

GARDEN NOTES

Yurnga

On buying Yurnga in 1969, George and I lived permanently in Melbourne so would only be able to come to the farm to visit every three or four weeks when George had a weekend off duty. This meant I was only able to plant carefully, plants or even cuttings, which would survive the three or four weeks without water. I would mulch very carefully and hope for the best.

On planting I wanted to marry the house paddock with the surrounding paddock and did not want to lose the view from beyond the fence. There is a history of planting the big evergreen oak from over the road. Neighbours, Fergie and Irene Murray, brought two special ones which were planted just as you come into the garden and the other at the end of the stock yards. Another very early planting was the blue cedar and then two mimosas at the edge of the house, a result of visiting our son in South Africa, where they were growing in abundance. Another, a pencil pine, the biggest plant from a seedling growing from our house at 25 Davis St.

On talking to David Pruscino one day, another neighbour, and looking at a creeper (solandra) sprawling over the front verandah I said "I'm putting it on a pergola when I find someone to do it". "I can" said David and it hasn't stopped flowering since.

I've had many phases of starting this garden and it wasn't until feeding my roses right in front of the house that I realised I needed to change my choice of plants. No good feeding and watering roses three times a year when planted next to grasses which grew with no effort. Hence, in about 2006 or 2007 I started following David Glenn with his catalogues and buying his trees and shrubs in pots which I had to nurture till I got to the farm. Earlier, tubes had been advertised from the Department of Natural Resources (this is very early in the piece - the '70s) so these were planted along fence lines between paddocks. There was a blank canvas in '69 - only grass in the paddocks.

In about '72 the dam was enlarged and out of that dozens of pine trees grew so I dug them up one day whilst Elsa Hodge was here. Her husband was Bill Hodge who fixed our water pump. Elsa helped me plant them along the fence next to Lisa Hay's. In the past we had quite a few paddocks and as the children needed education they were sold to enable this action.

On purchasing Yurnga I had a clear palette, only grass, no trees, except existing cypresses around the house. When one year visiting my niece in Rome, I wanted all cypresses to look like Roman pines, so I had John Pruscino's brother in law come and remove all branches low down, leaving the top to look like Roman pines. It didn't work. During the first big storm all these branches were ripped off. On the one existing pine, halfway up the northern side of it, there is a little groove with a baby Moreton Bay fig with its roots stretching around the trunk of the dead tree. The seed came from an existing big Moreton Bay fig as you come through the gate.

As you come in from Mt Lookout Road on the right hand side near the stockyards there are two pin oaks grown from seeds from the large one in front of the house. Only five seeds

collected that time from the pin oak, which was named after Alex Graves, were put in on the afternoon of his funeral. My husband, George, planted a gum nearby with beautiful silver bark in honour of his colleague, John Woodward.

The first tree you see as you come in from the front gate is araucaria *Bidwillii*, (Bunya Pine). There is also a big one of these on the west side of the house paddock.



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On wanting to move the front gate from next to the stockyards I had to move a big radiata pine and I put in a row of olives of three different varieties on the left hand side. My first olive tree, put in outside the kitchen window, is in memory of my brother who, on returning, planned to grow olives in the country but died in London at 47 years of age.

My first robinia died after Round Up was applied to suckers which put themselves about all over the garden. I replanted another in the same spot but did not repeat the exercise. Two yew trees on the north fence line are from my Uncle Carl's big tree in Canterbury - two cuttings I put in pots now about 10-15 feet. I treasure them. My Uncle Carl had a beautiful garden. He would pick buckets of flowers and give them to the matrons for the hospitals as he did his rounds.

About early 2005, because I was keen on Piet Oudolf's (a Dutch garden designer) planting in the Mediterranean style, I saw that grasses, even next to succulents, could work. David Glenn was producing these plants that were suited to our climate rather than England's. He has played a huge part in transforming the ordinary Australian garden. We had to adapt. We had to change. We could have our delicate plants like hydrangeas facing south but those facing the north in summer would have to survive this climate without too much extra water. Other influences were Rick Darke's "Encyclopaedia on Grasses", Filippi Olivier's "The Dry Gardening Handbook" and Noel Kingsbury whom I did meet once at the Royal Botanic Gardens.

