

GARDEN NOTES

INTO THE BLUE

Alan and Yoka's Bush Retreat

The Gardeners

Alan and Yoka share a passion for gardening. When they purchased the property in 1997, they were both working full-time. Despite being largely retired for the past ten years, numerous projects remain on the 'to do' list.

History

When purchased, the property was largely undeveloped, with extensive tree cover. The trees are mainly Apple Box and Messmate. About half the property was covered in head-high thick scrub, and there was little grass/lawn. Tree stumps from past logging featured prominently throughout the block. The area to the south of the driveway (uphill side) near the road remains an untouched example of this.

The existing mudbrick house was various shades of khaki through to mission brown, both inside and out, and very cold in winter.

Shortly after purchase the pond was dug to supply a source of water for fire protection, and the patio, main lawn and garage sites were cut by bulldozer – leaving something resembling a bomb site! The garage/ carport was built in 2005, using clay from the block for the end walls.

Apart from the above-mentioned activities, the rest of the clearing, landscaping, and planting has been done by hand. Our challenge was to create an attractive garden, featuring native and exotic plants, and to use the landform to maximum advantage – for a minimum of cost.

Garden Design

Our design intent has been to introduce colour to the site, particularly by the use of exotics around the house, and to transition to native plants in the more remote parts of the site. A lawn area was also a pre-requisite. Steeper areas were planted out so as to facilitate easier mowing.

Large plants have been avoided near the house, due to the bushfire risk. On the north side of the house the rotting retaining wall was removed, the area was terraced, and the rock wall and pebble design used to minimise fire load.

Further from the house we have planted an array of Oaks, Maples, Liquidambars, Cherry and Pear trees to provide autumn colour.

The soil on the block is a reactive clay covered by shallow, very nutrient-poor bush soil. The extensive cover of trees means that most sites are subject to root competition, and the higher sites are very dry.

The development of garden beds was initially restricted to areas near the house, where the ground had been disturbed by the bulldozer and most of the large eucalypts removed.

Subsequent garden beds on the south side of the lawn have developed more slowly as we have learnt to deal with the difficult conditions. Close planting and massive amounts of organic matter have probably been the key to success.

Even so, we have resorted to succulents in some areas. The Yucca Forest is an example of finding an interesting solution to a harsh site with minimal water and massive impact from established trees. All the yuccas are clones from one original.

The steepness of parts of the block has resulted in terracing several areas. The prevalence of white ants has meant that the only long term choice of terracing material was limited to treated pine or rock.

Alan was taught the art of drystone rock walling by a local landscaper and has now worked his way through many truckloads of bluestone. The design constantly evolves as time and plants teach us what looks good and what can be done. Maintenance is minimal, except for minor repairs after the local echidna visits.

We have utilised Eucalypt timber from the block for some garden edging and steps in more remote locations.

The choice of recycled concrete for crazy paving around the house was originally a budget-driven decision. However it has proved a very serviceable and decorative surface.

Many statues and ornaments decorate the garden. These are testament to Yoka's love of markets and garage sales, and Alan's ability to turn her ideas into reality. She has also collected a range of unusual and rare plants which have been incorporated into the garden.

Climate

In general, we are blessed with a site which is sheltered from most winds, except north westerlies. Being slightly above the valley floor also means fewer frosts – typically only one or two slight frosts per year.

Sun exposure varies from none to dappled during winter, to some areas receiving full afternoon sunshine and heat in summer. The south side of the house is particularly severe in this aspect.

There is no permanent flowing water on the site. However, during infrequent high rainfall events, massive amounts of water can flood through the block (the main lawn becomes a floodway). Managing and repairing washouts has been an all too common event.

Summer is generally dry and hot and requires many new plants to be nursed through the first year.

Due to the climate, landform and drainage patterns, we have a number of micro-climates on the site. Generally speaking, the north side of the site is moister and more sheltered and shaded. Conversely the hills on the south side are hot and dry. Plant selection and placement has involved much experimentation.

Animals

Being close to the National Park ensures a plentiful supply of animals. Echidnas, koalas, wallabies, possums, foxes, rabbits, and snakes are regular visitors. We have also recorded over 25 species of birds.

Many find our plants and vegetables delightful. 'Fort Vegetable' located behind Alan's workshop is guaranteed proof against possums, rabbits, wallabies, king parrots, and bower birds (but not snakes).

Similarly, the 'Chook Hilton' on the road side of the carport/garage has been built to withstand foxes and birds.

Another hidden form of wildlife is the yabbies or 'crabs'. They build underground reservoirs and channels, eventually subverting all forms of drainage. The result if left unchecked, is underground tunnel erosion.