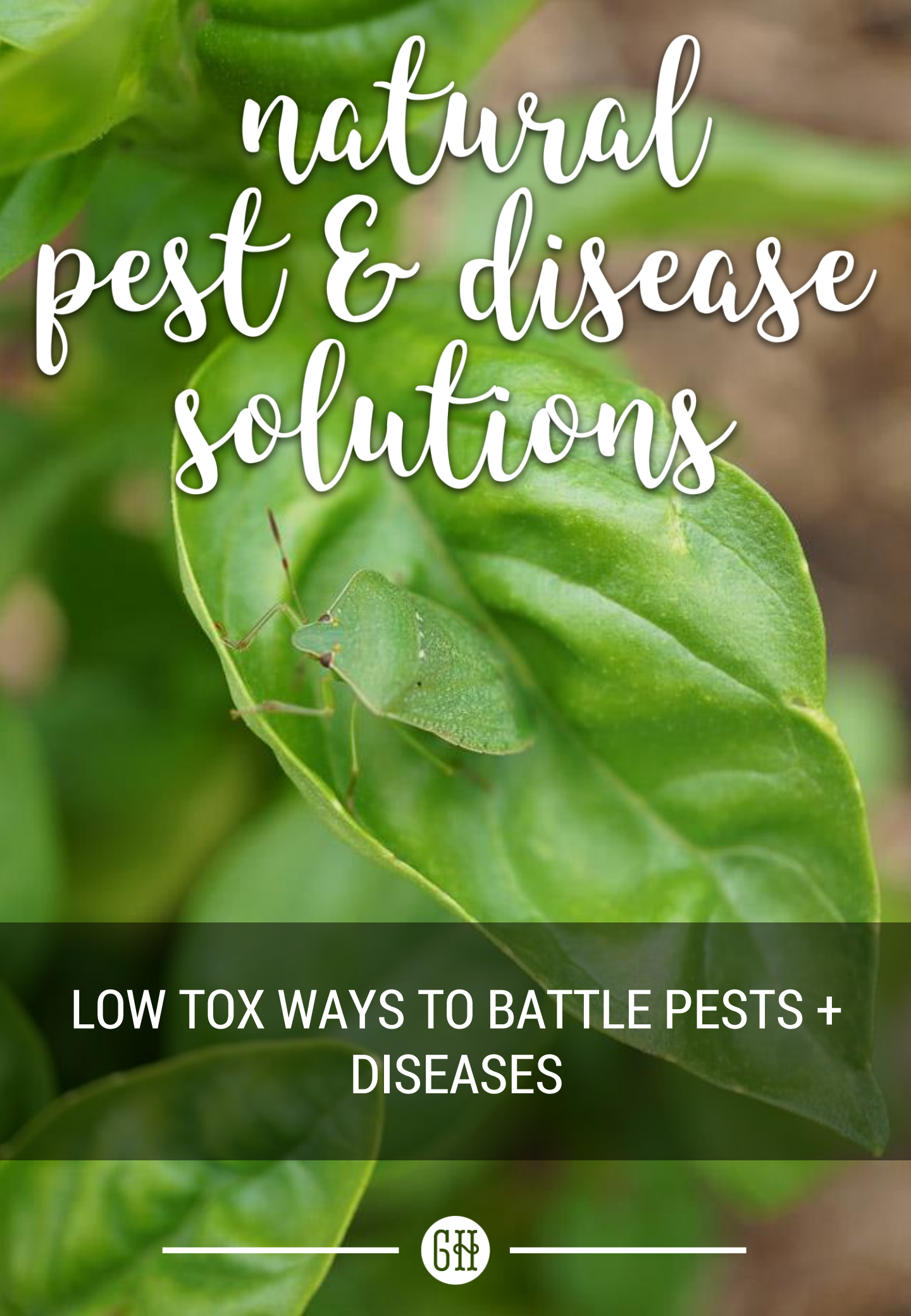
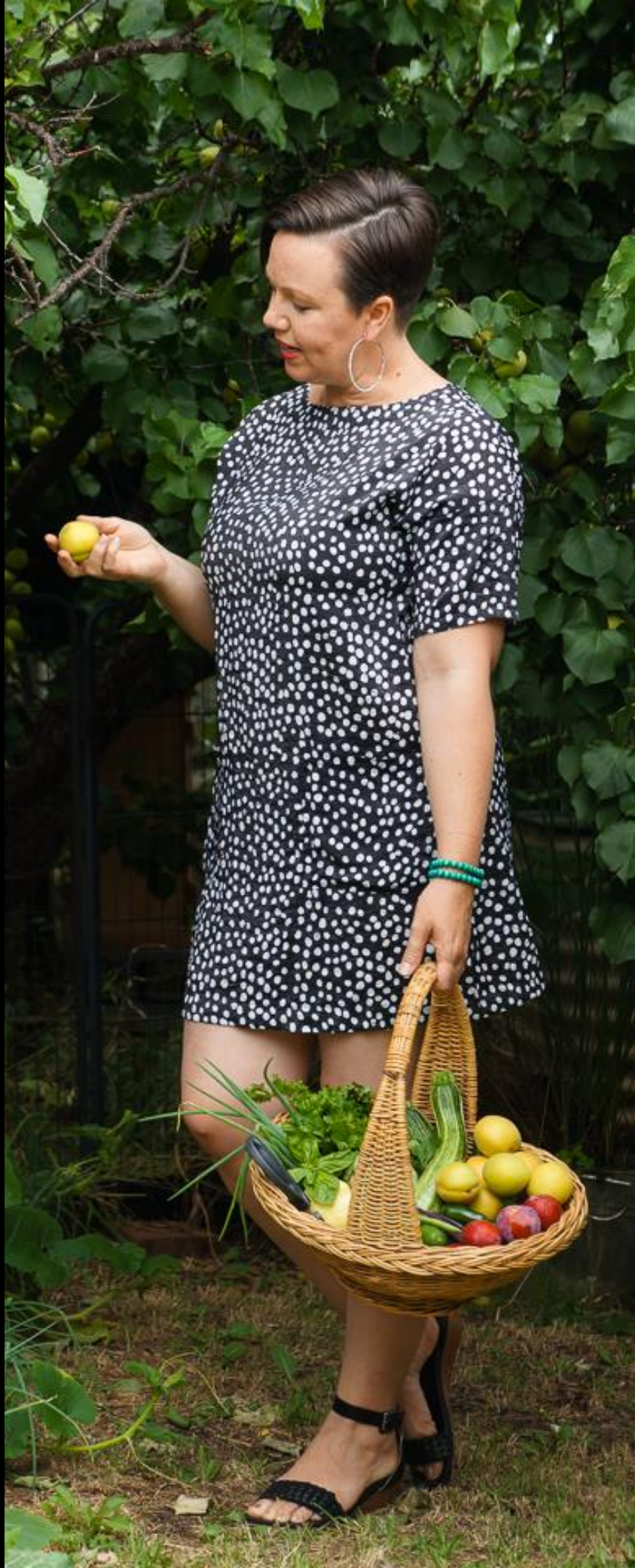

natural
pest & disease
solutions
LOW TOX WAYS TO BATTLE PESTS + DISEASES

Hello. I'm Bec

I am the urban hillbilly behind Growing Home. For almost 10 years I have been growing my own food, raising chickens + bees, cooking from the garden, and preserving the harvest.

I love growing an edible garden but have faced my fair share of challenges with pests and diseases… and trialled a bunch of natural solutions to prevent, reduce and control them.