Another very significant part of my gardening life was Kath Coster. She lived on the Nicholson river and sold \$2 and \$3 plants which she potted on the banks of the river as a 94 or 6 year old. I really loved her. She was the epitome of a gentle woman.

This garden is a huge mixture of plants: salvias, gauras like butterflies, grasses waving amongst nodding verbena *Bonariensis*, red hot pokers in winter and trees put in where I had a spot... sometimes watching for something to die... not always right but the best thing at the time!

While visiting our son in Africa and seeing the baobabs, I put one in on coming home. Planted it too close to an oak but I've got it! When you see something you like for the first time you have to buy it whether you have room for it or not. I saw a huge pot in Italy while at a wedding. It had red, pink and white oleander with stems wound around each other. I bought a pot like it and planted it with red and white oleander but am still looking for a pink one.

The champagne garden, named as that, is where we sat overlooking the landscape towards Mt Taylor, sipping champers. I've loved visiting Antique Perennials and its elements with all the plants of Mediterranean style, plants to die for - you want everything! I've forgotten to mention the silver pears I bought from Goodmans and many others. My araucarias: two *Bidwillii*, (Bunya Pine), three *Cunninghamii* (Hoop or Moreton Bay Pine) and three *Heterophylla* (Norfolk Pine). Other plants bulbs and trees I have put in are as follows: Japanese maples, liquidambars, alliums, jonquils, and daffodils, grasses: *oryzopsis rigida*, pennisetums, the king of grasses - calamagrostis *Karl Foerster*, miscanthus, carex and poa amongst the many!

My early years always involved plants. From age seven I had a vegetable garden. During my secondary schooling I lived with my godmother. My godmother would take my cousin and I to the Royal Botanic Gardens regularly. In the 1940s we would catch a train to Flinders Street then take a boat from what is now Federation Square to Anderson Street and gate 1 as that was how you got there with no car. We would walk through the gardens and feed the ducks, listen to the brass band and have afternoon tea. **Shirley Stirling**

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Shirley Stirling

Shirley Stirling, or as we think of her, Stirling Shirl, is a 94 years young gardener. Upon meeting her you are immediately drawn to her cheekiness and vitality. Shirl has a 2 acre garden, Yurnga, just out of Bairnsdale in East Gippsland. She refers to her garden as a “working, country garden”. Shirl and her husband bought the property in 1969. It was a treeless, grassy paddock overlooking the mountains. Thus the name: “Yurnga”- an Aboriginal word meaning “View Among The Hills”. The family used it as an escape from the city until 2009 when they moved here permanently. Shirley says she owes much of her successful planting to David Glenn of Lambley Nursery. He provided tough plants which survived while Shirley and family went back and forth to Melbourne in the early years. Shirley has been gardening since she was seven or eight years old after her mother gave Shirley and her brothers a small garden plot each.

Shirley is passionate about her plants. She describes her garden as having something happening all the time, but not in a great big flush of one plant in particular. She knows the names of all her plants and has a number of rare trees. She has only recently employed a helper in her garden. With the wet seasons we have had lately and also because of the need to rid her garden of mulch due to the threat of bushfires in 2019/20, the weeds have “gotten away” from her. She has family to help out but as they live far away, they cannot be on constant garden duty.

In summer, purple verbena bonariensis nodding its head amongst golden grasses, is a sight to behold. Shirley loves grasses. Calamagrostis *Karl Foerster* is one of her favourites. She loves using gaura to soften areas.

Dotted around Shirley’s prolific garden are a number of chairs. Using her walker, Shirl takes her tools to the chairs and gardens while sitting. There is no limit to this grand lady’s indomitable spirit! Shirley is an example of how to overcome obstacles at any age or stage. Shirley is on constant look out for those plants that “have put themselves about” and self seeded too freely.

There is no such thing as a quick visit to see Shirley’s garden! Love of her garden and of people, is evident. It is difficult to leave this beautiful garden and this amazing, amusing and very interesting woman. Shirley is as much a treasure as her garden.

