

GARDEN NOTES

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 complimented 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 pepper corn trees.

It's tough and utilitarian past didn't allow for the frivolities of a garden, except for 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 a 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 were 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. To accommodate we tried 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.



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In September, the garden is in a state of transition. Many of the winter bulbs have been and gone, but the awakening of new growth heralds a pastel prettiness through the garden which is otherwise more focused on varying shades of green and greys.

The overblown flowers of the Paulownia emerge from their winter hibernation, covering the tree (before leaves appear), in a cloak of regal purple. The long woodland of pepper corn trees (Schinus Molle) takes on a ghoulish shade of green and sometimes brown if the winter frosts have been particularly harsh. Occasionally they lose their leaves altogether.

But in this tricky climate, the perpetual wax and wane of all things here is a challenge which we must 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.

You can follow our garden journey on Instagram @thestonescentralvictoria

These notes can be downloaded from the Open Gardens Victoria website:
www.opengardensvictoria.org.au