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Michelle Brown has made the most of life at home during the pandemic.

Keeping it green during Covid-19

For Michelle Brown, the recent coronavirus lockdown renewed her focus on sustainability projects around the home. The Toowoomba resident, with husband James, took ownership of a church hall-turned-residence in the Queensland town around seven years ago and since then has worked to make it a comfortable and energy-efficient home.

"The recent situation makes you think about what the future might hold. We talked about what we could do during the crisis and decided that being self-sufficient was one of the best things to focus on," says Michelle.

"During Covid-19 we have worked full time from home, home-schooled, put in four new garden beds, new composting area and taken a few more steps towards changing over to all-electric from gas." They also added two more rainwater tanks for the garden, with two tanks already installed for laundry use, taking their storage to 18,000 litres.

Michelle and her family moved from Victoria to Queensland in 2008, with Michelle having grown up in the Sunshine State. They returned to Brisbane initially, but then settled on Toowoomba for its "varying climate", where they can feel the change in the weather "just like Melbourne".

"I enjoy talking with people about what you can do to reduce your impact, and the town is becoming more environmentally aware, which is pleasing to see," says Michelle. She is the assistant secretary of the Renew Toowoomba Branch, having been secretary for the last few years, and became involved with the group after attending an environmental day in town.

The decision to buy a 550-square-metre ex-church hall was partly based on that desire to 'show what you can do' by bringing something old into a new era.

"We love having a home with a story," she says. The hall has served as a meeting, wedding and club venue, a place to house servicemen during World War II, a literacy centre for children and an election polling booth. James' a cappella group still sing in the hall each week, on hold during Covid-19 of course. Michelle says the 96-year-old building has been a dream home for their four kids, with a 100-square-metre lounge room, space for a trampoline, badminton court and pool table inside.

Their early Toowoomba years have been spent renovating to keep energy bills in the lofty building under control. One of their first jobs was to install ceiling insulation to reduce energy costs for heating and cooling, which Michelle says made the indoor temperature so much more comfortable given there had been none previously. They also installed low-e double-glazed windows on the 'hot' sides of the building, changed all lighting over to LED to reduce energy use and installed four reverse-cycle air conditioners to heat and cool the home. Their energy bills got down to around $300 a month, before installing a 5.5kW solar PV system.

Electricity bills are around $50 to $80 a month now, with Michelle saying that most of their heating and cooling use is covered by solar. Next is to go all-electric as they plan to replace their old gas instantaneous hot water systems with new efficient electric heat pumps. Underfloor and wall insulation are also on the agenda.

The family of six promote sustainable transport within their local community by riding wherever they can, including the nine-kilometre trip to the local university where Michelle and James work. They will buy a secondhand electric vehicle after they run their current car into the ground, but might invest in electric bikes first. "We hired e-bikes for a day in Wellington and they were amazing for getting around including conquering Mt Victoria. We travelled 46 kilometres that day and we were so impressed."

"We love it in Toowoomba and we're happy that our home will last a lot longer after all the work we've done to fix it up. We haven't finished yet, though. It's a journey," says Michelle.

"Around our garden and the home we just want to show others that they can start small. Anyone can retrofit their house to save energy, become greener and be kinder to the environment. I think our future and future generations depend on it."

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