

THE STONES

Settled by Cornish miners on Dja Dja Wurrung country, The Stones is an historic property dating back to 1857.

The old farmhouse built from local stone is complemented by a stone barn, an Edwardian stucco dairy, a long iron milking shed, and the original first wattle and daub stables, tucked into the ground behind a woodland of peppercorn trees.

Its tough and utilitarian past didn't allow for the frivolities of a garden, with the exception of a few walnut and fruit trees, and a sentinel pine. So apart from this there was nothing here but paddocks right up to the gate, broken up with rocky crags and river flats.

Twenty or so years ago, the previous custodians laid out the house garden with some well chosen trees and plants. For us taking over the helm nine years ago, we were faced with waist high grass and a sea of weeds, and very little experience gardening in this land of savage frosts and searing dry summer heat.

In that first blind sighted year, we lost a lot of plants. Things that initially did well in the first summer were crucified in the winter to follow, so we slowly learned the climatic language and the plant limitations it governed. We turned to looking at what did well in local gardens, particularly the neglected ones, ruin sites and roadsides where stalwart plants survived. Through this we slowly expanded our repertoire of plants. We concentrated on doing our own landscaping and built many of the stone walls and steps in an historically sympathetic style to be in keeping with those in the local area.

Slowly we expanded the garden beyond the house grounds with new beds and plantings in a less traditional style. The cactus and grasses garden was created to cope with an area which receives very little supplementary water and no shelter or shade. Although cacti thrive over the warmer months they can suffer in winter so we try to focus on cold climate cactus with the exception of a few favourites which we protect on particularly frosty nights. We love their bold architectural forms in combination with the soft whimsy of the grasses.

Generally the garden has to fend for itself, not only because of the tough climate, but also to suit our busy working life. Luckily we love things to be a little wild and naturalistic, as it fits the heady atmosphere of this place.

Straight lines, formal severity, and ostentatious displays of riotous colour look absurd here, so the garden is not only shaped by climatic constraints, but also by the unspoiled history of the place and its especially lovely ambience. Therefore the garden has to sit right to suit its unpretentious and visually quiet surroundings. It's something we are mindful of with every new project here.

In April, the garden is in a state of transition. The summer growth has faded and the hot and dry conditions have mellowed, usually broken by the "Easter break", otherwise known as the first rains of the season. It's a romantically shabby scene of spent seed heads and new autumn growth in tandem - all dominated by the glorious colours of the turning leaves.

The garden now is mostly shades of amber and crimson with the compelling apricot tones of the grasses intensifying with every cooler night. It's a scene of birth and decay in equal measure.

In these tricky climes, the perpetual wax and wane of all things here is a challenge which we have to negotiate. Learning to accept that not everything works out quite the way you want it to, or that some garden endeavours will turn to ruin, is all part of the process. But often there is unexpected magic too, and triumphs quite beyond our design.

This is the real beauty of creating a garden in a place as harsh as here.

You can follow our garden journey on instagram @thestonescentralvictoria

The Stones is located on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung People. Open Gardens Victoria wish 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

