

GARDEN NOTES

WITS' END

Wits' End, an affectionately and at times aptly named, late Victorian cottage, is one of the earliest, surviving dwellings in the South Gippsland village of Loch. It is believed to have been built in the early 1890s, during the development of the township – which grew in response to the opening of the South Gippsland railway as it pushed its way towards the east.

After a two-year search around Victoria looking to buy a property with heritage appeal, we purchased Wits' End in January 1999. It has been primarily used as a weekend escape over most of the past 19 years.

Any home and garden is a culmination of all those who have previously dwelt within its borders. As such, Wits' End owes its current ethos to the earlier inhabitants – with some having had a profound impact on the garden character.

The rear western corner of the Albert Road block is dominated by perhaps the oldest inhabitant, a massive eucalypt. It is thought to be a specimen of *Eucalyptus strzeleckii*, a swamp gum indigenous to South Gippsland and protected as an endangered species.

The cottage's earliest home-owners planted an orchard on the eastern side of the dwelling. It still contains a number of the original fruit trees they planted including fig, walnut, plum varieties, as well as a spreading apple tree of unknown heritage at the Albert Road front gate.

In 1993, the property was purchased by Don and Judy MacDonald who salvaged the cottage and sympathetically restored it and named it Wits' End. They had the foresight to plant the now well-established trees and create the framework for the current garden. The numerous exotic trees they planted include a stand of Cut-leaf Birches (*Betula pendula* 'Dalecarlica') to shade the western side of the cottage, Liquidambar (*L. styraciflua*), Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*), Japanese Elm (*Zelkova serrata*), Golden Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior* 'Aurea') Common Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and Jacaranda (*J. mimosifolia*) as well as some natives such as Snow-in-Summer (*Melaleuca linariifolia*) and Lilly Pilly (*Syzygium*).

In the early days of our tenure, it was a constant struggle to make headway as we could only work on weekends in the sizeable garden. We battled blackberries, sticky weed and self-sown wattles and coprosma. Thankfully, a local nurseryman and gardener, Keith Marshall, came on board and laid out the garden beds in keeping with the original tree planting. With his invaluable knowledge of plants and the local climate and soil, the garden began to take shape, taking on an informal and relaxed park-like quality with plantings of bird-attracting shrubs such as salvia, buddleia, abutilon and bottlebrush, with borders of lily and agapanthus and hedges of hebe and lilly pilly.



A large number of trees have also been added including White Cedar (*Melia azedarach*), Silver Variegated Maple (*Acer negundo* 'Variegatum'), Silver Birch (*Betula pendula*), Blueberry Ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*), Chinese Elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*), Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*), Irish Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*) and Tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*). Keith continues to work on a regular basis at the property, and Wits' End would certainly live up to its name without his input!

Over the years a free-standing pergola, a carport, a small pond and paths were incorporated into the garden. In July 2013, part of the rear laneway and an adjoining block of land in Queen Street were purchased, giving the property two street frontages and increasing the area to around one acre. This also allowed Chris to finally indulge his passion for having a more formal garden area incorporating a 'pear walk' of 'Capital' ornamental pears (*Pyrus calleryana* 'Capital') and rose beds, while providing easier pedestrian access into the village.

The main areas of the garden are:

- the cottage garden (north-facing front of verandah);
- the orchard (western side of cottage);
- an open space (south-facing rear of cottage);
- the wild side (eastern area under the Strzelecki Gum behind the pond);
- the sundial garden (eastern side behind driveway hedge); and
- the pear walk (Queen Street entrance).

There are many avian visitors to the garden, including Superb fairy-wrens, fantails, Eastern spinebills, New Holland honeyeaters, a variety of finches, parrots such as crimson rosellas, galahs, sulphur-crested and black cockatoos, pied currawongs (seasonally), magpies, grey shrike thrushes, kookaburras and southern boobook owls. Those which do not feed on nectar, help themselves to fruit from the orchard, catch their own wildlife or enjoy the bird seed we spasmodically supply! There are also permanent colonies of frogs and lizards.

We hope you have as much enjoyment visiting Wits' End as we experience living and working here. Please watch your step. Muddy patches in the lawn can be slippery. They are the work of the resident yabbies or more correctly termed 'Gippsland burrowing crayfish'. You will see evidence of their burrows all around the property including their 'chimneys' of dried mud in and around garden beds and under trees.

Welcome to Wits' End and please feel free to ask any questions about the history of the cottage or the garden.

Chris and Barbara Tsarouchas