

GARDEN NOTES

Vale Hill House

- Lisa and Chris are first time regional property owners. Having moved to Melbourne in 2019 with busy corporate careers, lockdowns led them to follow their long-time dreams of owning a rural retreat. Neither Chris or Lisa had any experience looking after a large garden, nor did they fully comprehend what to expect living in a rural setting. Many times after moving in, in late Spring 2020, they thought, what have we done? The garden was somewhat overgrown with spring growth, the kilometres of hedges needed controlling and many of the 300+ fruit trees hadn't been pruned for some time. However, with help from family and advice from local friends they managed to survive their first summer and have been working hard to maintain the beautiful gardens and lawns to the high standard of the owners who originally renovated the property. It was those owners who planted the garden, transforming Vale Hill from a barren hillside into what it is today.
- Vale Hill House is a stone and brick mine manager's residence built in approximately 1858 by the McRorie family. Peter McRorie was born c.1803 in Perthshire, Scotland and married Janet Campbell on 22 May 1831, in Crieff, Perthshire. In April, 1855, Peter and Janet arrived in Geelong with four of their five children. Peter's younger brother, William and his wife Elizabeth Bean had settled in the Geelong area a year earlier. Peter and William were both stonemasons and for a time worked together on stone bridges and other projects in that area.
- Gold had been discovered in the region only a year before, and from Bendigo to Ballarat miners were flooding in. Peter McRorie was hired to manage a new gold mine, situated nearby. Today the white quartz-rich mullock heaps of the long-abandoned mine dominate the paddock opposite the property. The McRories lived at Vale Hill until they both died, just three months apart, in 1895. They are buried together in nearby Smeaton cemetery. Their headstone reads "They were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their death they were not divided". Through the twentieth century, the mining industry gave way to farming. The rich volcanic soil of the plain provided the perfect conditions for wheat, sheep and cattle ventures – and indeed, continues to do so. After the McRories, Vale Hill was acquired by Frederick and Eve Toose. Toose descendants still farm the land in the district today. Vale Hill stood proud in the landscape until 1978, when tragedy struck in the form of a fire that destroyed the property, leaving only four badly scarred walls and a trio of chimneys standing. The ruins of the old McRorie-Toose home became a local landmark for the next 30 years, until the property was purchased in 2005 by local business-owners Chris Walden and Wayne Cross who, after 14 months of patient negotiation before were able to buy it and undertook the most stunning transformation. Over the 11 ensuing years they meticulously developed both the house and garden.
- When Chris and Wayne described the day they bought the property, 'The site was dry, windswept and covered in low grass. There were only about four trees on the whole place'. Chris and Wayne set out to build a sustainable garden. They didn't want to allocate water to any plant that wouldn't eventually give something back. Over the years, the Vale Hill garden kept them in fruit and vegetables for much of every year and was a major source of supply for their restaurant.

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- Today, the property comprises 10 acres (four hectares), of which half are paddocks. The remainder comprises the house, outbuildings and arguably the largest domestic edible garden in the state. Its delightful labyrinthine design contains a wide range of fruit trees and shrubs – including a large number of unusual and rare species – along with sweeping terraced beds for seasonal and annual plantings.

The Garden:

- Occupying almost five acres, the edible garden at Vale Hill is vast. Like the house itself, it is reached along an undulating quartz-topped driveway, bordered by 100 pencil pines – interspersed between which, a sudden glory early each spring, lie 2000 daffodil bulbs, and, beautiful in autumn, 800 Washington hawthorns.
- The garden itself is set around meandering pathways, with fruiting hedges curved into windbreaks. Terraces, elevations, and companion planting schemes create a variety of microclimates, ensuring success for a vast range of fruits and berries. There are multiple plants of every species represented, fulfilling the desire of previous owners to be able supply ample top-quality fresh produce to the kitchen of their restaurants. Chris and Lisa have continued this tradition by giving produce to local chefs for their restaurants.
- The lowest slopes of the hill on which the garden stands comprise a spacious marquee lawn, surrounded by large steel raised flowerbeds, containing over 160 rose bushes of many varieties.
- The rest of garden sprawls majestically up the hill embracing the house on all four sides. To list all its plants would take half the day, but here is a sample: elderberries, bay trees, Washington Thorn hawthorn bushes, Portuguese laurel, cherries, almonds, peaches, several varieties of apples, plums, lemons, limes, pomegranates, pears, hazelnuts, chestnuts, quinces, persimmons, feijoas, and blood oranges.
- These species are perfectly adapted to the central Victorian climate, but the intricate design of the garden has enabled a few other, very unusual, plants to take root and thrive. There is, for instance, a mature hedge made from carob bushes and, most remarkably of all, almost two dozen established bottle trees, which are normally found only in the tropical far north of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.
- Interspersed through the garden are several decorative and architectural elements. There are some imposing sculptures, referencing both modern and classical styles, some startling large piles of white quartz that overtly reference the gold mining past of the region, and next to the swimming pool, the ruined remains of the old milking shed, repurposed by a domed iron roof and laser-cut fences into a delightful grotto, now called the ‘champagne room’ and regularly used as such! Also notable is an original dry-stone wall – once a traditional construction method in the Goldfields – festooned with grapevines and figs, hardy survivors planted many decades ago.
- Another garden feature, positioned close to the house itself and visible from the kitchen, is a large brick-covered dome. This is the top of large underground storage tank, which collects rainwater from the house roof and redirects it for internal use. In dry months, the garden itself is watered by a bore that feeds two 32,000 litre storage tanks.
- Adjacent to the formal gardens are paddocks comprising another five acres of land. The top paddock is now occupied by resident Alpacas: Dancing Queen, Filagree, Eden and little Alfie.

