

GARDEN NOTES

FAIRY GARDEN

The House

The narrow house was built in 1850, with a ground-floor extension of two bedrooms and a wash-house/bathroom added in 1880. This provided paid accommodation for visitors to the Great Exhibition. A chain-operated flushing toilet was added in 1897, when 'Smellbourne's' sewerage was first connected. Access to these new rooms was from the garden path, extending from the kitchen to the back yard. There was no garden as such – just dirt.

Recognising the potential, I purchased the run-down rooming-house in November 1999. The facade was plain, with peeling paint. There were seven numbered bedrooms: one indoor cold water tap, no hot water and only two power points – both in the kitchen, with a disconnected, ancient gas stove, and of course no heating. In the wash house was a gas meter, double trough, clothes-boiling copper with laundry stick, an old bathtub over which a home-made shower dangled, and a rocket-style heater. By feeding the gas meter with 20 cent coins and igniting the rocket, a quick shower was instantly available. This was all huge fun during the summer months, while deciding on steps required for relative comfort in the approaching Melbourne chill.

The wrought iron window and door security at the front of the house was copied by a local iron craftsman from a photo I had taken in Budapest the previous year and installed within three months of purchase, as a priority.

I set about designing my dream bathroom in what was Bedroom 2– all black and white, including a claw-foot iron bath and cupid bronze chandelier holding dusky pink fittings. Original Victorian oil paintings and framed posters adorn the walls.

The newer part of the building was falling apart, so Bedroom 7 was let at no cost to a homeless friend and Bedroom 6 used as a warehouse for Titania – my wholesale business. Over the next year I redesigned the house from the kitchen forward, keeping sections of the high garden wall, thus creating light wells and garden inclusion, plus ground floor toilet. A draftsman drew up my plans under the watchful, sceptical gaze of an architect. The reconstruction was completed in 2002.

The Garden

I designed the garden using a framework of steel archways to formalise it. The bluestone path and slate patio were also created upon completion of the building. Being long and narrow, the idea was to pull it all together and promote an illusion of width, with the ability to create a feature at each main junction.

Climbing roses and various creepers weave their way up and over the frame. Camelias, azaleas and geraniums provide the stable colour, with violets and ferns thriving in the many shaded sections; and of course there is a bird bath, which provides constant joy.

Hanging baskets of ferns and perennials such as pansies, balsam and orchids adorn the archways, to lead the eye along. In the final southern section is a thriving vegetable and herb patch. Many of the plants are self-seeded and left to their own devices. I also cheat a bit with a fake here and there to fill a colour gap!

Anne Atkins

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