

# OTHER PASSIONS...

## You say ta-MAR-toe, I say ta-MAY-toe....

Peter Elliott has a passion for red, round, juicy things.

The Darwin-based barrister is a successful tomato grower and as many locals know, that's no mean feat. The Top End particularly is not noted for its tomato-friendly climate.

"The magic temperature is 17 degrees. If you don't get below that, your flower sets will be poor," Peter said.

Still, that hasn't stopped Peter from working out his green thumb — a passion (and talent) he inherited from his father.

"My father got me interested in growing tomatoes. He always grew the vegetables at home when we were kids and I used to go out and help him and I developed an interest in gardening," Peter said reflecting on his childhood.

"Our neighbours each side had big vegetable gardens. Where we came from (in Melbourne) there were very big blocks of land, half acre blocks, so everybody had a garden out the back."

Fast forward to some 40 years later and Peter's drawn on his "garden out the back" experience to produce some fairly decent harvests of tomatoes.

"I've grown capsicum, eggplant and lettuce here but I mainly grow tomatoes," he said.

"The easiest type is Cherry Tomatoes. I think Cherry Tomatoes would be a noxious weed if you couldn't eat them. They just seem to grow no matter what and they fruit very well up here."

Peter has ten tomato plants in pots ("...because bacterial wilt is a big problem. If it gets into the plant it will let the plant grow to about two to three

foot and then it will die overnight. It's awful.").

He's also not shy about sharing his secrets to successful tomato growing.

"You must prepare the soil properly, you must grow them off two stems and remove all other laterals, and until such time as they fruit you really want to supply them with just enough moisture to keep them alive because otherwise they will put all their energy into growing stem," he said.



Above: Peter Elliott with his "other passion" — healthy, juicy tomatoes.

"Stem and leaf you don't want too much of, you want the plant to concentrate on reproduction. Also mulch everything, the amount of time and water you'll save is amazing."

The two stem method is best explained by Peter with a drawing but for those non-gardeners it's essentially a way of making the plant sprout two stems and preventing it from growing others (by removing the laterals). It was a method taught to Peter by his father.

Peter's tomato growing keeps him and his wife in the fruit for up to four months (he plants in May) and surprisingly he's not fond of cooked tomatoes or tomato sauces.

He eats virtually all his fruit raw ("except when I lightly grill them on toast").

And if the challenges of tomato growing in the tropics weren't enough (not that Peter sees it that way), the eight year Darwin resident is also attempting to grow mangosteen.

This lush tropical fruit is slightly acidic and deliciously sweet and renowned throughout South East Asia. It is also notoriously difficult to grow.

Peter's attempt is going well though it did give his neighbour some worry at first.

"Mangosteen trees are rainforest plants, they grow at the bottom of rainforests. So until they're about six to eight years old they can't photosynthesise and they will die if they get sunlight on them," Peter said. "They also need plenty of water."

"Mine is planted right in the middle of a big area of palms and when my

neighbour saw me every day sneaking off into the middle of the palms with a hose to water something, he wanted to know if there was a marijuana plant there!"

Peter assured him that there wasn't and the mangosteen tree has benefited from all the TLC. ("I've built a fence around it, every fortnight it gets about 200 litres of compost, it's got its own special mist irrigation system as well as a watering system at the bottom of it for its roots.")

"It's growing beautifully, it's up to seven foot high but it hasn't fruited yet. They don't fruit for eight to ten years. Mine's seven years old," he said.

"I'm hoping within the next couple of years to have mangosteen fruit." ①