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- For those interested, Vale Hill House today comprises four bedrooms, three bathrooms, two kitchens, double-height entrance hall, multiple dens, lounge rooms and entertaining areas, as well as a 170 year-old wine cellar, and a separate semi-self-contained apartment in the barn. Today the remaining walls form the core of the house. The stocky lintels, window and door frames, destroyed in the fire, have been reinstated using aged hardwoods. Instead of a replacement wood-beam ceiling, the bluestone walls are topped by a beautiful glass surround – flooding these originally shadowed spaces with natural light – hanging beneath an expansive metal roof. The roof itself is supported on vertical steel H-beams, which form part of the internal aesthetic.
- The core section of the house contains the master bedroom complex, which comprises the bedroom itself (with views across the plain to Mt Kooroocheang), ensuite bathroom, dressing room and self-contained den and study. It also contains two further spacious guest bedrooms, and a second bathroom with spa.
- At the rear of the bluestone core is the original wine cellar, its walls and vaulted ceiling made from multiple layers of handmade bricks. Beautifully cool even on the hottest of summer days, the cellar has storage for more than 500 bottles.
- The entrance to Vale Hill adapts the ruins of the original foyer, with today's front door opening into a space defined by bluestone and brick walls that still show the scars of the 1978 fire. The entranceway today soars to a light-filled double-height apex. A steel staircase leads up to kitchen, dining and entertaining areas – which themselves link back to the bluestone core by means of a steel and glass internal bridge.
- The expansion and progressive adaptation of Vale Hill House was an 11 year project that has involved the combined skills and insight of the developers Chris and Wayne – both of whom are experienced property developers together with South Yarra's respected Centrum Architects, and the late interior designer, Stuart Rattle.
- Chris and Lisa plan to maintain Vale Hill House to the high standards of the original settlers and all those who've owned and loved the property over the years. 'We are always thinking about the next project or improvement for the property, more animals, expanding the garden, adding a summer lunching house, it's hard to improve on what we already have, we feel so humbled and lucky to own a true piece of Victorian Goldfields history.'

Conclusion:

Vale Hill House has been featured in the following media:

1. **Dream Build** - Vale Hill featured on Dream Build, Season 1 Episode 3 – Goldfields, in 2012.

The description for the show was "What will happen to a Victorian goldfields ruin when the architect's first thought is, "What am I going to do that that?"

<https://www.valehill.com.au/wp-content/blogs.dir/6/files/2022/06/03%20Goldfields.mp4>

2. **A Place In The Country** - Vale Hill also featured in the book "A Place In The Country" written by Stephen Crafti, published by Craftsman House in 2008.

"The new wave of country houses in Australia and New Zealand reflects the desire of many city dwellers to get away from the pace and competitive edge of the city and find fulfillment in the peace, stillness and natural beauty of the land."

3. **Sale Video 2016** - https://youtu.be/u_3pcFK8Y70

Garden Planting Guide

The below planting guide to be read in conjunction with the Vale Hill Map (supplied as a separate file)

Driveway area - not shown on map

Platanus orientalis – Alford Blaze to the main road; Cupressus sempervirens Glauca conifer – Italian Pencil Pine; Crataegus phaenopyrum – Washington Hawthorn hedge; Daffodils - 2000 planted around the pencil pines

2 – Homestead Back Entrance

Oakleaf hydrangea – Snow flake; Acer pseudoplatanus – Sycamore

4 – Pool area

Agapanthus Black Pantha, Agapanthus Dwarf White, Ligustrum – Privet hedge, Passionfruit – lower wall creeper

5 – Champagne Room

Black Mulberry, Cupressocyparis leylandii – Cypress hedges, Wisteria floribunda

6 – Virgin Rock

Elaeagnus hedge

7 – Mullock Heaps

Diospyros Ebenaceae – Persimmons, Ceratonia siliqua – carob hedge, Brachychiton rupestris – Queensland bottle tree, Eucalyptus pauciflora - Snow gum

8 – Feijoa Garden

Ulmus horizontalis – Horizontal Elm, Brachychiton rupestris – Queensland bottle tree, Feijoa hedge

