

The importance of not gardening

Beyond the cottage garden – using foliage as the primary core of garden harmony – *William Martin*

We live in a climate far removed from the source of the majority of our most frequently used plants. Whilst many of these plants grow reasonably well in our rather diverse climatic range, many do not. Traditional irrigation habits have allowed a broad range of Northern Hemisphere woodland plants to be cultivated. These plants often require copious amounts of water during our long, hot and dry summers that can extend into autumn and sometimes beyond! The disturbingly complex issue of water shortages and conservation will, in the coming years, alter our lifestyles. Garden culture as we know it could well be relegated to the archives filed under 'nice folly, but hemispherically bizarre'!



William's previous garden – high maintenance with 'softies'

The opportunity to strive towards a garden culture that is of our climate, offers endless possibilities. Let us look to our own social and cultural values in the creation of a garden, that reflects who we are, and more importantly, where we live!

Ah ha! Have we read this sort of guff too often? Wait, there is more!

From the relatively tender age of nineteen I have passionately messed about with plants and gardens, weeds and seeds. Why? Beats me! My childhood years were spent in gardenless Scotland (for me, at least, excepting a rough patch of common land that grew fantastic nettles!). I do recall cultivating nasturtiums, radish and marigolds and a solitary crocus in a corner of this adventure ground. Favourite places and influences were nearby estate woodland and our local municipal park, a place for picnics and play.

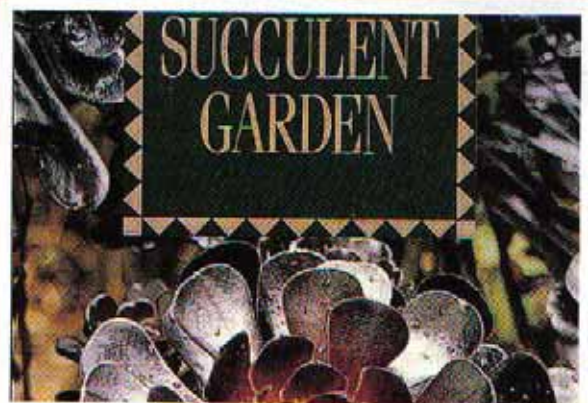
Victoria's volcanic plain is a far cry from those drippy climes. It is here I cultivate my private adventure ground, 'Wigandia'. This garden evolved from the experience of gardening on a heavy black soil/clay some 20 miles east from here: an altogether

different soil medium, replete with sometimes severe winter frost. Gardening on a clay base has many advantages because of the obvious moisture retention rate to carry some of the abundant winter rainfall through our generally short spring. This allowed many of the softer plants to retain a semblance of normality before the onset of our often nasty summer northerlies, after which they are forced into premature decline that no amount of added moisture will arrest. Delightful as they are, the 'fluffies' and 'softies' of our Northern Hemisphere inheritance, are largely folly, and have little place in our much harsher environment!

The lessons learnt gardening there between the mid 1970s to late 1980s cast the set for the ways, means and concepts that I practise today. How so? During this period I admired and collected many plants that had fallen from grace, though still to be found in some of the older 19th Century gardens which had escaped fashion change. Many of these plants would be regarded today as dull – as a result of their not-in-your-face floral attributes – and consequently passed by, which indeed they were in around the 1920s – a great loss to our gardening palate. Many of these plants were quiet bit-players in the considerably more exotic gardens credited to the Victorian era. They were grown for foliage, form and texture. (Not a 20th Century strength!) Identification of these plants was often not easy, but part of the enjoyment of discovery of our colonial garden past. The survival skills of many of these plants I found fascinating. Before long it became apparent that many of them were of climatically similar homelands, yet further they were from our hemisphere!

The simple discovery of plant groups compatible with the vagaries of our climate was a turning point in my garden making; no longer was the inevitable trial and error, and often failure, of wrong plant groups. Fortunately, many of these plants suited my ever-increasing enthusiasm for foliage as the primary core of garden harmony.

Over the years I cultivated this garden; I trialled and cajoled these old survivors and also many regular nursery plants, discarding some for various reasons, including short season novelties, poor



THE SUCCULENT GARDEN

Care, maintenance and landscape ideas in highly illustrated form for hundreds of sociable succulents. Soft cover, 104 pages. Retail \$27.45, Club \$25.80.



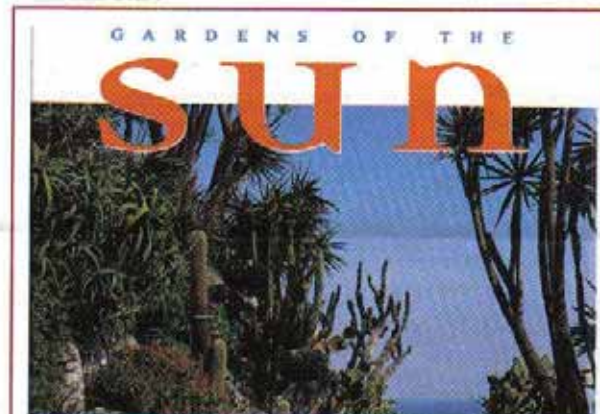
William's current garden, Wigandia. "The layering or tiering of plant colonies is not dissimilar to working in oils on canvas."

doers, and others that simply did not pay their way – non-performers. The final act of gardening for this garden was the realisation that I had achieved all I wanted to achieve. What to do? Stop gardening? Easy enough to say, but....!

Yes, to not garden was the chosen way; an exercise in relinquishing control, to allow plants to have freedom to do it their way. This exercise proved to be a most valuable lesson in the understanding of relaxed colony gardening (my label): further testing plant toughness, invasive qualities, and the use of same. I believe it to be the most important lesson of my gardening career – the importance of *not* gardening!