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You can also find mini eGuides on Seed Saving, Raising Seedings, Wicking Garden Beds and Healthy Soil.
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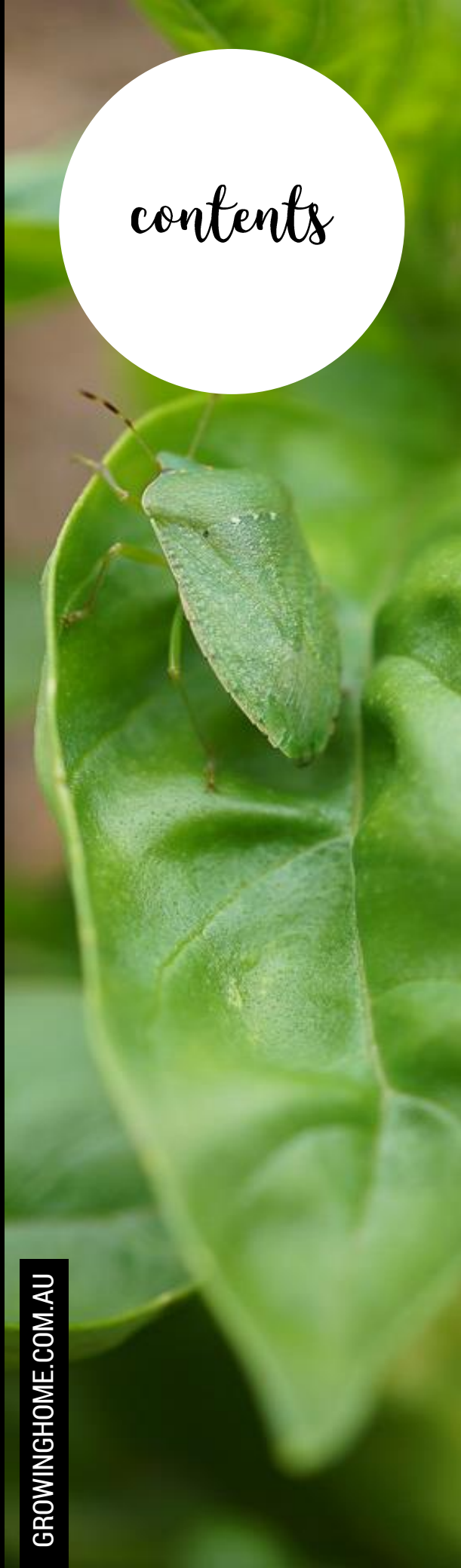

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GETTING STARTED

Growing your own fresh produce is an amazingly satisfying experience, no matter how big or small your garden is. Harvesting something that you have taken the time and energy to grow, often from seed or seedling, to a thriving plant and into your harvest basket is such a good feeling. Tasty too.

However, it's pretty much inevitable that at some point your edible garden will face some challenges. Which is one reason why it can be so satisfying to grow vegetables, herbs and fruit… because you've had to overcome an issue or two to get to the point of harvest.

Whether it is a simple issue, like a watering or feeding adjustment, or maybe more complicated like pests and diseases. Some are easily rectified, but other times it can be a destructive, disheartening and frustrating experience.

Pests may be small and you barely know they are there until they've done enough damage to be noticed, like mites, fruit fly or codling moth. Then there are big, noisy and much more noticeable pests, like possums, birds, rats or neighbourhood cats.

Sometimes you never end up working out what was nibbling your seedlings, chomping into your capsicums, or digging up all the plants in your vegetable garden!

Diseases can be fungal, bacterial or viral in nature, affecting your plants in many colourful, interesting and devastating forms. They may come and go depending on the seasonal conditions of certain years. Sometimes they are a regular visitor to your garden every year.

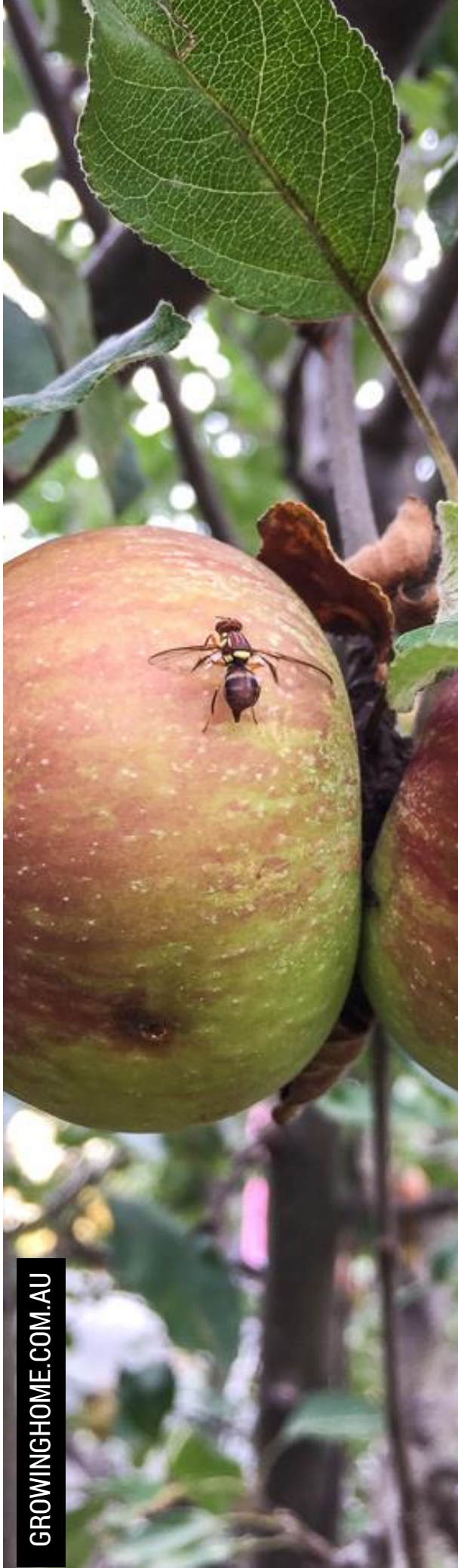
If you are unfortunate enough to experience multiple pests and diseases, and other issues, in your edible garden, it might be enough to put you off growing your own food.

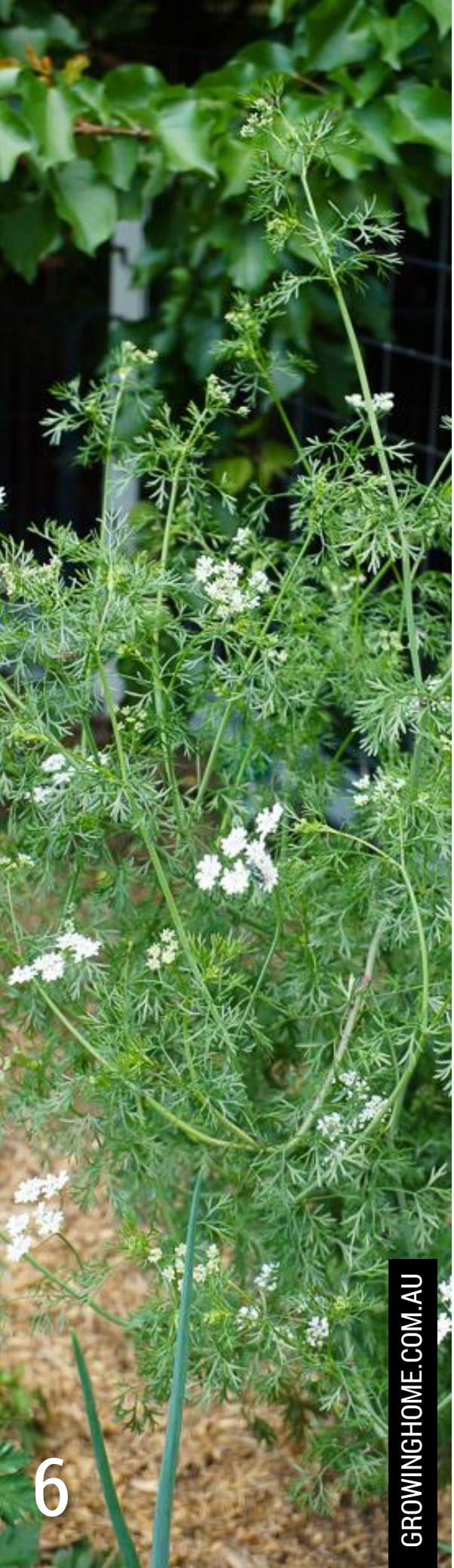
One awful year we had an infestation of two spot mites on the beans, aphids absolutely covering a zucchini plant, fruit fly in all the stone fruit and apples, white fly having a ball in the tomato plants, green vegetable bugs and their colourful babies everywhere, the usual powdery mildew but then some kind of virus making deformed zucchini and cucumbers too, and tomato wilt to top it off.

Needless to say that was a frustrating season but I learnt a lot about a wide variety of pests and diseases that year! In an integrated pest management approach, I removed affected leaves and sometimes the whole plant, used a botanical oil solution to kill off the pests and encourage good bugs, tested the pH of the soil and over Winter, I grew some mustard as a 'green manure' to dig in to fumigate the soil. The following year most of those pests and diseases didn't cause any issues again.

So let's learn about a bunch of natural 'low tox' ways to try and battle the bad bugs and diseases that might affect your edible garden, and not harm the good bugs and elements that protect our edible gardens.

GETTING STARTED





PREVENT

There are some issues you may not be able to prevent, only try your best to handle them when they do occur. The following ideas are worth thinking about to reduce the chance of pests and diseases happening and to increase the resilience of your edible garden if they do.

