

INTO THE BLUE

The Gardeners

Alan and Yoka, despite their widely varying backgrounds, share a passion for gardening. When they purchased the property in 1997, they were both working full time. Today, 27yrs later (and 17yrs into retirement), it is still a work in progress. We have twice been runner up in the Latrobe City Large Gardens category and featured in the Gippsland Country Life magazine Winter 2017 issue.

History

When purchased the property was largely undeveloped with extensive tree and scrub cover. The trees were mainly apple box and messmate. There was little grass/lawn. The existing mudbrick house was various shades of khaki through to mission brown, both inside and out, and very cold in winter.

Shortly after purchase the lower pond was dug to supply a source of water for fire protection, and the patio, main lawn and garage sites were cut by bulldozer - leaving something resembling a bomb site. The garage/ carport was built in 2005, using clay from the block for the end walls. The upper pond was added in 2022 to overcome erosion problems from stormwater. Apart from the above-mentioned activities, the rest of the clearing, landscaping, and planting has been done by Alan and Yoka.

In parallel to this the house was renovated throughout.

Garden Design

Our initial intent was to create an attractive garden, featuring exotic plants near the house with a backdrop of eucalypts further out - partly for fire safety. We also wanted to use the landform to maximum advantage and keep costs to a minimum. A nice lawn area was also a prerequisite. On the north side of the house the rotting retaining wall was removed, terraced with a rock wall and pebble "mulch" added to minimise the fire load. Further from the house we have planted oaks, maples, liquidambar, pistachios, cherry, and pear trees to provide autumn colour.

However hotter and drier summers have led us to slowly remove annuals, which require too much watering, and introduce succulents. This has also provided foliage variation and year-round colour. Yoka has collected a wide range of unusual and rare succulents. Many statues and ornaments decorate the garden. These are testament to Yoka's love of markets and garage sales and her creativity to turn \$10 into a \$100 effect.

The Site

The soil on the block is a reactive clay covered by shallow, very nutrient poor, bush soil. The extensive cover of trees means that most sites are subject to root competition, and the higher sites are very dry. The development of garden beds was initially restricted to areas near the house, where the ground had been disturbed by the bulldozer and most of the large eucalypts removed. Subsequent garden beds on the south side of the lawn have developed more slowly as we have learnt to deal with the difficult conditions. Close planting and massive amounts of organic matter have probably been the key to success. The Yucca Forest provided a solution to a harsh site with minimal water and impact from established trees.

GARDEN NOTES

The steepness of parts of the block has seen us terrace several areas. The prevalence of white ants has meant that the long-term choice of terracing material was limited. Alan was taught the art of dry-stone rock and has since worked his way through many truckloads of bluestone. Maintenance is minimal, except for minor repairs after the local echidna visits. It is also totally reusable if we change our minds.

We have lost several large eucalypts due to dieback and storms. Some eucalypt timber has been utilised for garden edging and steps in more remote locations where longevity is not so important. Most of the rest has been welcome as firewood, although Alan has dried and dressed some for furniture.

Climate

In general, we are blessed with a site sheltered from most winds, except north westerlies. Being slightly above the valley floor also means fewer frosts - typically only one or two slight frosts per year. Due to the climate, landform, and drainage patterns, we have several micro-climates on the site. Plant selection and placement has involved much experimentation. Sun exposure varies from none to dappled during winter to some areas receiving full afternoon sunshine and heat in summer. The south side of the house is particularly severe in this aspect. (The bed outside the kitchen is on its fifth iteration.)

There is no permanent flowing water on the site. However, during infrequent high rainfall events, massive amounts of water can flood through the block (the main lawn becomes a floodway). This seems to have become more frequent in the last few years. Managing and repairing washouts has been an all-too-common event, resulting in the top pond being built.

Animals

Being close to the National Park ensures a plentiful supply of animals. Echidnas, koalas, wallabies, possums, foxes, rabbits, and snakes are regular visitors. We have also recorded over 28 species of birds.

Many find our plants and vegetables delightful. "Fort Vegetable" located behind Alan's workshop is guaranteed proof against possums, rabbits, wallabies, king parrots, and bower birds (but not snakes). Similarly, the "Chook Hilton" (not presently open for guests) has been built to withstand foxes and birds. Another hidden form of wildlife is the yabbies or Gippsland crayfish. They build underground reservoirs and channels, eventually subverting all forms of drainage. The result, if left unchecked, is underground tunnel erosion.

Has it all been worth it?

The day will soon come where advancing age will mean we cannot maintain the garden to our high standards, but we will always look back fondly on our endless evening wine walks where we admire the beauty, nature and brainstorm the next project. **Absolutely YES!**

Into the Blue is located on the lands of the Gunaikurnai People. Open Gardens Victoria wishes to acknowledge the Traditional custodians of this land and we pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

These notes can be downloaded from the Open Gardens Victoria website:

www.opengardensvictoria.org.au