Onwards to Mount Noorat, an extinct volcano in Victoria's Western District. Rainfall approximately 28 inches, topsoil thin, atop many metres of pure scoria – excellent drainage. My current creation 'Wigandia', circa 1989, four acres in extent, takes full advantage of magnificent views in almost all directions. The site, on arrival, was rough pasture littered with African boxthorn (a vicious but small bird-friendly bush), remnant sheoaks (*Allocasuarina verticillata*), some plantation sugar gums and little else. The first, and probably the most important decision, was to refrain from altering the existing landscape and contours – to work with rather than impose conquering mathematical symmetry. The second concept was to work in harmony with the surrounding countryside with as much attention paid to inner and outer impact of buildings and type of vegetation. Thirdly, the sky must figure prominently in the scheme of things. I've long believed we over-tree our gardens at the expense of great skies and all the attendant problems of root thuggery!

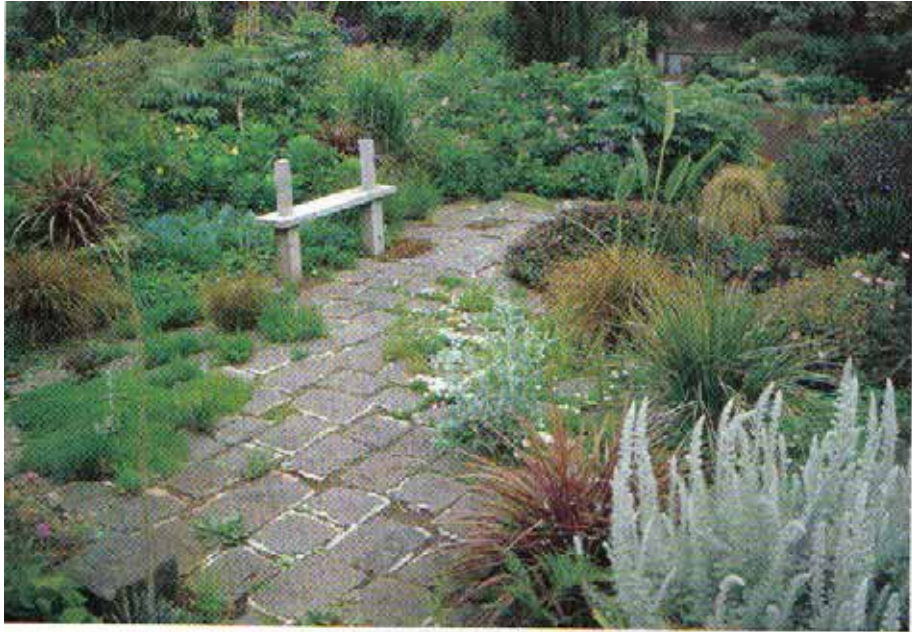
The general concept of the spatial ideals in place (in my mind), and an estate cottage relocated to the site, what to do but plant a garden, ahem! My observations of gardens far and wide, as a tourist and professional gardener, had left me with little doubt that most gardens are absurdly labour intensive: lawns, annuals, pruning, bare ground (weed beds) – an equation of toil and trouble. Where are the fun bits?



GARDENS OF THE SUN

by Trevor Nottle

This famous Australian gardener and writer's treatise, on how a garden is not 'a purchase of an image', but 'a response to our local environment'. He shows how to throw off our horticultural baggage and garden with our climate rather than against it. Stylish as always, he has chapters on subjects from courtyards and orchards to using water and stone in the garden, and also suggests plants and their sources. An inspiration. **Hard cover, 195 pages. Colour photographs from Australia and overseas. Retail \$39.95, Club \$19.90. SAVE \$20.**



"Paintings of depth and richness...with year-round performers" – Wigandia

How much labour and water will you save per year in a Water Wise, 21st Century garden?

WATER WASTING		WATER WISE	
	Hours		Hours
Lawn Mowing	59	Eliminate lawn	-
Weeding	150	Plant shrubs & ground covers.	50
Trimming hedges	12	Mulch. Eliminate annuals	
Total	221	Reduce hedges. Use relaxed planting	6
			56

Water usage

	Litres		Litres
Water used	7200	Save & use grey and rain water.	4000
		Use drought tolerant plants.	
		Keep your lawn but don't water it.	

Save 2200 litres of water and 156 hours, or over 3 weeks of 7 hour days

Planting in layers, as nature does, creates a range and density of vegetation that is hard to beat for year-round interest and harmony. The understated way in which many plant colonies evolve (naturally and in an abandoned contrivance, see left) became my model. Layering or tiering of plant colonies is not dissimilar to working in oils on canvas; the methods used to create paintings of depth and richness express parallel goals. So, too, certain tapestry and fabric design, e.g. William Morris.

The simple explanation is first to consider the lowest level: a ground covering plant chosen as background or foil and weed suppressor. The next layer of larger scale plants must be capable of surviving the former. This equation is endless in its multiples, the number of layers dependent only on the intended effect and design.

The majority of my garden plants are evergreen, and provide an unending season of interest. Deciduous plants I use most sparingly. Why have dominating seasonal plants when we can grow such an abundance of year-round performers?

Gardening on a scoria base provides an enormous challenge to many facets of our inherited ornamental horticulture. The growing season is governed by rain in the very short term because of the non-moisture retention qualities of the medium. Consequently the seasons for growth shut down prematurely without top-up rainfall.

The success of my plant choice and use of plants can best be gauged against my minimal use of applied water. This garden survived well three consecutive summers of zero irrigation! No particular plant type is sacred – all must pass my almost rigid torture test. The range of plants suitable and worthy of Southern Hemisphere gardening is vast – why waste valuable time and space on folly plants, and indeed, water?

Wigandia dreaming....