



# Beyond Neatness

TEXTS & PICTURES BY SARAH CAIN

*Sarah Cain, an experienced gardener from the Southern Highlands of NSW, and her husband, Geoff, turned away from a strong local tradition of European style gardening to follow a road less travelled.*

Living in a natural garden has changed the way we see beauty. The subtle charms of Australian native plants have us enthralled, but above all, in this garden we have discovered a rich extra dimension; we have found a deep sense of worth. It arises from the fact that our garden is not pleasing only to human senses. As the plants in our seven-year-old garden grow and begin to link arms, we find ourselves watching the development of a lively feeding ground, habitat zone and centre of biodiversity. To our delight, the whole of our acre is beginning to flutter, croak, wriggle, scratch, zoom, hop and buzz.

## A house is built

Our new garden adventure began with the building of a house. We were fortunate to cross paths with Canberra architect, Bert Read, whose work is defined by a belief that absolute beauty is found in the natural world. His buildings draw integrity from the genius of the site, paying homage to colour, form, texture and the effects of light. Bert Read designs with pure geometric lines and natural materials,

locking into the landscape by avoiding intrusive statements, reflective surfaces and gratuitous decoration. The serene and lovely house he designed for us is highly functional and beautifully 'liveable'. As they mature, house and garden are developing into essential elements of one another.

## A spirit of restraint

We try to heed the spirit of restraint that marks this place and avoid imposing decoration on either house or garden. In the garden we keep to the use of elemental materials such as timber, rock and water; but I have a passion for wood-fired pots. I am fascinated by the action of fire on clay and I am captured by the idea of earth being formed by the hands of a potter and delivered to me in useful and beautiful shapes that enhance everyday life. Pots find their way into our house and garden and settle down comfortably. I tell myself that a love affair with the rich, natural colours and seductive textures of fired clay is a logical progression from a love of the soil.

## Texture

For me it is all about texture with the plants, too. I am drawn to the richness and detail of the green tapestry that is growing around us. Flowers, of course, add seasonal attraction. It

is sometimes argued that the flowers of native plants are less striking than those of exotic plants, but for us that is far from the truth. We delight in native flowers for their integrity, delicacy and generosity. Most plants remain in flower for months and when the main flowering is over will produce more flowers in response to a shower of rain.

## Forgiveness

We watch for signs that the natural world is forgiving us for damage caused when we built the house in 1998. Soil compaction caused by builders' trucks is beginning to yield as layers of mulch, organic matter, worms and roots work their magic. Plants are growing up around the building and we have found tiny seedlings under the protective skirts of parent plants. Every drop of storm water soaks into the soil, caught in the rock creek bed constructed to steady its flow. Last week we found a large frog hiding under rocks in its course. During last winter a white-throated tree-creeper roosted in a sheltered spot under our pergola and a male satin bowerbird built his bower in a group of shrubs in the front garden. We find these happenings immensely rewarding.

Building the house left us with patches of poor drainage caused by soil compaction. Having lost plants in some of these positions, we turned to reference books to learn more. We discovered treasures such as *Banksia robur*, with its strongly architectural form and its flowers like fat, blue-grey possums. It will grow happily with wet feet. Likewise, *Correa decumbens*. Most *correas* insist on sharp drainage, but *C. decumbens*, with its useful prostrate habit, shiny foliage and red, bird-attracting flowers, puts up with poor drainage. These two, together with beautiful and floriferous callistemons, leptospermums and melaleucas, are now filling a difficult area where we lost plants due to the rigours of full summer sun and periodic ponding after heavy rain.

Today I ate my lunch in shade cast by a lovely little *Melaleuca cuticularis*, one of two I planted from six-inch pots in April 2000. This tree quickly became a favourite after I saw its picture in a book; multiple shapely trunks covered in peeling white bark reaching

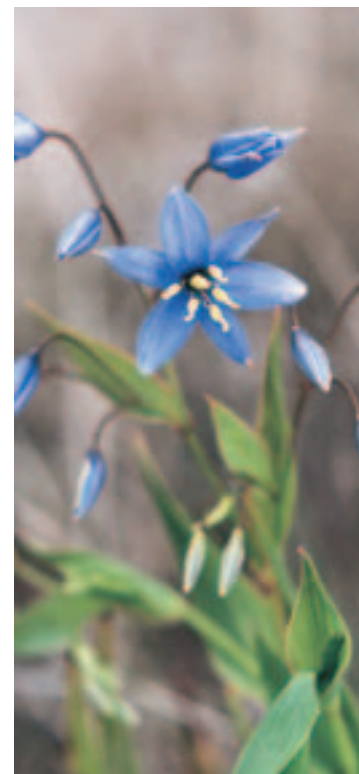
upwards to support tabulate layers of fine, blue-green foliage. As with many other trees in the garden, these two have twice suffered damage in winter snowfalls, but they continue to thrive and grace the courtyard with their strongly ornamental form.

