

GARDEN NOTES

DELGANY, PORTSEA

Now a complex of luxury apartments, townhouses and free-standing homes, Delgany has been a holiday retreat (1925-1941), the 62nd Australian army camp hospital (1942-1946), a school for deaf children run by Dominican nuns (1947-1985) and a Peppers resort with renowned hotel restaurant (headed by chef Hermann Schneider (of Two Faces fame).

The original parts of the castle-like home, clad in local and Mount Gambier sourced limestone, were built in 1923 for the Victorian Western District grazier Harold Armytage (Como Toorak). He was inspired by Delgany Castle (County Wicklow in Ireland). Other wings were added in 1953 and 1968 designed by Joseph Plottel.

The original house was created by architect Harold Desbrowe Annear to be one of the peninsula's grandest country homes. Delgany is set on nine acres (approximately 3.6 hectares) of heritage listed gardens. It is unclear whether Desbrowe Annear designed the gardens as well as the home. The property's role as a boarding school for 40 years is of historical significance, as is its ties to grazier Harold Armytage.

It cost 33,000 pounds to build and was completed in nine months, but Armytage died not long after it was finished and had little opportunity to enjoy the beautiful property. His sisters lived there until the 1940s, when it became an army hospital.

The front entrance was originally situated to the west of its present location but was moved in the 1950's. The teardrop turning circle and the winding driveway were created at the same time. The previous driveway ran through the small limestone building (previously the original garage and currently the gym).

Delgany is classified by the National Trust, listed on the Victorian Heritage Register and has a Heritage Overlay on the Mornington Peninsula Shire Council register.

Heritage Victoria, which intermittently visits the property, has an ongoing input into the development of the 3.6 hectare park-like landscape gardens. Renowned landscape architect, John Patrick, has consulted several times since 2004 when the property was developed by The Buxton Group into its current form.

Tract Consultants was responsible for the more formal gardens near the castle building during its development by The Buxton Group. Delgany has a planning exemption from Heritage Victoria which allows for replacement planting and maintaining the property.

As you drive into the front entrance of the property, from Point Nepean Road, you see ahead a large green Victorian wrought iron gate flanked by two smaller gates. Limestone bollards, with a chain situated either side of the gate on the nature strip, hint at the limestone Tudor medieval castle within.

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It is unclear where the current front entry gates and gate post came from, but it is thought that they may have been the gates to a large house built on the site during the 1880s by the judge Sir Thomas a'Beckett.

The start of a long winding driveway, bordered with agapanthus, mature Cypresses and Moonahs creates a grand impression. As you cross the threshold and enter the property, the atmosphere palpably changes and you are embraced by mature trees and expanses of lush grass. You leave the outside world behind. To the left, beyond the gates, are new plantings of Bay Laurels which will grow to a hedge over the next couple of years and provide screening for our neighbours.

These trees replace a previous hedge of Leighton Greens, planted to the immediate left of the drive. The hedge blocked the view of the majestic lower limbs of the Cypresses which created an imbalance of the entry vista. Currently we have placed temporary shade cloth screening as an interim measure.

Plans are in motion to create a winding bed of native shrubs that will meander along between the Cypresses and up the drive. To the right of the entry, in front of the first house, there are Moonahs, a mature Cypress and a dry stone creek bed. This was created to link with the creek bed beyond the front gate.

As you continue along the drive the road splits to the right at Desbrowe Annear Way and passes through the three free-standing homes adjacent to the Portsea Golf Course and up to the Northern car park. During the recent October hurricane (140+kmph winds) we lost two of the three mature *Pinus Radiata* on the border of the golf course. They blocked the drive and hit the roof of house 4.

On the lawns opposite, three mature Eucalypts form the centrepiece and are home to a family of kookaburras. A resident Bronzewing can be heard in the late afternoon hooting like an owl from within the branches of the Cypress nearby. Dwarf flowering gums and *Corymbia ficifolia* (red flowering gum) have been recently planted. *Maleleuca lanceolata* (Moonah) have also been recently planted to replace recent storm losses.

Take some time to admire the vista of lawn and the canopy of mature trees concealing the castle in the distance. To the right is the expansive golf course fairway where you may sit and watch the golfers avoiding the bunkers as they make their approach shots to the green. Many a golf ball has been collected from our gardens along the border.

Continuing along Armytage Drive (main drive) to the left opposite the visitor car park, there is a Leighton Green hedge behind which tower two mature Cypresses and newly planted Banksias. These will eventually replace the current hedge as a screen. A Currajong sapling (*Brachychiton discolor*) has been grown from seed and will mature in years to come.

Beyond the visitor carpark you enter a grove of Moonahs, century old olive trees and eucalypts. There is a steep grassy rise leading you to the arched loggia at the front of the castle. As you reach the top of the drive the full castle comes into view. The teardrop turning circle is bordered by lavender with a weeping elm as its centrepiece.

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Take a moment to turn around and enjoy the lengthy view down towards the bay in front of the gym. The views of other local limestone clad homes are part of the borrowed landscape which, being placed at the top of the hill, takes full advantage.

The gardens around the castle building are a mix of hedged Buxus, Indian Hawthorn hedges, tightly hedged Ficus, *Westringia fruticosa* and hedged olive trees. Crepe Myrtles sit along the drive. Iceberg Roses poke out from the oval box hedges.

Moonahs conceal the original limestone garage (now the gym) and provide a natural backdrop for the more formal beds. Gynea Lilies (*Doryanthes excelsa*) feature in the bed to the left of the main entry steps to the castle and the bed near the southern entry. In spring their 6-metre flaming red flower spikes prove irresistible to local birds.

The Hawthorn hedges are home to many tiny birds. Two Weeping Elms feature by the southern castle entry and a mature Plane tree rises from the basement garden of the apartment below this entry. A mixed bed of succulents has flourished here.

Following the driveway down past the pool and gym a vertical garden lines the retaining walls of the drive. Around the corner there is a bed filled with citrus and an avocado tree. A hedge of *Correa Alba* lines the drive along with tufts of *Lomandra*. A row of dwarf *Magnolia grandiflora* sit high above the drive.

To the west of the castle, past the loggia, a path leads to lawns via a copse of Moonahs. Their sculptural trunks create a beautiful dense tangle along the ground and a natural archway to the western lawn. Here the trunks from a group of mature Cypresses provide a magnificent lens through which to view the expansive golf fairways.

Further Moonahs over the post and rail fence in the golf course are a linking feature of the borrowed landscape.

The gardens provide habitat to many species of birds including kookaburras, rosellas, rainbow lorikeets, king parrots, yellow-tailed black cockatoos, doves, finches, ravens, owls to name a few. We have a resident echidna and during summer the occasional snake makes an appearance.

Take time to find a place to sit on the grass. Listen to the birds and enjoy the views. Thank you for coming to visit Delgany. We hope you have enjoyed the garden as much as we have enjoyed sharing it with you.

Gabby Walters (Chairperson, Delgany Owners Corporation).

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