

Farming in Australia - A Photo Essay

Australia has a long history of farming. For over 65,000 years Australia's First Peoples used sophisticated farming and agricultural techniques to sustainably feed their communities. By expertly managing the land and water ways they grew and harvested crops and developed sustainable methods and tools for hunting and fishing.

To nourish the land First Peoples used complex methods of land management such as cultural burnings to rejuvenate growth.

They grew nutritious crops such as yams, native grains, nuts, fruits and berries. Tuberos roots such as murrnong (yam) were harvested with digging sticks and carried in woven baskets.



Oval-shaped bundle-coil basket made of poong'ort (sedge grass), with handle made of European cloth.

Source: Museums Victoria
Photographer: Start, Rodney

Many plants had to be processed before being eaten and tools such as this grinding stone would be used to prepare foods like nutritious breads that were prepared on an open fire.



Oval shaped stone grinding tool.

Source: Museums Victoria
Photographer: Start, Rodney

First People engineered the land, building dams and wells, storage houses for surplus grains and complex structures such as aquaculture systems.

On Gunditjmara Country in South Western Victoria, Budj Bim is home to one of the oldest aquaculture systems in the world. Here the Gunditjmara people created weirs, dams and traps to sustainably trap fish and eels.



Gunditjmara stone fishing channels at Budj Bim.

Source: Museums Victoria

Photographer: Norman, Mark

Following colonisation, First Peoples farming practices were significantly disrupted and destroyed. European settlers brought with them their own methods of farming which relied on introduced plants and animals. Native crops were decimated by sheep and cattle and First Peoples were forcefully pushed out of their traditional farming lands by settlers.

Initially the settler farmers struggled to farm and grow enough food to survive. But after decades of altering the land with introduced plants and animals and changing some of their traditional European farming practices to suit their new environment they managed to prosper.



Introduced farm animals like cattle trampled the soft soils that First Peoples had carefully cultivated to grow crops such as murrnong.

Source: Yale Centre for British Art / Public Domain

Other immigrant populations also brought their farming practices to Australia. After the gold rush many Chinese immigrants moved into agricultural occupations and farming. From the 1880s to the 1930s Chinese market gardeners dominated the production and distribution of vegetables in some parts of Australia. They used innovative techniques foreign to most European gardens and were successful in adapting their farming techniques to the Australian climate.



Chinese vegetable hawker holding two baskets of vegetables with a long stick over his shoulders

Source: State Library of Victoria

Photographer: Unknown

Agricultural and farming practices in Australia throughout the 1800s and early 1900s developed in line with the western Industrial Revolution. Simple tools powered by hand or pulled by animals like ploughs and scythes, gave way to more complex technologies that harnessed the power of steam and other fuels.



Man using a hand drawn plough to work the land.

Source: Museums Victoria

Photographer: Unknown

For over a century, many farmers in Australia used horses to work the land.



Farmer Irene Lowe ploughing behind two horses. Irene Lowe was the first female graduate of Agricultural Science in the southern hemisphere. She graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1918.

Source: Museums Victoria

Photographer: Irene Lowe Album, Victoria, c 1915-1922: Invisible Farmer Project Collection

It was not until the 1950s that tractors began to replace horses on farms across the country.

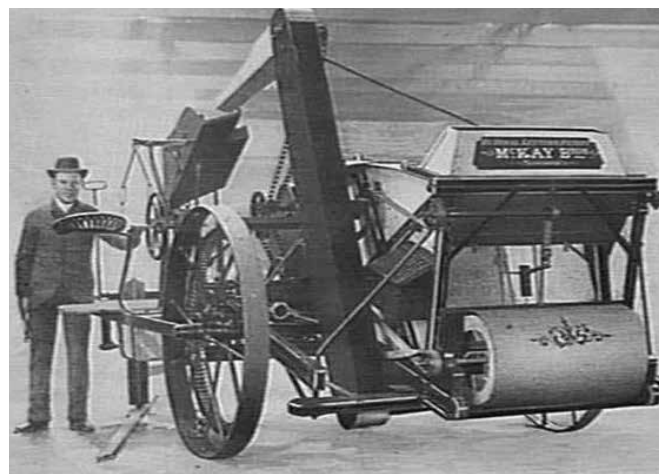


Farmer moving hay with a tractor, Gippsland, 23 November 1950.

Source: Museums Victoria

Photographer: Unknown

The mechanisation of farming practices saw Australian manufacturers start to develop machinery suited to the Australian conditions. In Victoria in 1884 a young H.V. McKay, frustrated by the slow and laborious nature of harvesting wheat, assembled a 'stripper harvester' on his father's property at Drummarton, Victoria. His design went on to become the most commercially successful Australian harvester design.



Early Sunshine Harvester', McKay Bros Patent, Sandhurst, circa 1886.

Source: Museums Victoria
Photographer: Unknown

The 'Sunshine' Stripper Harvester helped Australia to become a leading cereal producing country and was one of the first Australian manufactured products to be exported in large numbers. In the 1920s the H.V. McKay Company became the largest industrial enterprise in the Southern Hemisphere. It had a major impact on the social and economic development of Australia and was a significant contributor to the mechanisation of agriculture around the world. By the 1930s Australia was the third largest exporter of wheat after Canada and Argentina.



Advertisement - Hugh V. McKay, 'The Sunshine Harvester, The Best Profit Maker for the Grain Grower', circa 1910.

Source: Museums Victoria
Creator: Designer: Unknown

Colonisation and the introduction of European farming practices, plants and animals altered Australian land at great environmental costs. Soil degradation, droughts and mismanagement of natural resources have led to many longer-term environmental issues.



A Mallee root exposed by soil erosion caused by drought, circa 1930.

Source: Museums Victoria
Photographer: Unknown

To combat current and future environmental problems many farmers today are starting to think more sustainably and developing new ways of working and managing the land. Some are harnessing the possibilities of new technologies such as drones, solar and wind power and robotics to change their practices.



Wind farm.

Source: Wikimedia
Photographer: Ernesto Andrade

Others are looking to First Peoples farming methods for sustainable solutions. Amy Paul, an organic chicken farmer in Gippsland is one example. Amy is an activist, an advocate for sustainable land use, alternative farming practices and raising awareness of First Peoples farming methods. Feeling a deep connection to First Nations communities through her Native American ancestry, Amy believes that it's of vital importance that farmers take more interest in the lessons that they could learn from First Peoples history, culture and land use.



Amy Paul holding chickens, Walkerville, Victoria, 20 Nov 2016: Invisible Farmer Project Collection.

Source: Museums Victoria
Photographer: Forge, Catherine

Today, there is also growing interest in reviving practices like cultural burning and growing and harvesting native crops in Australia. Crops such as kangaroo grass and murnong are beginning to be cultivated and harvested again in hopes that they may unlock potentially new more sustainable food sources for our future.



Murnong flower growing in the Grampians National park, Victoria.

Source: Museums Victoria
Photographer: Lewis, Grace