

CHANGE OF DIRECTION

Despite the landscape designer's initial doubts that it would work, a former paddock has found new life as a perennial garden.

PHOTOGRAPHS **SIMON GRIFFITHS** WORDS **MYLES BALDWIN**

THESE PAGES Pathways of decomposed granite meander through the perennial garden, which is made up of a wide variety of plants, including salvias and grasses.





Buried in the mists of Robertson, New South Wales, is a garden that I would like to claim, in an utterly unbiased way, of course, as the best small garden in the Southern Highlands. A modern rendition of a walled English/European perennial garden, it contains wonderful form, simple structure, horticultural interest and a quirky twist. It's a garden of all seasons and makes use of its unique climate and topography. The problem is when I was first asked to create this space, I didn't think it would work.

Previously known as Possumwood, the garden is the creation of a partnership between myself and media executive John Alexander. He bought the property as a country escape – being a city apartment dweller for most of the year, he longed for the country air and the chance to create a garden and private retreat. My first meeting to view the site revealed a levelled grassy rectangular paddock running north-south, a bit larger than a championship tennis court. At the southern end, a break re-entered a drive running to the house and a barn. To the north were scattered evergreen alders and cornus, blocking out the street. The western side was a windbreak of Leyland cypress, and to the east a segment of rainforest enclosed the drive to the house. In other words, a mixed bag of textures, uses and problems.

The usual solution for creating a garden in a rectangular space is to run with some sort of symmetry. Even a perennial garden should have a strong structural line that can segment it, allowing it to be viewed accordingly, and also to align it with the adjacent architecture. Garden features can be automatically positioned from points created by dissecting the main axis, which can then give birth to satellite gardens focused on those elements.

When I presented my symmetrical garden idea to John I was taken aback when it was rejected. I felt the garden needed the structural symmetry to contrast the looseness of the surrounding rainforest. John's dream was, however, to have a relaxed garden of roses and perennials, with narrow

paths surrounded by different textures, smells and colours. He also wanted a water element but, again, one more natural like a pool adjacent to a forest rill rather than a structured pond or dam.

Back at the drawing board and in conversation with fellow designer Alex Shepherd, it was decided that we were both right and both wrong. The garden did need some sort of structural element to provide a horticultural break between two very different landscapes, but the overall design should be a loose organic approach, which ended up taking some time to plan.

The garden was to now be bordered by dry-stone walls made from locally quarried stone. The walls were built only where required, to heights that related to their position. On the western boundary the wall was more than a metre high to retain the now hedged Leyland cypress, while on the eastern forest boundary the wall was only half a metre tall and freestanding, to be a terminating point between manicured garden and the wild forest. This form of walling was a first for me, where rather than a simple geometric structure it would become an artwork. Although not quite an Andy Goldsworthy installation, we were inspired when we built the wall to dip into the pond at the northern end of the garden.

John wanted the garden to be accessed from both the barn/studio and drive. As a gesture towards formality, the steps at either end were positioned opposite each other. Within the walls a swirling pattern of paths directs visitors towards the centre but allows them to meander off, passing through various colour schemes and features. I wanted to make the movement through the garden a journey, so I concentrated strong pinks, purples and dark blues at the southern end, and used all the whites and yellows to the north. Throughout the centre, blue, soft pink and foliage contrasts such as those found between ornamental grasses and echiums were used. Heliotropes, I found, worked well beside *Salvia* 'Indigo Spires', and bergenia and dark-leaved heuchera made for a very masculine, heavy feeling.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT A rusted classical urn, with a semi-mudded dry-stone wall made of locally quarried basalt behind it. A trail of echinacea plants, with their distinctive downward-pointing petals. In front of a Victorian cast-iron fountain from the UK is a mass of *Salvia involucrata* 'Joan'. *Salvia* 'Waverly' leads into ornamental grasses. OPPOSITE PAGE An antique table and chair setting, with *Salvia* 'Joan' on the left and *Salvia* 'Waverly' on the right.

TREES ARE THE REAL ELEMENTS THAT MAKE A GARDEN, AND THIS ONE WOULD BE NOTHING WITHOUT ITS BACKDROP.

THIS PAGE Looking over the lake, through the grasses and to the studio. Trees are part of the native rainforest. The Leyland cypress hedge forms a windbreak on the right.

Roses, for which John's wife, Alice, has a passion, were matched with various plants of complementary colours. I planted one of my favourite roses, the David Austin 'William Shakespeare', adjacent to a mass of *Salvia* 'Joan'. The almost chocolate red of the David Austin contrasted perfectly with the pink in 'Joan'. More than 60 different cultivars of roses were used, including old favourites such as 'Blue Moon', 'Queen Elizabeth' and the bourbon rose, 'Ferdinand Pritchard', which looks as though someone has got a white rose and flicked purple paint all over it. Growing roses in a rainy climate like Robertson's can be tricky, so four obelisks were built to elevate much of the collection, improving air movement and reducing the risk of fungal growth.

The sound of water in a garden is wonderful and although it was decided that the pond would be still for lilies and aquatic plants, a large tiered fountain was designed into the southern end. It provides a joyful audible experience and is surrounded by a path wide enough to appreciate its structure.

Before setting out the perennial garden, it had occurred to me that the design might become a jumble of textures without a common thread, and with everything cut down in winter would merely be a wasteland. A solution was to plant an evergreen constant in the garden, a plant that would be inoffensive and not detract from the seasonal colour. For this I used stands of Japanese buxus balls, some more than a metre round, to grow together like huge green rocks tying together the various horticultural traits. The use of buxus also provides some continuity with the house garden created by the previous owner. A wonderful display, especially in the fog, the gardens were made solely from various buxus cultivars and Japanese maples.

To my eyes, trees are the real elements that make a garden, and although the attention is focused more to the ground with this garden, it would be nothing without its backdrop or setting. We were a little blessed with most of the

surrounding plantings, as what was there was at least 10 years old or existing rainforest. We hedged the Leyland cypress windbreak to follow the roofline of the studio. The northern embankment with its drift of large evergreen alders needed bolstering and, if anything, to gain some texture. Several magnolias were added, including *M. grandiflora*, *M. stellata* and a mature *M. x soulangeana*, which provide the big end of winter show. In the foreground I planted an unusual *Liquidambar formosana* and a series of interesting shrubs to cascade into the pond, including leather-leaf viburnum, oak-leaf hydrangea and a pink spiraea.

It was important for me that there be a seamless blend from the pond to the garden. I constructed shallow beaches on the east and west banks to plant semi-aquatics like Louisiana iris and the prehistoric-looking gunera, my favourite water's edge plant. Its giant leaves contrast beautifully with the delicacy of the cascading spiraea and adjacent bog sage.

Nothing calls out the seasons like a bulb display, and under John's direction every lawn near the entrance of the property plays its part. Maintaining the theme of the northern end of the garden, I planted creamy yellow daffodils, which flow into bluebells that travel onto a drift of more than 1000 snowflakes. Further down the drive is a tulip display of dark reds, purples and pinks.

Three years on, the garden formerly known as Possumwood is an immense display of texture and colour, and is now also a perpetual garden, with the ability to create new plantings by propagating existing stock. The dynamic garden grows from a winter nothing to, in some areas, over two metres tall with a display that runs for 10 months of the year.

For me, however, from every job I try to take something away, to learn and hopefully become a better designer. In this case the lesson was that even when literally faced with a square it's what's inside that counts. ■

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