

GARDEN NOTES

Woodcote

Welcome to our “escape in suburbia”. We bought this half acre property in 2008 after a lengthy search for a weatherboard house (easy to alter) on a larger suburban block. We then embarked upon a joint project of creating a new garden and converting the 1950's house into a passive energy Arts & Crafts Revival home.

As a landscape designer, Sandra designs gardens in many styles, according to the preferences of clients, however several principles govern all her work, and these may be seen here:

- an emphasis on plant material for structure, rather than a heavy reliance on hard landscaping
- the use of natural materials such as stone and pebbles in any hard landscaped areas
- the importance of mystery in a garden, where not everything is seen at first glance, where boundaries become less apparent.

This is an informal garden of rooms. The decision to create such a garden was prompted by Sandra's interest in plants, their textures, forms and foliage colours and the broad plant palette which she employs in her work.

Early on, drainage was found to be a big problem on many parts of this block, particularly on the south side of the driveway. Hence the pebble stream, which acts not only as a metaphor for water, but in fact as an ephemeral stream, taking excess water away from the front garden in winter. This “stream” continues on in various guises all through the garden, culminating in the billabong at the lowest point of the rear garden.

Given the existence of the lovely old Moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*), and the Blackwood Wattle in front of the house, it seemed logical to develop a native garden at the front. Consequently, all non-native plants were removed and new plantings were designed to suggest Victoria's high country. The theme tree throughout the front garden is a form of Snow Gum, *Eucalyptus pauciflora* 'Little Snowman'. The field granite rock work was completed by Sandra, with the aid of an endlessly patient bobcat operator.

The native meadow in the front garden is an ongoing project. It is designed to suggest a grassy clearing in the bush. The dominant grass here is 'Oxley' Wallaby Grass, an amazingly tough grass which can be mown to form a fine lawn if desired. Other grass species here include *Microlaena stipoides* (Weeping Grass) and *Dichelachne crinita* (Long Hair Plume Grass). Months of weeding with a steak knife are slowly bearing fruit! Interplanted wildflowers include *Wahlenbergia stricta* (Tall Bluebell, two forms), *Bulbine bulbosa* (Bulbine Lily), *Helichrysum rutidolpepis* (Pale Everlasting), *Pycnosorus chrysanthes* (Plains Billy-Button), *Arthropodium strictum* (Chocolate Lily) and *Craspedia variabilis* (Common Billy-Button).

The front garden is not irrigated. New plantings are helped initially during the establishment phase, but must then survive on their own. The path to the left of the house past the tanks provides a transition into a Japanese-inspired area, extending all along the back of the house. The existence of the two mature Japanese maples prompted this design decision. The loose pebbles suggest water, but also function as drainage conduits.

Underplanting the gigantic Dutch Elm in the back garden is horticulturally a great challenge. Sandra has steadily arrived at a palette of plants which will grow successfully under such a voracious tree. Successful species here include *Buxus microphylla* 'Faulkner', *Agapanthus* 'Snowball', *Arthropodium cirratum*, *Aucuba japonica* 'Variegata', *Eupatorium megalophyllum* (tall tree Ageratum), *Miscanthus 'Zebrinus'* (Zebra Grass), *Nandina domestica*, N. 'Moon Bay', *Ophiopogon jaburan* 'Variegatus' (Variegated Mondo), *Rhaphiolepis x intermedia*, *Ruscus aculeata*, *Sarcococca confusa* and *Sedum 'Autumn Joy'*.



GARDEN NOTES

The Dutch Elm is regularly injected for Elm Leaf Beetle and has been cabled to enhance stability. We have seen ourselves as custodians of this giant. In the relatively short time that we have lived in this area we have watched with horror as so many large trees have succumbed to developers.

It was decided that a “real” pond was essential at the lowest point on the block. After importing 2m³ of Coldstream rock onto the site, we realised that the job was beyond us and were relieved to be able to call upon the expertise of Philip Johnson’s amazing team in order to construct the pond and stream which we had designed.

The area surrounding the pond is designed to suggest a woodland planting - the copse of trees here are *Nyssa sylvatica*. Plantings along the far side of the lawn extending down to the pond include numerous Prairie plants and perennials: *Rudbeckia* 'Goldsturm', *Achillea* 'Coronation Gold', *Echinacea purpurea* (white form also), *Helianthus angustifolia* (Swamp Sunflower), *Agastache* Blue Boa (Mexican Mintbush cv), *Salvia* 'Blue Gem', *Aster x frikartii* 'Moench'. Grasses include *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' (Feather Reed Grass), *Calamagrostis brachytricha*, *Miscanthus* 'Sarabande' (Variegated Feather Grass), *Miscanthus transmorrisonensis* (Chinese Silver Grass), *Panicum virgatum* 'Rotstrahlbusch' (Red Beam Prairie Switch Grass).

At the upper end of the lawn, obscured by the developing hedge of *Teucrium fruticans*, is a small orchard including white and yellow peaches, quince, nectarine, olive and two blood plums. Elsewhere in the garden there are a few other fruit trees.

More recent additions to the garden are the metal pergola, crafted by Neil Tait of Castlemaine and the vegetable garden retained by the Coldstream stone walls. The fruiting grape on the pergola is Thomson’s Seedless (the sultana grape). This structure helps to create a shady summer room, linking the verandah to the vegetable garden.

Beyond this area is another favourite part of the garden: the rose garden. (Please refer to separate list for varieties.) We have a grey-to-blue water recycling unit, as well as three rainwater tanks. The treated grey water is reused in the washing machine, toilets and irrigation to the back garden.

A note about the house...

We are devotees of William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement and the remodeled house is Warwick’s personal take on Arts & Crafts revival, with a nod to Edna Walling and the older style of Mt Dandenong architecture. The garden shed in the far south-east corner of the property was constructed as a test run for the house - it is built almost completely of recycled materials, including the roof, which was made from shingles cut from an old fence we demolished. It also incorporates all Warwick’s principles regarding low energy use and is remarkably cool on a hot day.

From the outset we wanted to take an holistic approach to the site redevelopment: retain and promote tree growth, limit building footprint and hard paved surfaces and to create a building with character, a structure that will last, installing services with low power consumption. The house is not air conditioned or centrally heated. Instead, a system of solar air modules with low wattage fans was installed to provide fresh and warm air to the house. This is consistent with the passive energy design ideas. Solar powered roof heat extraction fans are also incorporated. Insulation, air leakage and glass treatment have all been attended to in great detail. Many recycled materials have been used, including old timber, windows and doors, overmantels and light fittings.

I hope you enjoy your visit! Please take your time. Plant lists are available at the front table.

Garden of Sandra McMahon & the late Warwick Sheffield.

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

www.opengardensvictoria.org.au