on eating acorns. We taught acorns and wild foods just after winter solstice of 2011."

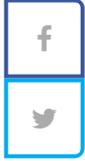
Taj remembers the acorn conversation perfectly.

"We were basically nerding out about it," she says. "What are the chances of two random people in the hills doing that at the same time? We pretty much became instant friends."

Since then, Taj and Tamara have formed a close bond, teaching together for four years. They are teaching their sixth permaculture design course together.

"We both come from the heart and deep ecology," says Tamara. "I can always speak my mind with her."

Taj agrees that the two have a "very understanding friendship.



"I have a deep love and respect for Tamara, because she encouraged me to teach when I didn't feel like I necessarily could. I felt like I was too young. She encouraged me and she said I could do it, and she took me under her wing a bit because I felt a little more comfortable if there was someone older there with a little bit more experience. Since then I've never really looked back."

Liam Oakwood, a former student of Taj and Tamara, says that their style of permaculture education is unique.

"Taj and Tamara aren't just teaching permaculture, they're creating a loving community in the hills as they go," he says. "All the former and current students interact and form a blossoming network of sharing in the Dandenongs and wider Melbourne. They are truly practising permaculture, even in the process of teaching it."

As well as teaching her class, Taj has a never-ending list of current and upcoming projects in the works, including the permaculture garden at Rainbow Serpent Festival, teaching an Advanced Design Course, three more festival workshops, three permaculture implementations, two permaculture designs and a series of collaborative workshops with John Ferries of Edible Forest Gardens nursery.

"It's ridiculous, but it's in my veins I think," she laughs.

For all her ambition, the Perma Pixie says that her view of success has nothing to do with material possessions, and everything to do with health and happiness rather than having 'made it'.

"When I get up in the morning, I don't cringe. When I get up in the morning, I don't dread where I'm going or what I'm doing. I guess I'm in the process of making it, and that's because I feel happy every day."

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