CONDITION THE SOIL

- Boost the soil by adding compost, worm castings or juice, natural mineral 'rock dust' and organic fertilisers.
- Use mulch to keep soil protected, and make sure the water input/ output is balanced
- Testing the pH of the soil and adjusting it if it is very acidic or alkaline, to help your plants absorb nutrients from the soil and stay stronger.
- Learn more in the Healthy Soil mini eGuide.

ENCOURAGE NATURAL PREDATORS

- We want the 'good bug' predators to live and feed in our vegetable gardens, as they destroy the 'bad bugs' by eating them or by parasitizing them. These good bugs include most ladybird beetles, hoverflies, praying mantis and certain wasps.
- Use companion planting by growing coriander, dill, sunflowers, fennel, Queen Anne's Lace and many others in between your crops as they are homes and alternate food sources for the good bugs.
- You can also buy boxes of 'backyard buddies' natural predators to release into your edible garden (such as Lacewings, predatory mites, ladybeetles and mini wasps) or Predalure to attract them.

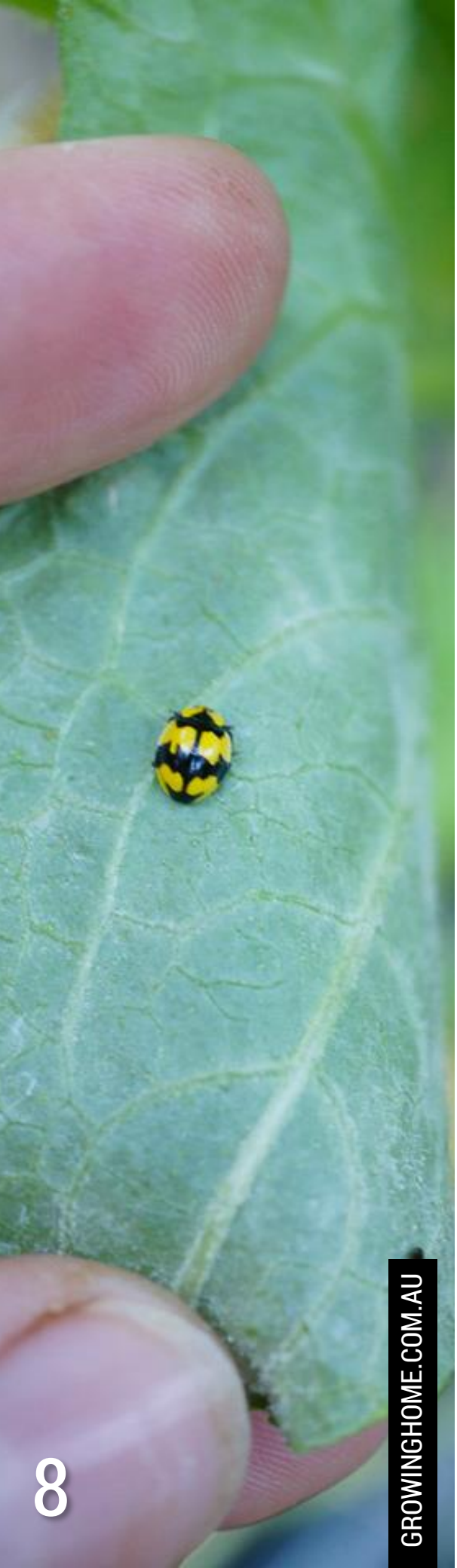
REPEL + CONFUSE BAD BUGS

- We can also use companion planting to confuse or repel the ‘bad bugs’.
- Plant herbs and flowers in amongst the main crops to confuse pests, as they mask the scent of nearby vegetables. These include sage, oregano, rosemary, thyme, basil, marigolds, lavender and scented geranium that produce strong, volatile oils.
- Use plants that repel the bag bugs, including basil, marigolds, nasturtium, sage, alliums (like garlic, chives and spring onions), wormwood and tansy.

GARDEN DESIGN + PLANTING

- Along with companion planting to attract good bugs and repel or confuse bad bugs, we can plant vegetables, herbs and flowers near to each other that can be of benefit to reduce disease, such as chives under apple trees to prevent apple scab.
- If you have chickens, set up your run so that their ranging area is under established trees, where they will scratch up and eat pests and fallen fruit.
- Plant in the right season and choose the varieties that are best for your climate zone to ensure strong growth that resists pest and disease better.
- Plan for crop rotation by growing your main crops in a different garden bed or area of the garden each season to reduce soil deficiency or build up of disease.
- Consider using wicking beds or drip irrigation systems rather than top down watering which can increase foliage issues like mildew.
- Plant to allow for ventilation which helps reduce issues, such as rusts

PREVENT



MONITOR + IDENTIFY

Sadly sometimes you don't know you have a pest problem until you find your seedlings all nibbled to basically nothing or the plant is beyond rescue! If you do notice holes appearing in some leaves, the odd seedling destroyed or weird patterns on your leaves, check your plants. This includes under and around your pots or trays for snails, slugs and slaters. Check the underside of the leaves, and the garden bed area around the plant. Try to take a photo if you spot the naughty pest in the act.

You can also use pheromone traps to monitor some pests, including apple codling moth, fruit fly and citrus leaf miner, which mimic the scent of females to attract male moths and indicate when it is time to start treatment. Some traps like this include an insecticide in them too.

Sometimes what we think are pests are actually 'good bugs'. Learning how to identify good bugs that you want hanging around, or bad bugs that you are better off without, is a good skill to develop before you squash a bug that was in fact, helping your garden! Like this fungus eating ladybird (Illeis galbula).

Search for bug identification sites or guides that suit your region or country. Contact your local council or even agriculture department if you can't find something suitable online. A good site or booklet will show you the good and bad bugs in various stages of development too, eggs, larvae, nymphs, juveniles and adults.

A handy one I use is this Good Bug? Bad Bug? Guide by Queensland government which helps identify them but also whether they are a pest or predator too. There is also Good Bugs.

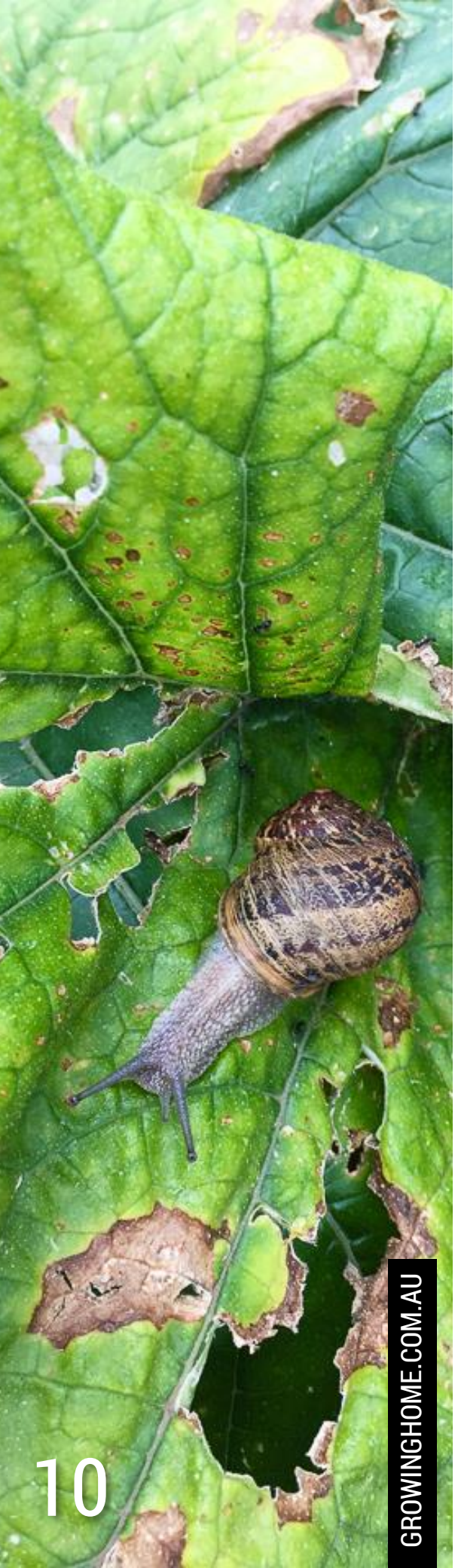
Trying to identify diseases will help with choosing the remedies for them. Check the symptoms online or check out a book from your local library. Don't presume the cause of the issue is from a specific disease or pest as there may be alternate (or even multiple) factors at work, such as aphid infestation curling the leaves of a peach tree, rather than it being a fungal leaf curl.

