

Birregurra Cottage Garden

Our Birregurra garden is now three and a half years old. It sits on almost an acre of land which we purchased, along with a Federation timber house, back in 2019. The length of the block, parallel to Atkins Creek, faces north and has distant views over farmlands. Behind us to the south is the rural township of Birregurra and the Birregurra oval.

The property had a number of mature trees including gums. Three were removed because of age/storm damage, the remaining two at the front accompany a *Gleditsia Sunburst*, a Cedar and Liquidambar. Towards the back is an established Peppercorn tree and an Oak both which lived in a paddock where the previous owner kept sheep. Down the centre of the block was a long drive opening into a large gravel car park. I wish that I had the foresight to remove the sub base to this area as it is slowing down plant growth. A small garden with fruit trees existed to its north.

Creative vision:

Waiting for our landscaper who failed to submit a garden design, it was necessary for me to design the garden myself. Not having gardened or knowing anything about plants, soils or garden design, I proceeded to set out a plan comprising linked circles and curving paths.

During our house renovations on a boggy and messy building site, we pegged this design out and then we began slowly digging out garden beds between the timber pegs.

After 'sketch digging' the front of the block it was clear that our hopefully fabulous new garden was going to be extremely flat and uninteresting and so I decided to use rocks and soil mounds for height and also to help to define the garden rooms. The groups of rocks also assisted in planting as I had a focal point to arrange the plants around. They also seemed to create a microclimate which protected plants from the winds and shielded them from frost.

Plants and selections:

I visited a few local garden nurseries, including Bunnings, to buy plants. This was during Covid and so I couldn't travel too far. At this stage I was looking for plants that would be evergreen to establish the walls of the garden rooms. I also realised that I needed a mixture of leaf types and colours to make the planting look interesting and so I selected a mix of exotics and natives. When first planted they seemed very much like needles in a haystack but my imagination of a finished outcome kept me optimistic and enthusiastic. My partner and friends saw it as it was (needles in a haystack), but I imagined it in its full glory despite not knowing what the plants would be like when mature!

GARDEN NOTES

My partner has been a keen gardener most of his life and has an eye for special plants, most which were deciduous. I rejected these initially because I really wanted evergreen, however, now that the garden walls have established the exotics bring another layer of beauty to the plant groups and assist when adding new plants to make the groups more interesting.

What has been surprising to us is the rapid growth of our conifers toward the back of the garden. I am now concerned that I have planted them too close and that we will have a giant lump of green instead of an arrangement of elegant individual shapes.

Some local nurseries:

We were fortunate to find Cottage Garden Nursery in Gnarwarre in the early days who specialised in salvias and unusual plants. Their range of plants made me realise yet another layer of beauty to enrich our existing selections and our enthusiasm for salvias had the early garden beds looking plentiful and colourful.

In terms of selecting plants, my principle is to combine groups of colours, textures and leaf types to form the picture, resembling a painting.

Small plants, I usually buy in fives or sevens. The planting groups are based on colour, leaf texture, size and their shape. I try to juxtapose each group against either a different colour grouping or leaf texture grouping.

We discovered a nursery at Lara called Roraima. They sold plants which I had not seen in other nurseries with their different shapes and colours. When added to our existing plant groupings they often brought the groupings to life. One of my favorite grasses is the *Elegia Capensis* (Horsetail Grass) which combined with natives and conifers, enhances the colours and textures.

Of course some plants don't always survive in a garden and this causes the arrangement to break down but it also opens up a new idea for a garden bed when alternative plants are added.

After a purchase, I usually don't know where the plants will be located until I see them in the garden and the juxtaposition with their neighbours. I usually place them and then plant them a day or two later when sure that they will be right.

More garden planning;

Once the garden began to take shape, we realised that we needed a structure to add interest to the garden journey. As much as we like sculptures and objects in other's gardens, we prefer to let the plants do this work in our garden. My partner suggested a rose arbour which has a ring of timber posts linked by chains for climbing roses borrowed from an Edwardian concept. It is a nice pause point in the garden journey but I think that it would have been more successful in growing roses if it had more enclosure and so hopefully, as the surrounding plants establish, this will happen. It is open to the north, west and south and gets very wind blown at times.

GARDEN NOTES

The last part of the garden design was how to finish the back area adjacent to the oak tree and overlooking our compost and piles of new soil. The ground was originally hard and made of compacted soil but kept alive by a ground cover of weeds. When we made new garden beds, nothing seemed to grow there other than dahlias.

After the heavy rains of winter 2022, we lost a lot of trees in the back on the east and south boundaries. The year old banksias, sheoaks and Agonis all died from root rot. Thus a new strategy of purchasing plants for the back was adopted by buying plants that could cope more with wet feet. I also wanted trees which would grow quickly and help to disguise the nearby oval lights. A friend suggested Eucalyptus Scoparia gums and they are doing their job but we have planted quite a few and maybe I will regret this considering how difficult it is to grow plants under gums! The creek also flooded at this time and partly entered the back gate and so I decided to build a new mound in case of future flooding. This mound has plants which were planted last spring and are still yet to establish.

Our pool sits within a circular fence and we have endeavoured to plant this fence out keeping in mind pool fence safety regulations. The garden bed on the oval side was under water last winter and so we decided to build a new mound. This became our herbaceous border for last summer and it was so successful that many of the screening shrubs that we planted didn't have a chance against the canna lillies and salvias. We plan to keep them protected this summer from surrounding over growth.

Last year the garden, with many new flowering plants added, attracted many new bird species. Their song can be deafening at times! We hope that you enjoy a walk through our garden.

Things about which we should have had more foresight before commencing the garden design:

- Check out the ground conditions and quality of the existing soil.
- Check out surrounding water sources and drainage patterns, we have found that there are at least two underground water sources that cut through the site, making it difficult to grow plants in those areas.
- If planting over areas which have had bonfires make sure that you replenish the soil. Too much ash residue can kill a plant or make its growth slow.

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

www.opengardensvictoria.org.au

Birregurra Cottage is located on the lands of the Eastern Maar People. Open Gardens Victoria wishes to acknowledge the Traditional custodians of this land and we pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

