

## GARDEN NOTES

### Nioka

Nioka's garden evolved over fifty years through the hands of four custodians with Jack Lätti as the current caretaker and designer. Over the past seven and a half years, since the Lätti family took ownership of the garden, it has become home to a wide collection of succulents, whilst retaining some of the earlier structures.

Key to understanding the current layout and plant selection of the garden are a few pragmatic requirements:

#### 1. Aesthetically Pleasing

- Maintain and frame the views of the surrounding areas
- Create and retain defined spaces for specific functions
- Allow freedom of movement around and through each space, ensuring that each remains unique, and
- Ensure cohesion between all areas.

#### 2. Home to a vast succulent collection

- Aloes, aloes, and more aloes including bred and registered cultivars and hybrids,
- Plants with succulence including cacti, euphorbias, stapelias, echeverias, crassulas, agaves and bottle trees (*Brachychiton rupestris*), and
- Propagated mother stock for ceramic art.

#### 3. Reducing fire risk

Interpretation of CFA 10/50 rule:

- Close to the house, succulents are planted and vegetation prone to burning reduced
- Tall eucalypts are more than 10m away where possible, and
- Shrubs (mostly indigenous) are reduced in paddocks up to 50m away.

### Visitors

#### The Front Garden

Approaching the property from Gumtree Road on the south, visitors will encounter the first garden bed to the left of the main gate. Established in January-March 2018, the garden includes a number of aloes. Here Jack created garden beds with large rocks arranged in a seating area, planted out with Queensland Bottle Trees to create a shaded area. This arrangement represents a remnant concept from Jack's childhood when he and his dad transformed rock faces in Johannesburg, where Jack grew up, to create spaces where the family could have meals.

The two front gardens are raised to obscure Gumtree Road and the fence from the view of the house with the bed next to the house raised to hide the driveway from the indoor living area. Clivias were planted along the shaded southern side of the house in order to increase lush foliage in the shaded areas. Agaves are found at both ends, with the remainder of the beds grading towards mass planting of stemless aloes along the driveway. Both areas in the front garden also include larger aloes with single or multiple stems - *A. barbarae*, *ferox*, *africana*, *marlothii*, some hybrids and *castanea*.

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### The Sculpture Garden

Following the bluestone path from the front garden bed, the visitor is led towards the west of the house which displays the sculpture garden featuring kikuyu lawn, pink mudstone boulders and a mulched QLD bottle tree garden bed with pigface and crassula succulents along the north and western fences.

The art pieces on the mudstone slabs and boulders are scattered throughout to capture the gaze of the viewer's journey through the ceramic sculptures and from inside the glass atrium, as well as obstructing the neighbouring backyard. In time the *Brachycitons* will become a feature in themselves, leading unto the rendered chicken coop.

During the Covid pandemic the sculpture garden was a great display area while the pottery studio required additional social distancing measures.

### The Lapa

One of the first areas planted seven years ago is this sunken area level. The area is used extensively to make fires in the fire pit which has an amphitheater-like ambiance. Planting in the soil against the large concrete water tank hides it from view. Taller species along the top of the amphitheater wall frame the view and interesting plants are planted between the rocks of the wall itself. This area is mature and due to root competition from several gum trees close by has struggled over the last few summers, but still holds up well in its function.

The area was constructed in this way to be away from the house and provide a separate space, particularly at night, with a crackling fire creating a bush camp atmosphere and a South African 'braai' (BBQ) area.

### The View

The red brick paved area above the swimming pool is the most common position for first-time visitors to linger, fixated on the distant mountains and beautiful panorama. However, in this area the viewer will also find remnants of what is believed to be a rock bed placed by Gordon Ford in 1992, as well as the odd bottle brush. Other plants that have been retained include the jade plant *Portulacaria afra*, *leucospermum* and a range of palm trees planted by previous owners.

This area was planted out in the winter of 2016 with a large range of low aloe species such as *A x spinosissima* and related cultivars. Pockets among the rocks are rotated with new plants. The aloes provide various tones of green to grey foliage and spectacular flowers most of the year, luring the New Holland Honeyeater, the Eastern Spinebill and wrens, among numerous other birds.

It is expected that the pergola will be replaced over the next year, resulting in some changes to the garden. As time passed the area around the palms also became a vegetable production area with different crops depending on the season, including tomatoes, pumpkins and gem-squash in summer and leafy greens in the winter.

### The Pool Garden

At two years old, this is the newest garden on the property and was designed from the outside seated area to firstly hide the pool fences but, most importantly, link the formal exotic garden visually with the eucalyptus tree line beyond. One exception is an attempt to design an aloe flower display for the seated viewer most year-round. This garden is an extension of the "view" garden.

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Narrow patches of aloes run east to west to build a layered flowering display with all species hugging the ground and only a band of seasonal flowers on display. Taller plants on either side frame the overall view. Hidden in the middle is a garlic and onion patch with foliage to blend with the grey aloes.

In time, the pumphouse will be replaced by a rendered structure similar to the chicken coop and the lapa area will be extended with a pizza oven to link up with the kiln built.

### **The Studio Garden**

The eastern studio garden was planted concurrently with the lapa with the main aim to define a flat working and display area north of the studio. This garden is dominated by beautiful aloe Barbareas and Queensland bottle trees. The under story has recently been removed to give more attention to the larger structural trees.

Visitors are invited to explore the working pottery studio. The studio is a unique creative space, often open to the public for exhibitions. It is a working space, which also hosts workshops from time to time.

### **The Anagama Kiln**

The kiln is a realisation of a long dream of Jack's to build a wood fire kiln. The pandemic allowed for more time in which to transform the pottery. Wood is used as a fuel to create a glassy surface on ceramic pots and time spent to decorate and glaze pre-fired (bisque ware) pots is reduced. Wood as an energy source also satisfies the local council requirements to reduce fuel loads for bushfires making firing a kiln an energy friendly option.

### **The Nursery**

Finally, visitors will find a plant nursery area on the eastern side of the garden around the kiln. The nursery presently houses a series of plants protected by the Melbourne Rail and the north-east link authorities (*Dianella amoena*) in a restricted area. A large number of in house propagated succulents are also grown in the nursery and used for potting into new ceramic pots for sale from the studio. A variety of plants growing in the garden are also available to purchase during the open garden days.

**These notes can be downloaded from the Open Gardens Victoria website:**  
[www.opengardensvictoria.org.au](http://www.opengardensvictoria.org.au)