9 – Lavender Walk

Brachychiton rupestris – Queensland bottle tree, Arthropodium cirratum – New Zealand rock lily, Citrus x sinensis – Blood orange, Nepeta – Catmint, Cercis canadensis – Forest Pansy, Euphorbia characias - wulfenii

10 – Secret Garden

Arizona Blue Ice Cypress, Brachychiton rupestris – Queensland bottle tree, Cupressocyparis leylandii – Cypress hedges

11 – Cloud Garden

Laurus nobilis – Bay tree hedge; Brachychiton rupestris – Queensland bottle tree; Miscanthus sinensis grass; Teucrium fruticans - *Shrubby germander*; Rosmarinus officinalis – Creeping Rosemary

12 – West Orchard

Fruit trees: Pears, Figs, Apricots, Apples, Plums, Quince; Punica granatum – Pomegranate; Corylus – Hazelnut Hedge to northern fence

13 – Fire Pit

Cupressus sempervirens Glauca conifer – Italian Pencil Pine, Euphorbia characias - wulfenii, Rosmarinus officinalis – Creeping Rosemary, Figs

14 – Cherry orchard

Fruit trees; Almonds, Cherries, Plums, Nectarines, Pomegranate, Mespilus germanica – Dutch Medlar, Bartlett Pear, Carpinus betulus – Fastigiata Hornbeam to south, Crataegus phaenopyrum – Washington Hawthorn hedge to northern fence

16 – Marquee Lawn

Elaeagnus to the perimeter of the marquee lawn, Prunus lusitanica – Portugal laurel to the east fence line, Crataegus phaenopyrum – Washington Hawthorn hedge to the northern fence, Quercus coccinea – Scarlet Oak trees to the east boundary, Malus floribunda – Crabapple glorious to the north

17 – Rose Garden

Raised rose gardens, Laurus nobilis – Bay tree, Psidium cattleianum – Strawberry guava, Sambucus nigra – European elder & Cut Leaf Elderberry, Elaeagnus to the north of the path, Prunus lusitanica – Portugal laurel to the east, Carpinus betulus – Fastigiata Hornbeam to south, Crataegus phaenopyrum – Washington Hawthorn hedge to the west

18 – Iris Garden

Iris germanica, Laurus nobilis – Bay tree, Ornamental Pear – Bradford, Buxus balearica - Balearic boxwood

19 – Quince Grove

Olive hedge, Cydonia oblonga – Quince, Liquidambar styraciflua, Wild Meadow Flowers, Crataegus Mexicana – Mexican Hawthorn

20 – Lower Paddock

Fraxinus angustifolia – Narrow-leaf ash and Quercus palustris – Pin Oak

21 – Cottage Garden

Brachychiton rupestris – Queensland bottle tree, Punica granatum – Pomegranate, Feijoa hedge, Perennials & Miscanthus grass, Fagus sylvatica – Copper beech hedge to north, Viburnum tinus hedge to the east, Oakleaf hydrangea – Snow flake

23 – Upper Paddock

Cupressus sempervirens Glauca conifer – Italian Pencil Pine, Eucalyptus pauciflora - Snow gum, Fraxinus angustifolia – Narrow-leaf ash

25 - Ravello

Limes, Ligustrum – Privet hedge, Ceratonia siliqua – carob hedge to the east, Olive hedge to the east and south, Cupressocyparis leylandii – Cypress hedge to the west, Mespilus germanica – Medlar

26 – Lemon Grove

Lemon trees, Ceratonia siliqua – carob hedge to the east, Olive hedge to the east and north, Cupressocyparis leylandii – Cypress hedge to the west, Psidium cattleianum – Strawberry guava, Punica granatum – Pomegranate, Sambucus nigra – European elder, Diospyros Ebenaceae – Persimmons

27 – Orchard Road

Fruit trees; Cherries, Fig, Apples, Plums, Nectarines, Peaches, Quinces, King Mulberry and Casuarina – She oaks

29 – Poplar Forest

Crataegus phaenopyrum – Washington Hawthorn hedge, Heathere colchica – Ivy, Populus tremula – European Aspen & Nigra, Chestnut De Coppi – Marone & Red Spanish, Liriodendron Chinese – Chinese tulip poplar, Tilda cordata – Tilia, Eucalyptus pauciflora – Snow Gum, Rosmarinus officinalis – Creeping Rosemary

30 – Front Lawn

Front lawn with perennials & Miscanthus

Tilda cordata – Tilia, sinensis grass border, Buxus – English box, Pyrus calleryana – Cleveland Select, Common Hornbeam to the north, Viburnum tinus hedge to the south and west, Prunus lusitanica – Portugal laurel to the east, Quercus palustris – Pin Oak to centre of lawn

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These notes can be downloaded from the Open Gardens Victoria website:

www.opengardensvictoria.org.au