Also consider the recent conditions, for example, hot, rainy weather may increase fungal issues such as powdery mildew (as seen in the photo) which affects zucchini, cucumber and pumpkin plants, or fusarium wilt which affects tomatoes.

Some diseases may be introduced by pests, such as dried fruit beetle bringing brown rot, so not only are there holes and grubs in your stone fruit, then the fruit is quickly ruined by the fungus. Or cucumber mosaic virus spread by aphids. In some cases another pest may signal the root cause, such as noticing an increase of ants in your plants, as they actually 'farm' aphids (for the honeydew they excrete) with the tiny sap sucking pests doing damage.

Please note, not covered in this guide, but there are also disorders and deficiencies which can effect the appearance and growth of plants, which may be caused by lack of consistent water and/ or mineral deficiencies, such as blossom end rot. Or other issues related to lack of pollination and the young produce shrivels.

MONITOR + IDENTIFY



MANUAL REMOVAL

Sometimes the best way to handle a minor pest or disease issue is manual removal of the pest or diseased leaves/ plant.

You may also combine this with preventative measures, such as removing stacked pots nearby that were providing shelter or pruning leaves to increase ventilation.

If a disease or infestation is spreading and getting worse, or too much damage has been done to an annual plant, you may need to decide if the plant should be removed. It can be a tough call to make especially with a plant that has been productive (even harder decision if it's a fruit tree that isn't recovering despite trying different solutions to save it).

Some pests and diseased plants should be handled with care. Certain bugs can spray a horrid smelling, staining liquid on to you! Stink bug removal should be done wearing personal protection equipment (PPE) like goggles, gloves and using long handled tongs!

You also don't want to disturb tribes of pests, or spores/ other contamination, and accidently spread them to other parts of your edible garden! Bring your bin close to the garden bed, and carefully remove leaves with secateurs or garden scissors, or dig out the plant. Transfer them into the bin immediately. Clean equipment and gloves before moving on to further garden jobs.

Also be sure to check for eggs or hatchlings under leaves on the plant where you found the adult pest, as there are sure to be babies which would love to carry on the family reputation.

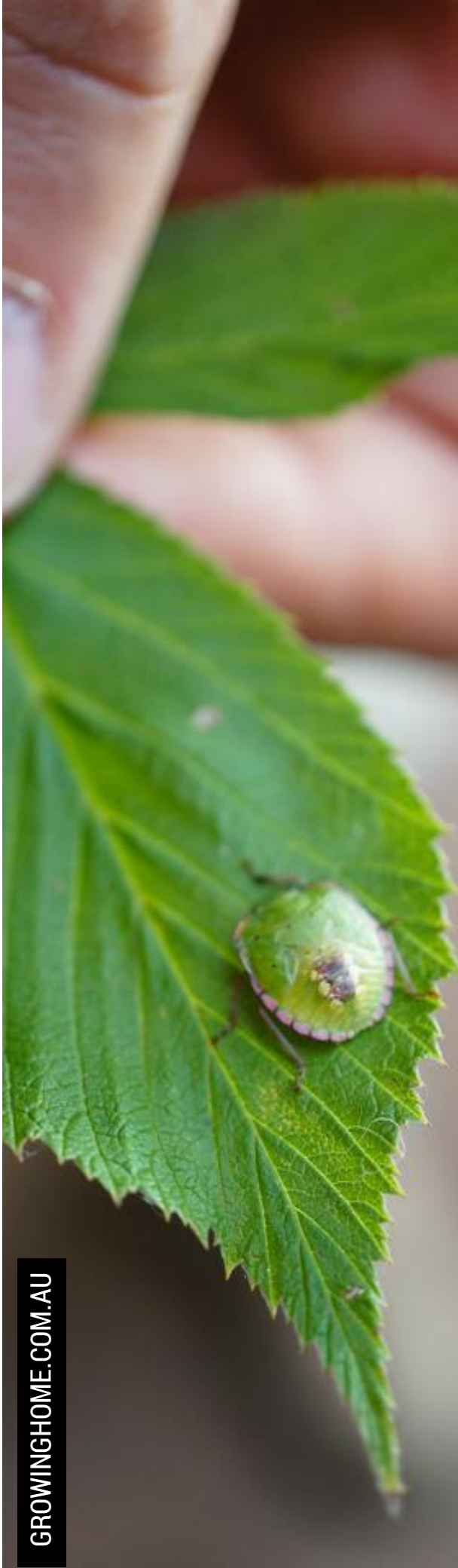
Good garden hygiene also means picking up decaying fruit or fallen leaves from affected trees, and putting them in the bin. You may want to put them into black garbage bags and leave it in the sun for a few days before binning it.

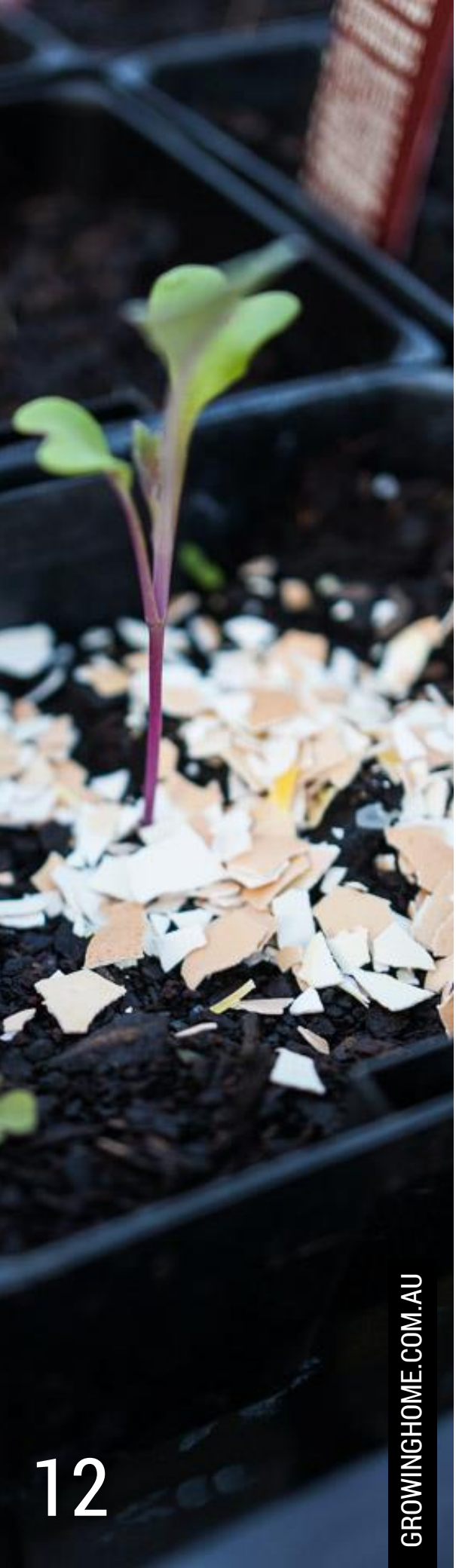
It can be annoying, but trying to stay on top of the fruit clean up is important to prevent future generations from growing exponentially and getting way out of control! When we had a big fruit fly issue and the majority of our apricots were infected, we kept an old bucket nearby to easily gather fallen fruit daily to dispose of before it got really rotten and more generations hatched.

If you are squeamish about touching or squashing bugs (which gets easier if they have decimated your emerging seedlings or ruined a crop) then consider using traps that can be disposed of without touching the pest, let your chickens or ducks do the hard work for you, or use a shovel/ trowel and transfer them into a bin.

Removing a bigger pest like a possum or rat is another thing altogether and best organised with your local wildlife rescue specialist or animal removal service.

MANUAL REMOVAL





EXCLUSION METHODS

Stopping pests from getting near enough to eat or damage your vegetables, herbs or fruit, by using physical barriers or covering the plants. These are not necessarily proven but worth a try if you are feeling desperate to solve your pest issue!

PHYSICAL BARRIERS

IRON EDTA PELLETS

These are pet-safe and safe for your vegetable garden, eventually breaking down and safely being absorbed by the soil. Placing the pellets in a ring around seedlings and plants is one of the most reliable methods I have found to keep slugs and snails away from seedlings.

DIATOMACEOUS EARTH (DE)

This is a natural abrasive rock powder that desiccates pests. Use on top of the soil where you have planted your seed, or around the bottom of the seedling. It can affect beneficial insects too, so use accordingly. Wear a face mask when applying; use food grade DE.

COPPER TAPE

This may cause an electrical charge to deter slugs and snails as their slime connects - place a strip around pots, or make a collar from a plastic pot with it's bottom cut off, add a line of copper tape around it and turn upside down over the plant.