## Good-bye to noisy tools and neatness

Sitting under my tree watching a cloud of tiny insects, I looked forward to the moment when a neighbouring gardener would turn off a mechanical blower. When we left our exotic garden we happily said goodbye to all mechanical tools. We had fallen out-of-love with neatness. With our senses now tuned to the energy of a natural garden, neatness seems to represent sterility, hard work and a constant battle for control. We have abandoned raking, preferring to preserve the layer of life that thrives in leaf litter and topsoil. And there is no mowing to cause noise and soil compaction and to use up fuel and our gardening time. Two people can manage this garden with hand tools and sporadic bursts of attention. Because we are not really in control we relax in the knowledge things will look after themselves when we choose to turn our backs.

## Balance

There is a balance evident in this garden. Because so many different forms of wildlife visit, no one species dominates. We have seen surprising bird behaviour such as rosella parrots chasing currawongs out of the birdbath and





wattlebirds taking on crows. The charming little eastern spinebills that zip around the garden sipping nectar from flowers are happy to share space with wrens, shrike thrushes, thornbills, whip birds and others. Feral birds do not come here. Cobwebby bags of caterpillars that appear on leptospermums and melaleucas disappear without our intervention; and I suspect that our neighbours' rosebuds benefit from the rosella parrots' passion for the red-flowered callistemons, correas and lambertias we plant for their delectation. When the cockatoos tear chunks out of banksias and hakeas in their quest for fruit we comfort ourselves with the knowledge that they are eating the food best

suited to their nutrition. The plants respond to this rather savage pruning with flourishes of new growth and trunk stability fit to withstand our mountaintop gales.

Having lost plants in our exotic garden because of the belief that we could grow anything we wished by artificially altering garden conditions, we are now more circumspect. We tried and failed to grow some of the beautiful Western Australian banksias before reminding ourselves that altering conditions to suit the plant puts us into conflict with the land; we find it far more successful to choose a plant to suit our given conditions rather than the reverse. Australia is a vast continent encompassing hugely diverse soils and climate. The fact that a plant is an Australian native does not mean it will succeed on our patch.

In our exotic garden we had difficulty finding effective groundcover plants to help retain water in the soil and to provide living mulch. With the native plant palette we have had much more success, discovering a wealth of vigorous and hardy plants happy to scoot around the garden filling spaces between larger plants. Some, like grevilleas, cover themselves in nectar-filled flowers in spring much to the delight of the birds. Others, such as the myoporums, are more modest in flower, but form such a dense, green carpet that even flick weed cannot penetrate their defences.



## The rewards of research

There is a wealth of wonderful discoveries awaiting gardeners venturing into the world of Australian plants, but, somewhat dauntingly, there are 25,000 plus species of plants on this continent. Good reference books are a must. Failure has often resulted when we have caved in to impulse and bought plants we have not learned about.

As a comprehensive all-in-one gardeners' guide, it would be hard to better Wrigley and Fagg's *Native Plants* (Reed Books, 1966). The Australian Plants Society publishes periodicals that make excellent reading and are a mine of information; they include notices of plant growers' sale days held in Canberra and at Mt Annan Botanic Garden. Those gardeners with dollars to spend and a desire to know all, are anticipating the completion of the comprehensive *Encyclopaedia of Australian Plants* (Elliott and Jones, Lothian 1980). The eight volumes currently available, (plant names A-So), provide all the information you could ever need in readable and easily digested text.

## A dream realised

There is a casuarina forest outside our front door. I imagined it when the house was being built, dreaming of patterns of light and shade, sighing wind and a carpet of brown needles. I chose a species that sounded good to me, but I made a mistake. I should have chosen a local species. Now the trees are quite tall, but each year we fell a few and replace them with the local *Casuarina littoralis*. This is not because we are 'purists' wanting to grow only indigenous species, but because we found out about the Glossy Black Cockatoo. The Glossy Black Cockatoo is an endangered bird that lives locally; its nutrition depends heavily on the fruit of indigenous casuarina trees.

Not long ago there were plenty of Glossy Black Cockatoos because there were plenty of indigenous casuarinas; but then also not long ago the Southern Highlands of NSW were a natural garden. That garden has vanished. It has vanished because we gardeners have changed the landscape from cool temperate forest to beautifully ordered sterility.

## Change

Times have changed; conditions are different from those that predominated when early gardeners, dreaming of England, selected privileged areas such as this for the pleasant climate and rich soil and established garden style in Australia. Dr Peter Valder has referred to these areas collectively as 'the hill stations'. These days 'hill station' gardeners are not immune to new realities of a diminishing water supply, a changing climate and greatly diminished biodiversity. These considerations now need to be addressed by all gardeners.

Far be it from me to suggest that we should destroy the lovely and historic gardens that distinguish our favoured gardening districts; that we should eliminate all our beautiful exotics to plant natives. I am suggesting that we enrich our gardens; that we reserve at least 20% of all garden space for native plants in order to preserve and nurture our endangered local treasures. We need to study, research, choose, display and care for native plants with respect equal to that which we show for our well-loved exotics.

We are privileged to live and garden on this uniquely beautiful continent, to be stewards of our own corners of this wide brown land. With that privilege comes obligation. Every year thousands of visitors come to our gardens, particularly to those in 'hill station' districts. They come to find inspiration and to learn. Committed and experienced garden owners like us need to set an example; to show that we are flexible and intelligent and capable; to show that we respond to new challenges by a practical demonstration of the fact that an essential element of gardening is the ability to change.

