

## THE BARWITIAN GARDEN

This garden is found in a small rural spot named Barwite, on the Broken River, situated about 15km north-east from Mansfield, North East Victoria. My partner, Nicky Sanders, two daughters, Grace and Holly, cat Billy and a few chooks and I call this six acre block home. We live in a straw bale home overlooking a seasonal waterfall and shallow escarpment with a stretch of native habitat on the Broken River. Nicky bought the land about 15 years ago, designed and helped build the house and lived with Grace and Holly for about five years before I arrived. I met Nicky around 10 years ago, funnily enough via a garden consultation!! We talked about putting in a retainer wall for about 10 minutes and then talked about everything else in life for the evening!! We connected so beautifully and fell in love. I was welcomed whole heartedly into the fold. I moved in about a year and half later. About five years ago we built a studio which is our creative sanctuary. It's where Nicky does ceramics, graphic design and fine art photography and I design gardens and paint as an artist. I paint with paint or plants; the process is the same for me. My approach is based in feeling, thought, experience, knowledge and applied with free will and personal truth where spontaneity trumps tradition. I visualise the colours, flowers, the attributes of plants at all times/seasons, the textures, contrast and heights all being deeply considered in the moment.

Before I started the garden there were some casuarinas on the south side of the house with an oak, a few fruit trees, some birches on the north side, a plane tree on the eastern side and a planting of eucalypts on the western boundary, all planted by Nicky. The rest of the area was full of one metre high grass and weed species. The house was perfectly positioned with the river and waterfall being the main viewing axis through and from the house. The waterfall is such a beautiful asset in regard to the energy, sound and atmosphere it gives.

The garden started very tentatively three years ago. To start with I installed the retainer wall (free of charge of course!) around the small gravel courtyard at the house. I cultivated a strip of land about two measly metres wide along the south side of the house and got some perennials on the move. There really wasn't any great intention until I found myself looking down the length of the bed a couple of months later and realised that I had to fan the garden out around the house and studio to be able to create the beautiful depth that I saw in that moment. Then I was possessed!!

I needed to create a garden that offers a sense of beauty, detail and depth from almost any place, creating a feeling of being completely immersed but very much also in the landscape. The house and studio needed to be settled into the landscape, gently emerging whilst still singing with its architectural design elements. The house in particular has a beautifully curved roof seen from the river and the soft rendered straw bale walls are most agreeable with plants. This also helps tie in with the theme of curves experienced in

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the landscape and also needed to be applied to the garden. These curves echo the house roof, hilltops, river and give a natural relaxed feel.

I set out and prepared some beds for planting and after the first season it became clear that the garden would be extended considerably in order to achieve what I felt was a good fit in the landscape. So new beds were prepared and planting is underway. Using a variable palette of perennials and grasses as the bulk of the planting, there are many different genus and species with some trees and shrubs in the mix, there are a number of *Xanthorrhoea* 'Super Grass' spotted around the entire garden. These form part of a thought aimed at the future, with these grass trees being able to revel in their grandiose presence, eventually growing to about 5m high, at this time the garden will be quite different. I'll take it as it comes and react to that then!

The trees found in the garden are *Zelkova serrata*, *Parrotia persica*, *Ulmus parvifolia*, *Acer palmatum*, *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia', *Azara microphylla*, *Betula utilis* 'Jacquemontii', *Ficus johannis* ssp. *afghanistanica*, *Cerdiphylum japonicum*, *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy', *Ginkgo biloba*, *Arbutus unedo*, *Pistacio chinensis*, *Malus spectabilis*, *Lagerstroemia* sp., *Juglans nigra*, *Allocasuarina* sp., *Eucalyptus gregsoniana*, *Eucalyptus polyanthemos*, *Eucalyptus scoparia*, *Eucalyptus leucoxyton* Dwarf, and *Tristaniopsis laurina*. The garden is currently growing at an extraordinary rate.

A key element is having a superb slightly clay loam with plenty of good stuff already in the mix. Also, preparation in eliminating dominant weed grasses/plants and a quarter of a cubic kilometre of mulch, wheel barrowed in!! My Zen mode kicks in when doing this task and it's good exercise!! Ha!! The mulch improves the soil profile, stimulates the mycelium, bio flora, suppresses weed growth and holds moisture. There's watering to be done in establishing the newly planted plants and to activate minerals etc in the soil but once established the water holding capacity and quality of the soil means there's minimal water during the growing season with the exception of some of shady/woodland plantings under a few of the trees. There's a veggie garden on the far eastern side, which has just been relocated and preparation is underway.

The garden is full of change and interest throughout the growing seasons, from the start of spring when the switch is flicked and the garden is turned on!! An eruption of buds, flowers, foliage, insects and birds take hold and the growth and change is dramatic. For me it has strong parallels with nature, painting and music, so dynamic and changing daily. The flowers, colour and growth generally peak by mid to late summer and then we move into autumn and by mid to late autumn, the garden has completely changed as plants have finished the year's growth and are receding into their winter decay. This time in autumn is my favourite time to experience the garden. After the preceding months of amazing growth and vibrancy the garden becomes softer, quieter, slower, the colours change from green and intense hues to blacks, chocolates, gold, honey, oats, oranges, yellows, purples, painted in frosts and glistening in the mornings, the transformation is immense and beautiful. The structure and architecture of the spent flowers, stems and foliage still hold very true in this other state.

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During winter I make changes, digging up, dividing plants, and changing areas of planting that need to be changed, whilst letting seed set and the process of decay do its thing elsewhere, truly mesmerising and miraculous!! There are countless moments that a garden gives, which enables us to be present in the moment, giving us fulfillment, peace and joy.

There are areas that have been planted during the current growing season, alongside other areas that go back four years and everywhere in between. Every season there are areas changed and tweaked. This is normal practice in such a garden.

The sense of scale and the naturalistic theme in planting was governed by a thirst to learn about plants, to be embraced by the beauty, feeling and life whilst being sensitive in touching and blending with the sublime backdrops all around. The garden also is a learning resource for my soul, garden design and plant consultancy business. Seeing possible plant combinations gathered from the entire garden is such a great resource when designing gardens. It's a very different garden to what might be designed for clients as their needs, wants, desires and sites are unique to themselves and I design accordingly. The paddock on the south side of the property will potentially be planted as a native woodland with native edible herbs and plants, grasses and shrubs with a maintenance regime of cool burning being used. This is a particular passion with Nicky and is in its research phase.

While being inspired by the plants themselves, the bush and mountain alpine landscapes are always engaging in the dialogue. I'm particularly inspired by my mum who sadly passed away six years ago but said to me, "*Do it while you can*". I am also inspired by Piet Oudolf, Cassian Schmidt, Beth Chatto, Christopher Lloyd, Wolfgang Oehme and James Van Sweden, Noel Kingsbury, Michael McCoy, Ellis Stones and my special mates at Antique Perennials – Matt Reed, Mike Morant and the crew who have been a huge part of my own creative and personal transformation/journey and in growing a heap of amazing plants.

While this garden is an ongoing work of art that feeds my soul, it is also created for my darlings, Nicky, Grace and Holly, as well as anybody else who wanders in!! I dearly hope you enjoy.

### **Ralph Bristow**

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***The Barwitian Garden is located on the lands of the Taungurung people. Open Gardens Victoria wishes to acknowledge the Traditional custodians of this land and we pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.***

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

[www.opengardensvictoria.org.au](http://www.opengardensvictoria.org.au)