CRUSHED EGG SHELLS

Rinse, thoroughly dry (air dry on a plate or tray, or low heat in an oven) and then crush up egg shells into very small pieces, using a bowl and rolling pin or even in a small bag and crush with your hands. Spread a layer on top of the soil where you have planted your seed, or seedling.

HORTICULTURAL GLUE & GREASE BANDS

This is made from sticky non-drying glue made from natural gum resins, vegetable oil and wax. You can get pre-glued bands or wide sticky tape on a large roll, easy to apply, whereas others are painted/ pasted on.

Use these around the trunk/ stem of apple trees to stop female apple codling moth fluttering and crawling up the trunk to lay their eggs. They can also be used to prevent other pests like ants and earwigs too. May need to be reapplied.

OTHER OPTIONS

Depending on what you have available to you, options might include:

- wood ash
- sawdust
- wood shavings
- coffee grinds

Just be careful that bulk additions of these to your garden bed may alter the pH level of the soil.

EXCLUSION METHODS

COVERS

I have found using garden cloches is one of the best methods to prevent pests attacking seedlings. I have been using these cloches for many, many years, in fact, we have been using the same bottles all that time too! They keep the seedling warm, moist and protected from pests, until the weather has warmed up or the seedling is big enough to handle the elements. (They also help you remember where you have planted your seeds, so you don't accidently remove a seed/ emerging seedling or plant over it)!

You could also try covering seedling pots/ trays with clear plastic sheets, or try using plastic packaging bags that come off quilts/ doonas. This 'mini greenhouse' lets in light, keeps in warmth, moisture and helps to keep out pests and pets. You can also use large plastic boxes. Learn more in the Raising Seedlings mini eGuide.

Before covering any plants, just make sure there are no pests or their eggs or larvae in the plants already before you add the covers! You also need to make sure any fruiting plants that require pollination have had enough time to be visited by pollinators before covering.

You can use exclusion mesh products like mini bags (use mesh produce bags like oranges come in) or sleeves made from fine vege netting, with drawstrings at each end or gather the opening and peg it together around the stem or branch. These can cover branches on trees. Make your own or buy them pre made, and reuse them each year.

EXCLUSION METHODS

Completely netting garden beds and trees is a good method to keep flying pests out like white cabbage moth on brassicas and birds on fruit trees. It may take two people and a couple of hours depending on how much you have to cover.

Netting should be done after petal fall for fruit trees (allowing the flowers to be pollinated first). Make sure to secure it neatly around the trunk or garden bed (use clamps or perhaps cable ties), and think of how you will access the tree when harvesting, esp. if it isn't done all at once.

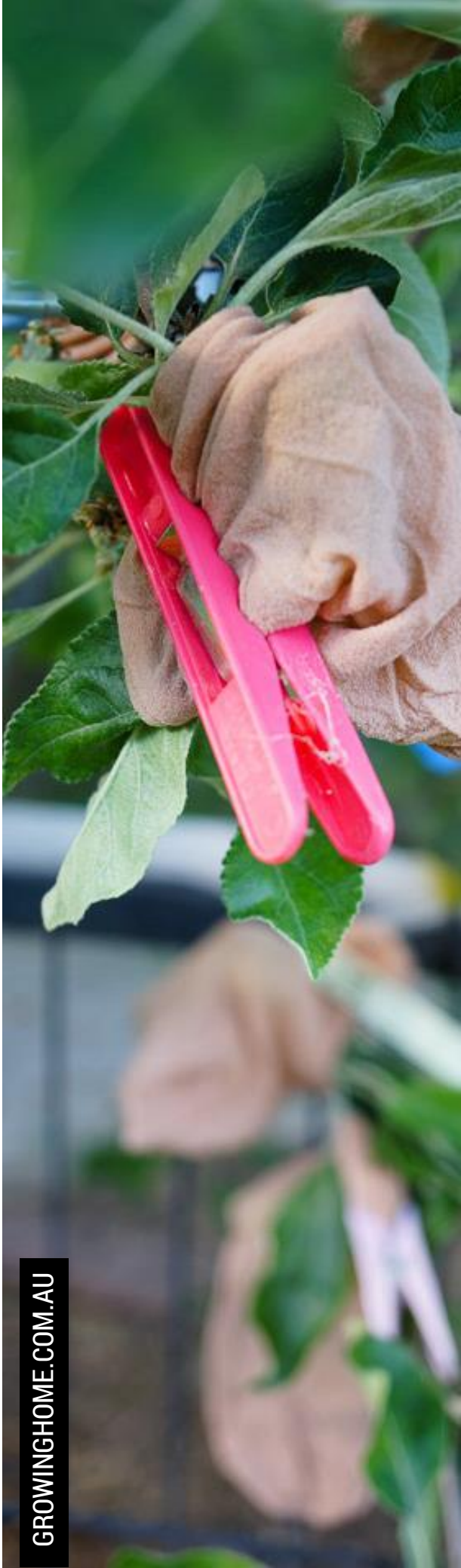
Sockettes or pouch covering individual fruit is another option but can be lot of work, depending on the size of your trees. Do it after petal fall when you first see the tiny apples forming, thin the apples and apply the sockettes only over one apple, securing it around the stem or branch with a peg.

As the fruit grows and stretches out the stocking material, pests may still be able to penetrate it. It may be possible to reuse these.

Other ideas to exclude pests, like birds or cats, from disturbing or digging up an area where you've sown seed, include using 'seed trays' upside down or scaffold mesh (laid over garden bed after planting seeds).

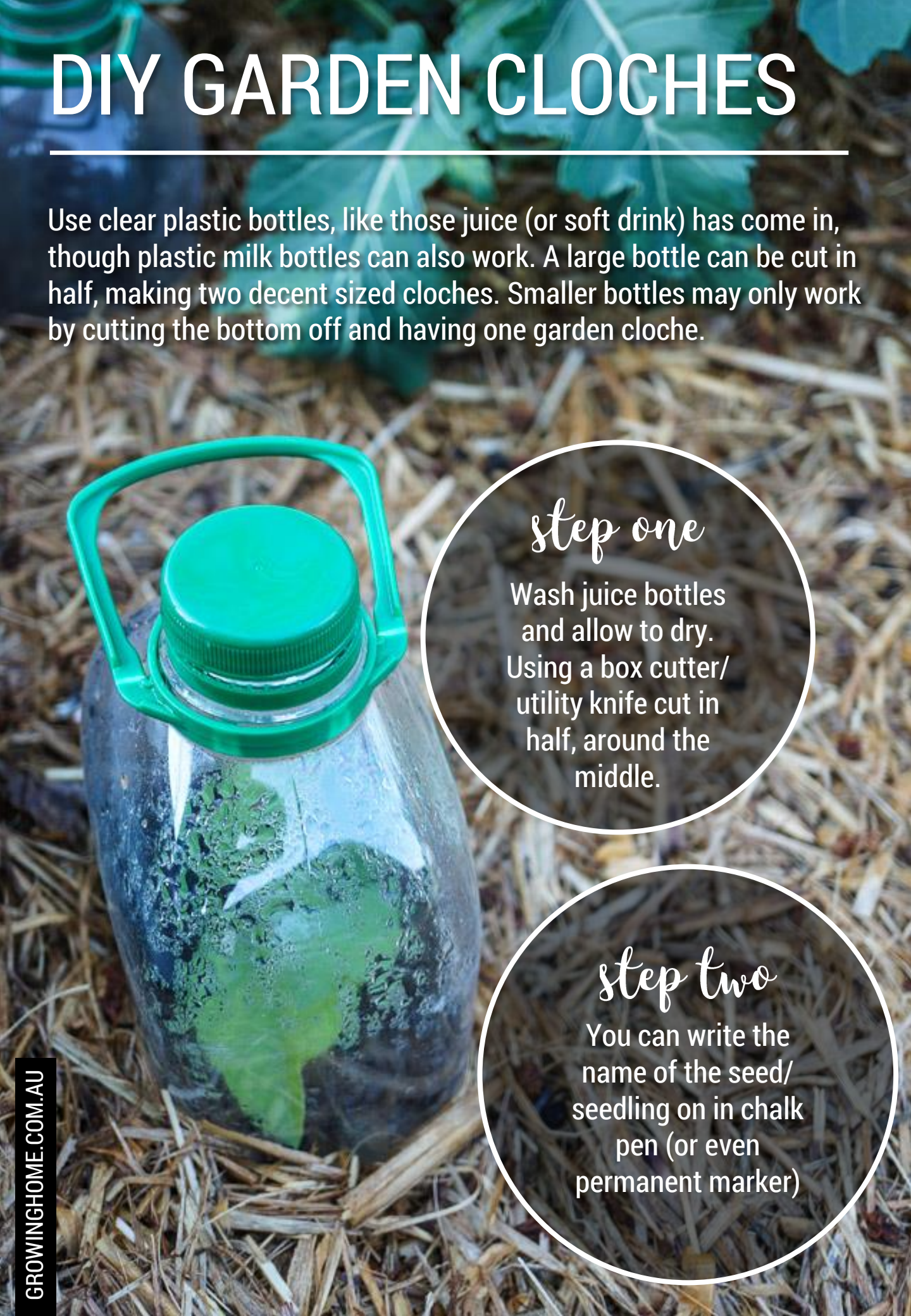
For possums and rats, you need may need to look into caging your vegetable gardens.

