

THE ORIGINS OF SUSTAINABLE HORTICULTURE

KEY POINTS

- Sustainable land management practised by nomadic hunter-gatherers.
- The benefits and costs of early settled agrarian communities.
- The environmental history of agriculture.
- The GM debate.
- Emergence of sustainable agriculture and horticulture.

Living sustainably in harmony with nature is not a new idea. There are valuable lessons to be learned from the past. In this chapter we take a historical glance at the relationship between humans, the land and nature. We will also look at the way important questions about the land have been handled: questions about land ownership; how the Earth is to be harvested; how the Earth's resources are to be shared; and the role that the land and its plants and animals have played in different cultural traditions. This will help in understanding the events leading to the current environmental situation and provide a context for the challenges that lie ahead for sustainable horticulture.

Aboriginal gardening

Different attitudes to the land, nature and its management are well illustrated through the

contrasting perceptions held by Australia's Indigenous people and the early settlers. Both communities needed to obtain food from the land but they used very different methods.

Settlement of Australia by the British after over 40 000 years of Aboriginal occupation was justified by the precept of *terra nullius* (land owned by no-one) and sovereignty was acquired on the basis of occupation alone. To the settlers' eyes, the land was not being 'used'. Aboriginal people were not cultivating the land, or at least not in a way that the settlers understood. The settlers were accustomed to boundaries of fences and hedges. Influential English garden chronicler J.C. Loudon, in his *Encyclopaedia of Agriculture* (1835), urged the planting of gardens 'as proof of possession'.

We now know that Aboriginals were using fire in a highly effective, skilful, controlled and sustainable system of selective harvesting that