

GARDEN NOTES

CASA DEL SOL

'Casa Del Sol' (House in the Sun) was the plaque nailed to my grandparents' house. The original 'Casa' was located right on Makorori beach in Gisborne, New Zealand. Beautiful childhood seaside memories were made here, including Nan who was always working in the garden with her backside in the air. I remember huge bumble bees, sweet-scented roses and big black grapes on the vine – I was destined to become a keen gardener. And when we built our house in 2006, up went the plaque on the front wall. While the house had a name, the garden has been a work in progress ever since.

Being a garden designer for a living, my focus has been to create a sustainable garden constructed with locally-sourced stone and reclaimed timber and materials where possible, with mass plantings of hardy, interesting, drought-tolerant plants chosen to provide year-round colour and texture.

The house was finished in 2007 and in 2019 we finished the garden – like the plumber with the leaking tap syndrome! Time and money. It's a challenging site for any gardener – a difficult triangular-shaped sloping block with south-west facing fence line and to top it off an elevated site that frequently receives strong winds from all directions – my plants cop a hard time. A garden design was drawn up, and besides a little tweaking with plants, the garden is pretty much true to the original design.

Every good garden designer picks up on the 'borrowed landscape' and this was the pretext for me to incorporate an airplane within the design. The streets in this neighbourhood are named after WWII airplanes, however acquiring an 'Anson' plane (for Anson Court) was never going to happen. Thanks to 'Jeff the plane wrecker' a Piper Warrior now sits motionless on top of our garden studio.

Granite and bluestone dominate the landscape from the large cubed seats in the sunken outdoor lounge, to the slabs and blocks that form the walls and raised no-dig herb garden. We sourced the huge bluestone slabs from Bamstone Bluestone in Port Fairy then stored them – the garden was basically a 'quarry' for many years until it was time to get underway. Owning a crane truck came in very handy as some of the slabs are over 2.5 metres long and 60 millimetres thick (very heavy). These were lifted and shifted time and time again until they were finally placed and we no longer had to work around them. Big mission accomplished.

Under the plane is a wood-fired oven and a bluestone benchtop which doubles as housing for a Greek spit. It's all about friends and food down here. A Perspex pergola was built to keep the cooking area dry. The metal support posts were reclaimed from a friend's old carport that he was demolishing. There's also a 5,000-litre water tank.

The studio, originally Groundswell Gardens' depot, was transformed into its current state in 2019. When designing it we sought to keep costs down while minimising the environmental impact. Existing walls were retained where possible, and we kept the frame, but changed the roof from a pitched to a double-butterfly design. The design consists of three-metre-long reclaimed second-hand windows, bluestone flooring for the inside/outside flow, and cement and plyboard sheets as an inexpensive material for internal and external walling and ceilings.

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



Not long after the plane ‘crashed’ onto the studio roof, Marty my neighbour came by to inform me that he had once flown in that exact plane – my newly acquired Piper. “Get outta town!” He’d taken a photo of the plane and confirmed the serial number YH-CIK with his old boss, the previous owner. Story has it that Marty had flown in it from Essendon to Ballarat airports and the boss’s partner had overshot the runway into a bunch of trees. What are the chances of that, hey? Small world indeed.

Other quirky items include the reclaimed aviation posts salvaged from the RAAF base in Laverton – now used to support a wild passionfruit vine. The fuel tank from an F1-11 (I think) was reclaimed and mounted into our deck, as if a bomb has just landed. ‘Lucky’ I call the sculpture – as in ‘lucky it missed the house’! And a reminder of how lucky we are to be alive and well in this lucky country.

We planted the Blueberry Ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*) hedge on ‘day one’ to screen out the neighbours. This is one of my favourite trees as there is always something going on with them throughout the year. When in flower, this hedge brings in thousands of bees and that’s a great thing. It’s a strikingly beautiful and hardy plant that flowers, fruits and provides interesting foliage year-round.

As well as all sorts of ‘weird and wonderful’ focal points there are two water features. In the front a field granite boulder has been carved into a large bowl that rests on top of a half-cut boulder that is given extra support with two metal stilts – something Salvador Dali would be proud of!

As you enter the rear garden – through reclaimed circa 1960s gates that have been painted and reformatted to slide over the second water feature – there is a 4.5-metre-long fishpond. This has two sections – the largest with fish and the smaller for plants to thrive and to attract frogs who can safely lay eggs that won’t become fish food.

I can see and hear both water features from my drawing desk in the front office and I’ll often watch bathing birds and surfacing fish with pencil in hand.

Leaning against a north-facing wall and pride of place in a Mexican-style cactus garden is a massive San Pedro cactus, almost at its mature height of 6.5 metres. With the other cacti this provides stunning night-flowering pleasure and the bees just love it.

With a large variety of flowering plants, Casa Del Sol is a pollen haven for local bees – something I wish more people would consider when designing or having someone design their garden. Please, we need bees!

The ‘wild style’ is my style. It might sound savage, but I just love to see plants competing for juxtaposition. A passionfruit vine strangling a banana, *Tetrapanax* suckers pushing up through ground covers, multiplying agaves, clumping cacti and Blue Chalk Stick succulents (*Senecio serpens*) running wild. Silver Torch cactus totems (*Cleistocactus strausii*) coming up and out from spiky *Lomandra* and low growing aloes.

I strive for gardens that move beyond pools and paving. Gardens with soul, gardens that tell you just a little bit about their owners, imperfect gardens with interesting plants that thrive on neglect and plants that give you surprises. In the words of Made Wijaya (the extraordinary Australian author and landscape architect who made his mark in Bali): “It’s all gone soulless, treeless, birdless and loveless”.

Let’s bring it back! I hope you dig my garden and Fly By Night Estudio that’s always in the sun.

Cam Swell