EXCLUSION METHODS



DIY GARDEN CLOCHES

Use clear plastic bottles, like those juice (or soft drink) has come in, though plastic milk bottles can also work. A large bottle can be cut in half, making two decent sized cloches. Smaller bottles may only work by cutting the bottom off and having one garden cloche.



step one

Wash juice bottles and allow to dry. Using a box cutter/ utility knife cut in half, around the middle.

step two

You can write the name of the seed/ seedling on in chalk pen (or even permanent marker)

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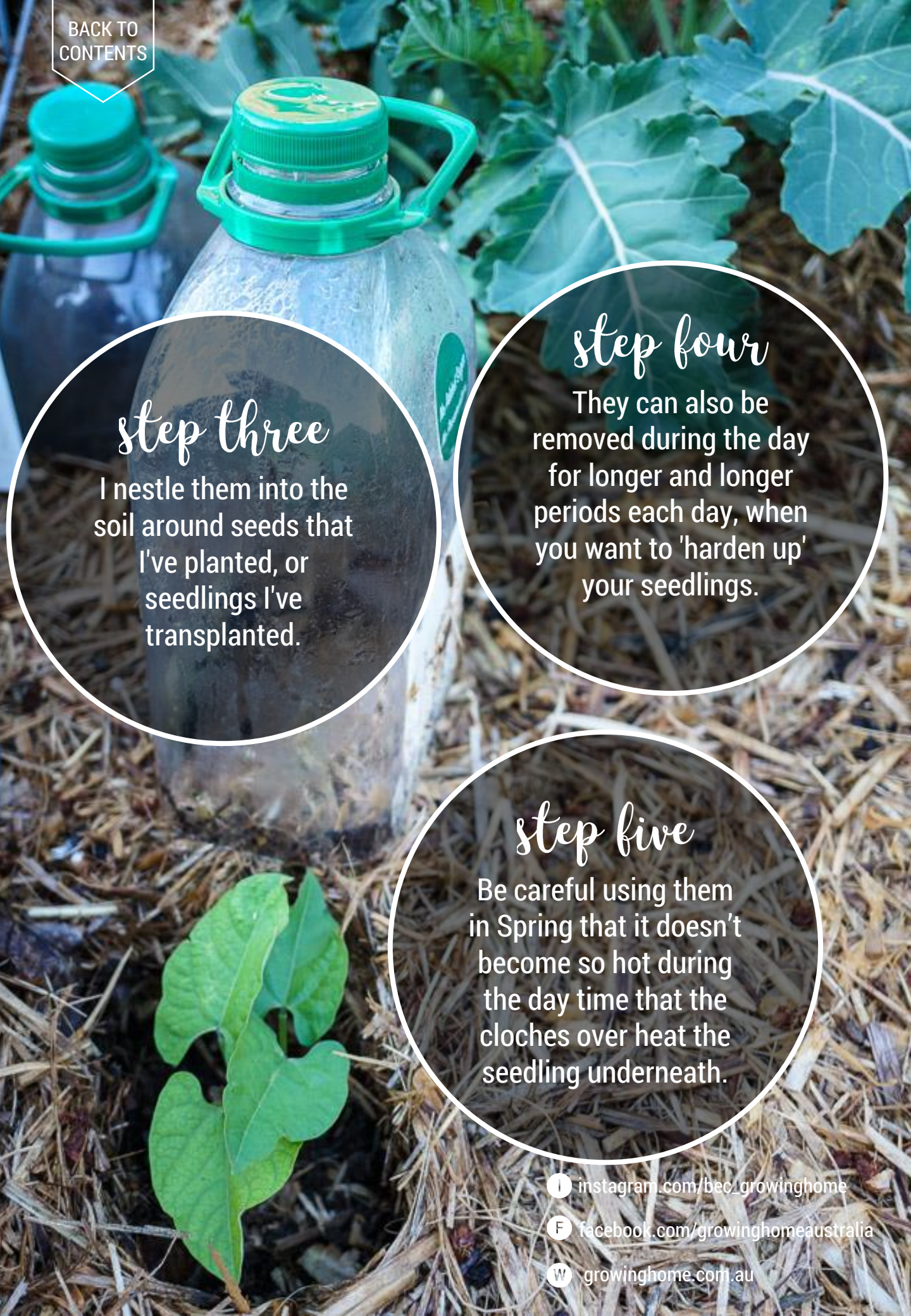

step three

I nestle them into the soil around seeds that I've planted, or seedlings I've transplanted.

step four

They can also be removed during the day for longer and longer periods each day, when you want to 'harden up' your seedlings.

step five

Be careful using them in Spring that it doesn't become so hot during the day time that the cloches over heat the seedling underneath.

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SPRAYS + POTIONS

Natural pesticides can be used in conjunction with other methods in this eGuide. I am not affiliated with the Eco Organic range, I have just used several of their products for years and find them effective. We also need to be mindful that some 'natural' solutions can still affect the good bugs and bees, like pyrethrum.

IRON EDTA BASED PELLETS

A reliable ad easy method I have found to keep slugs and snails away from seedlings is using iron based, pet-friendly pellets on top of the seedling pot, around the edges of trays and around the edges of garden beds. You can use these pellets in a slug and snail trap too.

HORTICULTURAL OIL

Botanical oils based on plant oils (not from petroleum oil) can be effective on sap-sucking and chewing insects, such as mites, white fly, citrus leafminer and aphids. I use Eco Oil which can bought as a concentrate or ready to use, as it is not only very effective on the pests, it is safe and attracts beneficial insects.

I have also used it on apple tree trunks to smother codling moth eggs and to prevent the adult moths landing on an oily surface. You do need to repeat, spray 3 to 5 days apart, and reapplication may be necessary after rain.

You could also look into making your own using sunflower oil or neem oil as an insecticide.

ECO-FUNGICIDE

Made from potassium bicarbonate, I find this effective on powdery mildew (more effective than a diluted milk or bicarb spray). I prune affected leaves which allows for better ventilation, then thoroughly apply. Repeat after 7 days. It would also work on other fungal diseases such as black spot and rust. It is safe for beneficial insects and soil microbes. Buy Eco-fungicide a concentrate or ready to use.

ECO-NATURALURE

Fruit fly bait for both male and female flies with no withholding period. It targets only fruit flies with food-based attractants and a bacteria-derived insecticide. It is safe for beneficial insects. It can be used as a ait on a piece of wood or tree, or as a foliage spray. Start early in the season (from petal fall) and respray every week, or after rain.

