



▲ Clarence Slockee and Christian Hampson are cofounders of Yerrabingin and have created the first Indigenous rooftop garden. Photograph: Carly Earl/The Guardian

The Indigenous-run enterprise is more than a green space – it will provide community opportunities as well as bush foods

**“E**ffectively what you’re looking at is a big pot.” Clarence Slockee and Christian Hampson are showing us around the Yerrabingin Indigenous rooftop farm, the 500-square-metre garden they have created on the rooftop of a Mirvac office block, smack bang in the middle of Sydney’s Eveleigh industrial park. It’s the first of its kind in Australia but they hope not the last.

The 2,000 native plants in the garden have flourished in the eight weeks since they were first planted. Warrigal greens, ruby and seaberry saltbush, river mint, finger lime, native raspberries, lilly pilly, grevillea and thyme honey-myrtle are among the 30 different types of bush foods enjoying the sunshine four storeys up.

It’s a project Slockee and Hampson, the co-founders of Indigenous start-up **Yerrabingin**, have been working on for more than a year in collaboration with Mirvac. The two friends went back to university together to do their business degrees and founded their start-up as a side hustle. They originally planned to do a cultural landscape garden for the precinct, but they were asked by Mirvac to consider a rooftop farm.



▲ The first Indigenous rooftop farm on top of the Mirvac building in Eveleigh, NSW. Photograph: Carly Earl/The Guardian

Urban agriculture is a growing trend around the world, with rooftop farms such as New York's Brooklyn Grange supplying produce for the local community. There are city farms in Sydney and a large rooftop farm on top of Melbourne shopping centre Burwood Brickworks opening soon, but this is the first time there's been a space dedicated to bush foods.



But there were some unusual factors for Slockee and Hampson to consider when it came to planting a rooftop farm. For example, drainage needed extra thought to avoid the weight of extra water. That means free draining soil and plants that require as little irrigation as possible. And in this garden, there are drainage cells hidden under the soil to catch and hold rainwater, with any excess drained off the side of the building.

Plants were selected with extra care. Yerrabingin permaculturist Matt McKay explains they chose bush foods that thrive in harsh conditions, in high sun and wind, given their elevated position. Some aren't usually grown in [Sydney](#) like saltbush and muntries (*Kunzea pomifera*), which are normally grown in Victoria and South Australia. "I know native nurseries that can't even keep [muntries] alive there because the humidity just gets to it," he says. "[But] all of the succulents and the Warrigal greens, these species that are really suited to these conditions are thriving, because these are their [ideal] conditions."



▲ Many of the bush foods were chosen because they would thrive in harsh conditions such as high sun and wind. Photograph: Carly Earl/The Guardian



The design of the garden was carefully considered. Given trees were an impossibility, there are iron tree trellises inspired by Singapore's famous [Gardens by the Bay](#)'s supertrees and created by the local blacksmith to help to attract local birds and wildlife. There are also small greenhouses for propagating plants. And, Slockee says, "everything that you can see around the edges is edible, medicinal or cultural. The circular beds themselves are pollinator beacons, so we get pollinators in to do their thing with all the flowers."

Much of the farm produce will go to local chefs and restaurateurs, who will be encouraged to forage in the garden. It will also be open to the community and Slockee and Hampson hope it will inspire the locals to grow plants in whatever space they have available.

But this garden is more than just a green space. There will be sustainability workshops on topics like native permaculture design, pickling and preserving produce, making beeswax wraps and introduction to bush foods in the garden, while Slockee and Hampson will also work with local schools on their environmental and

science projects.

They also plan to use it as a Indigenous cultural space for music and dance performances, and traditional workshop practices like weaving and tool making demonstrations. There will also be open days and opportunities for volunteers to work in the garden. “As a farm, it’s not a commercially viable entity because it’s so small but as an educational resource and as a prototype for what can be done in this sort of space, it’s really quite invaluable,” Stockee says. They also hope to inspire other real estate developers to consider these type of projects in their residential and commercial developments

There are broader possibilities for the site for Indigenous communities, Hampson says. “Aboriginal people across New South Wales own land through land councils and a huge part of it is [being] environmentally sensitive. They’ve been given bits of land that essentially other people don’t want. Now the great thing is by looking at what we’re doing, they can create environmental sensitivity and viability in the same breath by bringing back plants that they would have had traditionally for food and utilise them because there is now starting to be a market.” The market for bush food is growing rapidly but according to Hampson only 3% is supplied by Indigenous companies while 97% is supplied by non Indigenous companies.

He adds: “The idea of people understanding the origin and cultural knowledge of those foods [is important]. People, especially younger people, are very interested in their food origin and what better food origin than food that’s got knowledge that’s thousands of years old.”





Warrigal Greens growing in the Indigenous rooftop garden, on top of the Mirvac building in Everleigh, NSW Australia.  
Photograph: Carly Earl/ The guardian

The farm is also a great example of Aboriginal environmental land management in practice. Hampson says: “Lots of people are starting to learn that Aboriginal people just didn’t wander around in the bush and pick stuff off trees. There was a land management component too, whether it was sea management, river management and I think this is another great opportunity [to demonstrate that].”

Yerrabingin will employ Aboriginal horticulturists to manage the rest of the industrial park. “It’s going to be the same as this, all organic, no chemicals used, eventually we want all the gardens across this landscape to be foragable to a certain extent, so [we can run] tourism walks.”

And they’d also like their work on the farm to inspire and encourage other Indigenous entrepreneurs. “We want to be able to take what we’ve done and say ‘Look if you’ve got good ideas and you can find good partners, don’t be afraid to put your ideas out there’. It’s a little bit about how you structure your approach, and more importantly you are using Indigenous social capital and networking to create these opportunities.”