

## House and Garden

MAY 2004 Leo Schofield

Aussie gardeners are becoming increasingly confident about the use of ornament in their gardens. Time was when the only non horticultural decorations one saw in gardens were in older houses were white-painted cement statues, often limbless, of female figures representative of the Seasons, fountains depicting a couple of little kiddies sheltering under an umbrella, the ferrule of which constituted the spout so that the inanimate subjects would be surrounded by real rain, and, in simpler gardens, the much-despised gnomes or swans fashioned from discarded rubber car tyres, painted white and filled with petunias.

But we've become a tad more sophisticated in recent years and now don't shy away from introducing into our gardens decorative elements that our grandparents and in some instances our grandparents would have considered distinctly off limits. Like slabs of stone over which water trickles, strange metal sculpture, seats made from logs with the top sliced flat.

In some way or other, all of these are simply interpretations of traditional garden ornaments. In lieu of a classic urn, an ordinary everyday object can be strategically placed for contemplation. William Martin has perfected this snook-cocking style. Visit his glorious and sometimes startling garden on Mount Noorat in the

Western District of Victoria and you may be taken to see classical columns (made of sheets of galvanised iron rolled into cylinders) topped with trophies that on closer inspection turn out to be the stiff-bristled circular brushes used in industrial floor scrubbers. Martin has used all manner of *objets trouvées* - in his amazing garden and it comes off triumphantly, although some of his installations are so site-specific they would look a tad wacky in Toorak.

Sydney-based garden designer Andrew Sullivan has done equally creative things with what might seem like detritus. He takes old chunks of broken up concrete building rubble, stains them bright turquoise or sea green and uses them as feature paving. Indeed, for one garden exhibition he devised a 'before and after' garden with one side of his display area set up as a kind of dump with all the material one encounters on a demolition site and on the other side showed the same stuff used in a brilliant and colourful Balinese-inspired garden.

So one should not be too precious about what should or should not constitute garden ornament. Classic gazebos, arbours, arches, urns and trellised can all be re-interpreted in modern minimalist or even funky fashion.

I've seen a screen comprising a row of matching pots each filled with a clump of bamboo stakes, all cut to the same length and laced together with hessian upholsterer's webbing to form a fantastic outdoor privacy screen; bush rocks piled into a pyramidal form

turned a mossy green by the water that trickles down all sides from the apex; I've seen a large sandstone head from a demolition yard that, in the process of removal from the Victorian building it had once adorned, had lost all of one cheek and a fair bit of the chin buried in soil at a quirky angle with lawn planted right up to the base so it resembled some ancient architectural fragment; and I've seen welded wire wine racks used as trellis, discarded telegraph poles recycled as supports for a wisteria walk, and a magnificent arch made from driftwood. And if you see an industrial site being dismantled, stop and take a look to see if there are any large flywheels or components of some long disused machine lurking around. They can look every bit as dramatic as an expensive piece of art sculpture.

In all this process of re-interpreting classic garden traditions in a contemporary way, its important to understand that there are no rules. If you want to make a gazebo from reinforcing steel, go for it. Indeed, the brilliant Californian abstract expressionist artist Robert Irwin, who created the magical Central Garden of the new Getty museum in Los Angeles used just that material to fashion giant 'parasols', towers of steel that converge and then arch outwards like the ribs of a giant's umbrella, and planted in each dazzling coloured bougainvilleas that now have reached full height and tumble out over the 'ribs'. Who cares if the framework has become rusty? It's part of the effect, another colour in the garden's palette.

Of course, if you happen to own a fine marble statue or bust go right ahead and place that strategically in your garden as a focal point at the end of a walk or against an ivy-clad wall. But do so at your peril, remembering that Australians have a particular fondness for knocking heads and limbs off sculpture in public places. However, they are unlikely to want to vandalise a re-cycled lump of industrial plant, a large creation of tangled wood or some broken cement dyed purple.

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