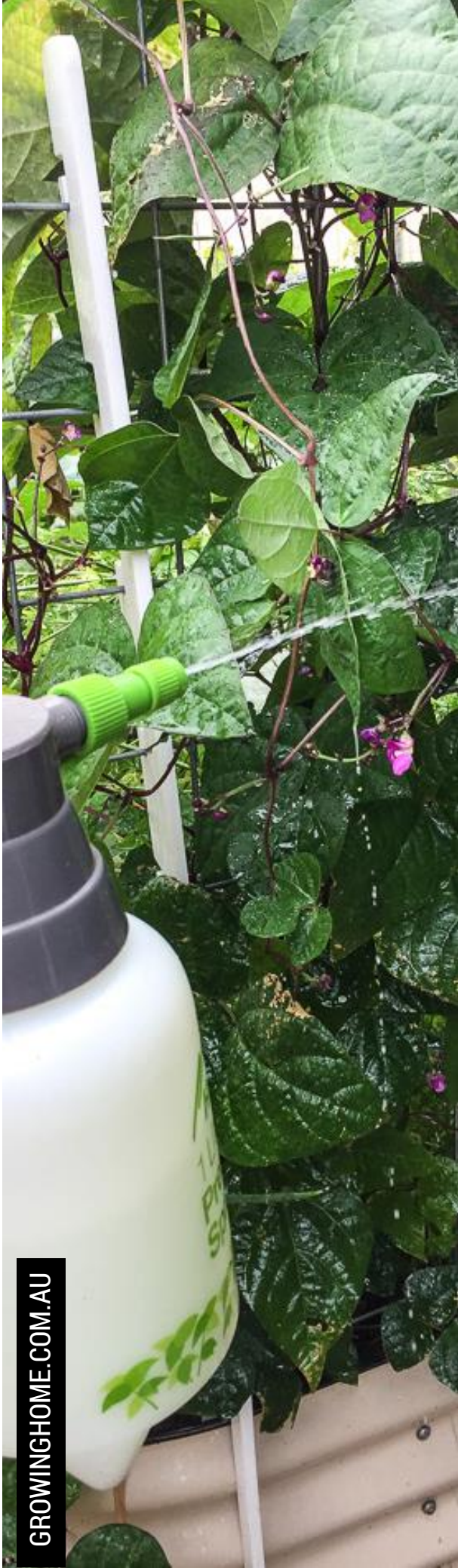
COPPER OR LIME BASED FUNGICIDE

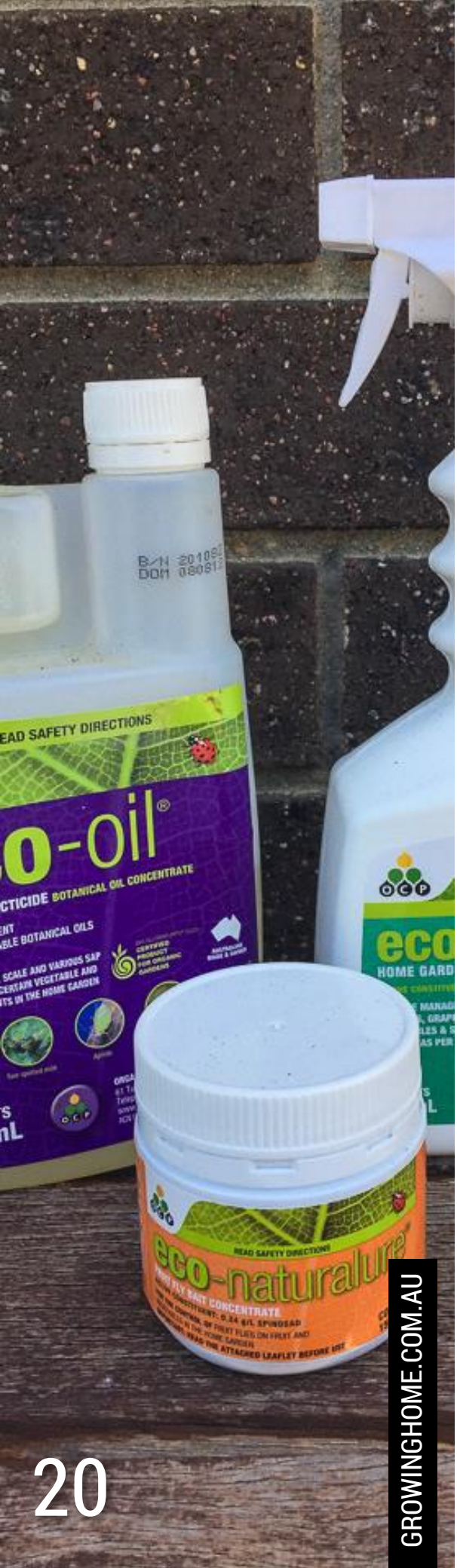
For Leaf Curl which affects stone fruit you can safely use a fungicide spray made with copper oxychloride/ hydroxide or lime sulfur (or a combination of copper sulphate and slaked lime called Bordeaux mixture). Spray in Autumn, and again in early Spring at bud swell (before the blossom comes out).

OTHER COMBINATIONS

You can make your own, or buy, combinations using chilli, garlic and pyrethrum based sprays, or those with molasses, soap, detergent vinegar and salt. I stopped using sprays with pyrethrum after we got bees. Also be careful of using these 'natural' sprays as they may kill soil microbes and harm ecosystems.

SPRAYS + POTIONS





TRAPS

Traps generally have some kind of bait in them that pests can't resist, and then some way to kill or contain the pest once inside. Traps don't need to be filled with toxic chemicals, just something that irresistible to the pest, and either kills them because it is toxic to them, or they get stuck and can't get out.

The downside of traps is the time to make and install them, but they also need to be emptied out or replaced frequently, they may not cover a large area, and they can start to smell!

PHEROMONE TRAPS

Traps that use pheromones which mimic the scent of females to attract male moths are a way to monitor when it is time to start other treatment. Sometimes these traps include an insecticide in them too, or even a sticky substance that traps them, so the pest is also killed or can't escape and dies. Pheromone traps can be bought for apple codling moth, fruit fly and citrus leaf miner.

Whilst pheromone based traps will only attract specific insects, depending on the style of the traps, other insects may still get caught.

BAIT TRAPS

Traps use various substances as baits, items you might already have like beer, yeast and sugar, vegemite or fruit juice, which ferment and the protein attracts the pests. You can also buy products like Eco-Naturalure to use in your traps, as it is a bait to attract fruit fly but also contains an insecticide to kill the fruit fly.

You can use old bottles, glass jars, plastic pots, or buy plastic traps, which are partially buried in the garden bed.

Home made fruit fly traps can be made as per these instructions, but other ideas include cutting the top third off of a soft drink bottle, then turning that section upside down and placing it into the remaining two thirds of the bottle, so a one-way path is created. Tape the two section together, add your bait and place in the garden.

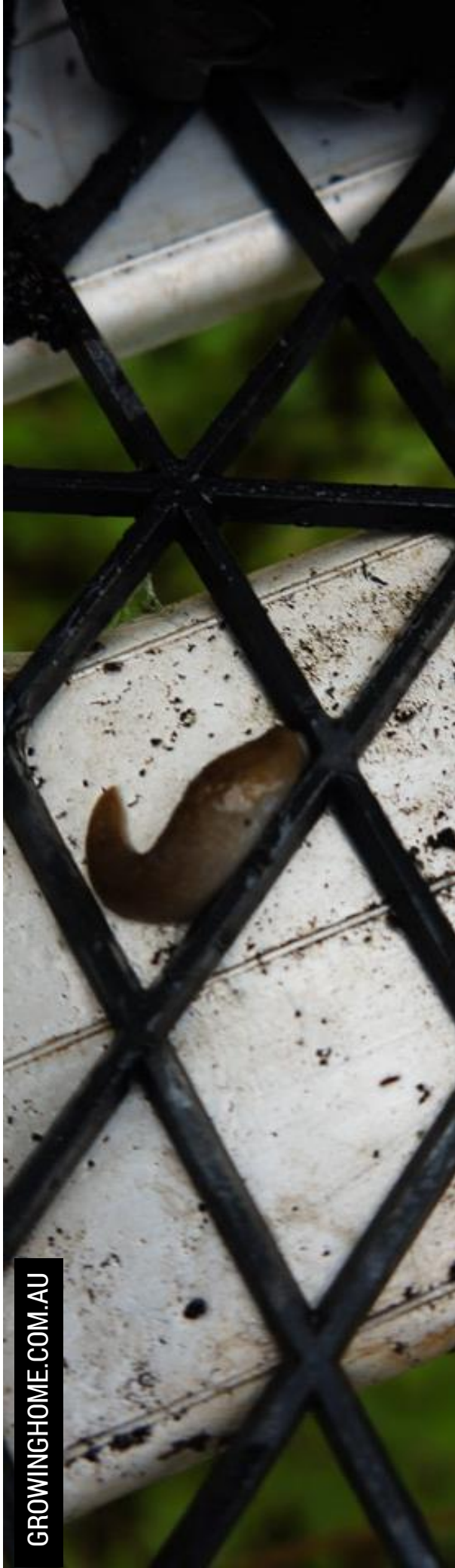
Other items that can trap pests include securing sections of corrugated cardboard around the trunks of fruit trees, in which pests lay their eggs or hide over Winter. These can then be removed and thrown out before the pests have a chance to reactivate in Spring.

I tried the beer trap method on snails when I first started growing and must say, I never much success with it (compared to Iron EDTA pellets) but other people use them successfully.

A trap for earwigs can be made using a plate or shallow container, with a layer of cooking oil and a splash of soy sauce in the middle. The earwigs will drown attempting to get to the soy sauce. Using oil in your trap can also ensure pests get stuck or suffocated.

Note that bait traps may attract and catch many insects, including beneficial bugs.

