

## GARDEN NOTES

### GUNYAH

'Gunyah' means resting place, but like the owner, this garden rarely does! It is highly productive, yet has the appearance of an ornamental garden. I like to show people that edible plants can be planted throughout any style of garden and are just as beautiful as non-edible plants. There are 200 or more edible and useful plants in multiple layers to allow as many different types as possible. The front garden is a 'Mediterranean' area – with olive, feijoas, carob, thymes, oregano and my favourite rosemary 'Blue Lagoon'. Many plants are from Crete: Cretan Chicory (perennial green vegetable), Dittany of Crete and Cretan Calamint (bee forage plant). In the back garden I have tried to create a tropical feel with a canopy of large deciduous fruit trees, as this helps me get through a Melbourne winter, as well as purifying the city air. Most of the garden is watered by a home-made grey water system, with the exception of the pots and the vegetables grown on the nature strip and in the perennial plot, which get mains or tank water.

The garden began more than 25 years ago as a blank canvas when I was an apprentice gardener at Melbourne Zoo. I removed tonnes of concrete by hand with crowbar and sledgehammer and built up the soil with home-made compost and garden waste, such as autumn leaves from the nearby park. I added gypsum to help break up the heavy clay soil and brought home exotic manures from the Zoo, a favourite one being elephant, which made a manure tea with strong results on the garden and neighbours!

Initially the fruit trees in the back garden were mostly stone fruits as, after an upbringing in the Goulburn Valley, I couldn't bear to eat stone fruits from the supermarket. Over time I opted for a better spread of fruiting times and varieties. A White 'Shatoot' Mulberry has replaced a peach tree and where a nectarine stood is now a fire-pit with native ground covers. This provides a sunny spot to sit in the back garden for the first time in many years. The apricot 'Trevatt' fruited heavily for 20 or more years (up to a quarter of a tonne of fruit some years) – its productivity due to it having its roots amongst vegetables, and because I adopted Alan Gilbert's light pruning methods on it from the very beginning. Sadly it has finished its life and will be replaced by a dwarf apricot 'Moorpark' which will be easier to manage. Removing the large apricot tree has allowed more sun and light into the centre of the back garden, which has been shady for years, yet happily growing a range of shade-tolerant vegetables and herbs, as well as thornless blackberries, youngberries and loganberries. Soon I plan to relocate the raspberry patch, as it has stopped being fruitful in this area. The lovely rusty frame made by my dad will be re-purposed to give my quails more vertical as well as horizontal space.

Over time I have added sub-tropical fruits, particularly from South America, which suit Melbourne's climate: Avocado 'Bacon', Babaco (Highland Paw-Paw), which takes nine months to ripen its lemony sherbet tasting fruit, Pepino (bears fruit all year round), White Sapote, Feijoa 'Mammoth' (eaten fresh and dried) and macadamias – possibly in too much shade to produce nuts well.

The two mature grape vines along the front of the house and the bungalow are red-fruited 'Fragola' grapes with fruit that tastes and smells like strawberries and are naturally disease resistant. On the large metal structure to the north of the garden are male and female kiwi plants; and a Kiwi Berry (*Actinidia arguta*) on the back fence, has flowered but not set fruit as it flowers two weeks before the larger Kiwi which pollinates it.

The Giant Burmese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera hildebrandiana*) graces the back verandah with enormous fragrant flowers and wonderful gnarled wood. The trusty old Choko vine is behind the aquaponics system. I use the soft shoots and tendrils for stir-fries, the fruits in winter as a zucchini substitute and also take them to food swaps. It produces about 100 fruit per year, from late autumn onwards – a true survival food plant!

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The old grape vine on the back verandah has been removed to make way for a black fruiting Strawberry Grape. Other tropical-themed edible plants include galangal beneath the apricot tree and daylilies and edible cannas in the courtyard bed. The courtyard is framed by a mature apple 'Wandin Weeping Pride', which is producing well this season due to good early rain. It is a picture in spring with pale pink and white blossom.

The front garden has been planted to tolerate exposure to wind and sun and to highlight the colours of the house – with the blue flowers of the rosemary and silver foliage such as Olive 'Manzanillo' and a large-leaved native saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia* 'de Koch'). This is used in the bush food industry as a salt substitute, but I have discovered it makes a great salad leaf. The stems of the carob and the Native Pepper (*Tasmannia lanceolata*) also give burgundy highlights. The espaliered feijoas in the driveway are a successful experiment with attractive blue-grey leaves and prolific tasty fruit in an incredibly small and harsh area – at least 10kg last year from five plants pruned into a very narrow space.

The northern corner near the house has several shade-loving plants under the Manchurian Pear. My favourite native plant, Lemon Myrtle (*Backhousia citriodora*) does best in Melbourne in a pot – its fragrant lemon leaves used in refreshing teas, or dried and ground in a variety of meals. Native Pepper (native to Victoria and Tasmania) has surprisingly spicy leaves which can be used as a pepper substitute when dried and ground, a more reliable option than the pepperberries, which occur only on the female plants, when grown with the male. This shady corner also has some native finger limes, which prefer shade unlike most citrus. I have six native limes now, as they are amazing fruits – my favourite is 'Red Centre'.

There are many culinary, medicinal and tea herbs in the garden. In the front, a large lemon verbena is much loved for tea. Pots hold tarragon, annual basil and a rare perennial pepper basil. Stevia is handy for a quick sweet snack and self-seeded lemon balm grows in the Dromana toppings paths.

The backyard perennial plot grows mostly perennial edibles that need more water than the rest of the garden gets. Perennial leek, sorrel, asparagus, red dock, oca, taro and rhubarb are grown here, as well as edible flowers such as *Viola tricolour*, borage and fruity sage. I grow some annual heritage vegetables in there such as 'Preston' bean, Snowpea 'Delta Louise', and Rocket 'Nonna's Giant'.

The aquaponics system has been designed to grow silver perch and water loving herbs and edible plants. It is definitely a different kettle of fish to growing in soil! The garden is not fertilised heavily, but if I need to I use homemade compost, Seasol and Charlie Carp. Once a year I spread pelletized manures and gypsum, to help counteract any negative effects from the grey water system.

My beehive is on the garage roof so as to interact lightly with visitors and neighbours. Besides loving honey, I love bees for their role in pollinating around 30 per cent of the food we eat. At the back of the garden is an Isa Brown chicken, who eats snails from the garden, as well as herbs such as comfrey and nasturtium. Another enclosure holds five European quails who lay four eggs almost every day. The chickens, quails and bees link us to our agricultural past and provide entertainment as well as a contribution towards self-sufficiency.

The nature strip and the garage roof have been growing food for about four–five years and have allowed me to grow more sun-loving produce. On the roof I harvest one or two punnets of strawberries each week and the tomatoes grown up there are incredibly sweet, as are the strawberries. Cropping times are quick with the good light and exposure and heat-loving plants like eggplants also fruit well up here.

The nature strip grows pistachios, leafy greens, edible flowers, potatoes, artichokes, some bush foods, edible weeds and sweet potatoes. A heritage perennial kale grew for five years and has just been replaced with some new ones. Five-coloured chard, Society Garlic and Wild Rocket all look as good as they taste. Leaf Amaranth (Vleeta) is popular with my Greek neighbours, and the nature strip garden is the best for chatting to neighbours and meeting passers-by.

I hope you get as much inspiration and enjoyment from the garden as I do!

*Karen Sutherland*