TRAPS



DIY FRUIT FLY TRAPS

We get Qld fruit fly here in the warmer months, ruining our apples, raspberries and getting in to the apricots too. These traps have a bait that ferments and attracts the fruit fly, who get in to the trap but can't get out, and they drown. You can use these in conjunction with other methods. The downsides are that they can catch other insects and can get smelly.

step one

If you like, you can wash the juice bottles and lids, allow to dry (or just use them as is, with whatever juice is remaining).

step two

Cut a small upside V in each side of the bottle (toward the top) with a safety knife, and press the plastic triangle piece in.

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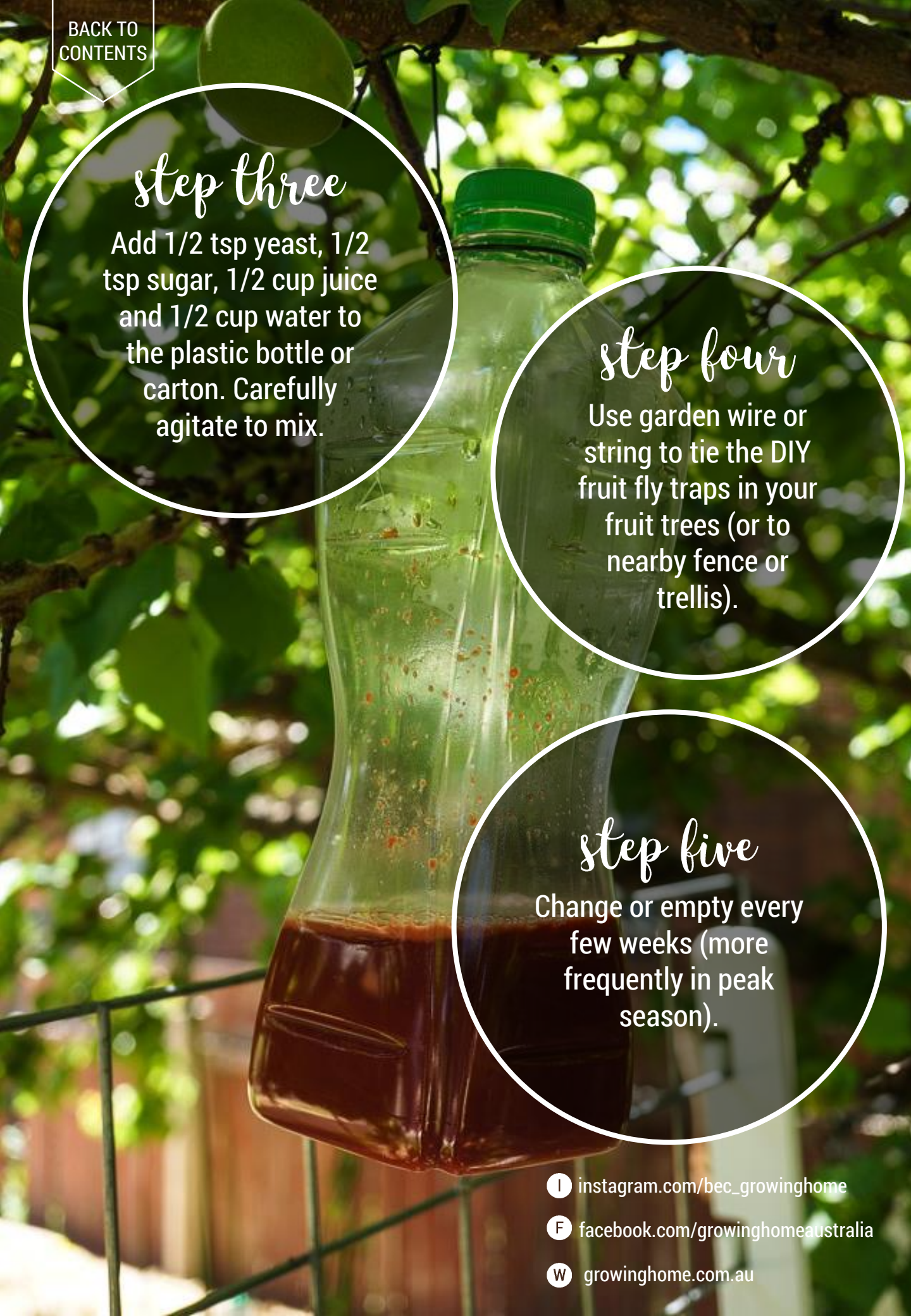

step three

Add 1/2 tsp yeast, 1/2 tsp sugar, 1/2 cup juice and 1/2 cup water to the plastic bottle or carton. Carefully agitate to mix.

step four

Use garden wire or string to tie the DIY fruit fly traps in your fruit trees (or to nearby fence or trellis).

step five

Change or empty every few weeks (more frequently in peak season).

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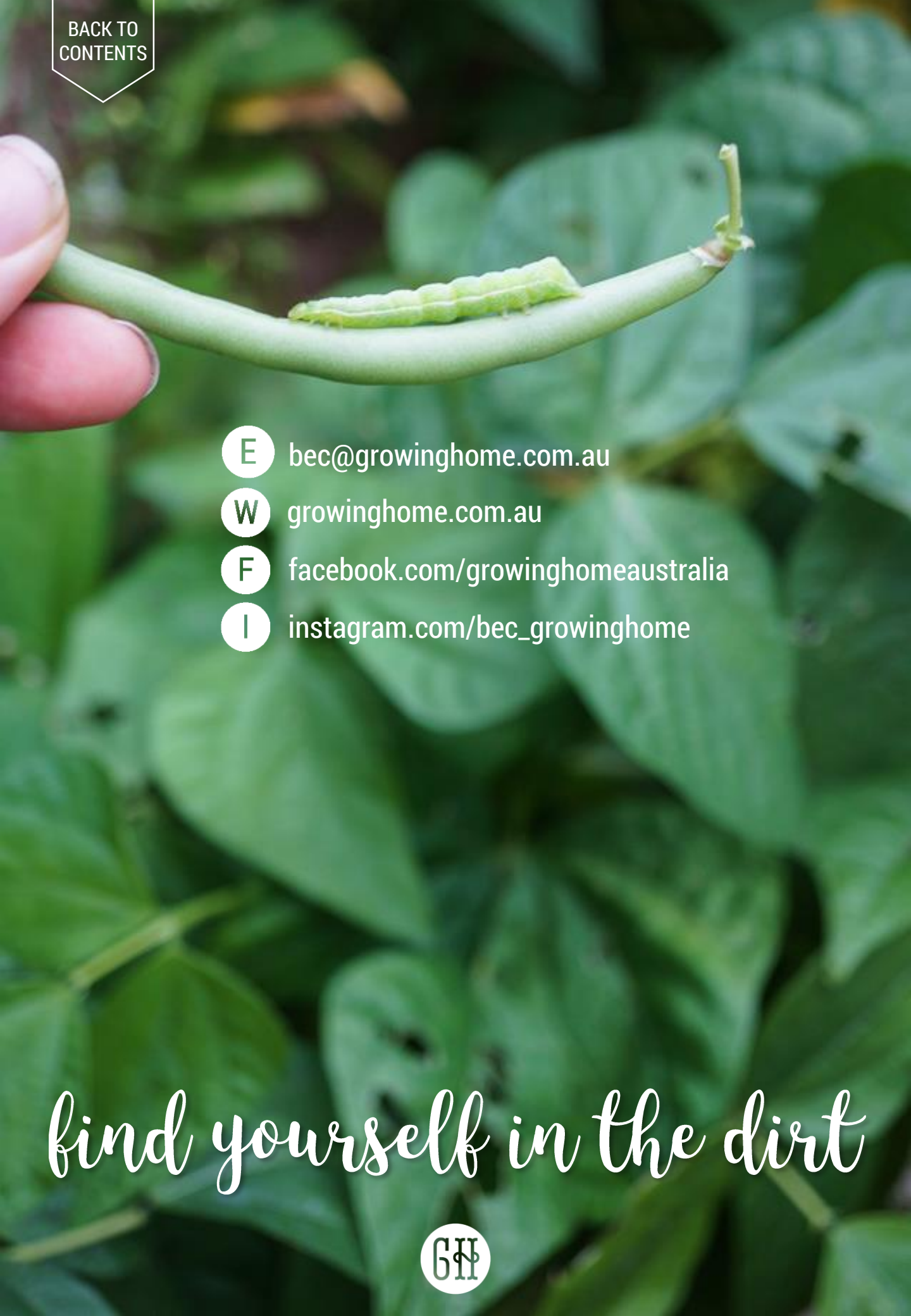

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