

st martin in his

field

In the dry western district of Victoria, in the shadow of an extinct volcano, William Martin is forging a distinctly Australian garden style with his creation – Wigandia

WORDS **LEO SCHOFIELD** PHOTOGRAPHS **SIMON GRIFFITHS**



William Martin takes a seat in the garden that surrounds his cottage on Mount Neorat in western Victoria. An eclectic mix of succulents and dry-climate plants (see info page) creates a tapestry of colour and form.

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illiam Martin is a self-confessed murderer. "I murder good taste," he declares firmly. "I also murder cliches.

And I've murdered quite a few plants in my time." The crime scene, the place where he practises this extensive horticultural homicide, is a hillock near the hamlet of Noorat in the western district of Victoria. Here William has created what is, without doubt, the most eclectic, exciting and original garden in the country.

Wigandia (named after a species of flowering tree from central South America that features in William's garden) is also probably the first genuinely Australian garden – one free of alien influences, highly responsive to the local landscape, sensitive to climate (dry) and conditions (tough). William expands on this point. "My garden is about murder, but it's also about magic and the weather. This is a

magical spot. I had to do something that was up to the place. I'm also interested in sustainability; not just of plants, but of culture as well." He doesn't use fertilisers. He uses very little water. Most of the built elements in the garden are constructed from recycled material.

To chat with him for a while is to realise that William isn't short of opinions. His pet hate is "inherited northern-hemisphere garden traditions", for which read 'pretty English gardens'. Australia has been in thrall to the gardenesque since colonial times. We may not have opted for an Australian republic, but William Martin has declared unilateral horticultural independence, and others are beginning to share his beliefs and to follow his example. Wigandia may just be the most influential garden of the next half-century.

To say that William started his garden from scratch is to give an old cliché new

meaning. What he had to begin with in 1990 was a small plot of land on the top of a mountain of scoria, from which he scratched and scabbled a garden. But first he needed a house in which to live while he planted and dug, so he bought an outbuilding from Dalvui, one of the grand old properties of the area, dismantled it, conveyed the bits up to the top of his private mountain and reassembled it. Then he began the garden, an embodiment of all his current philosophies about plants and their uses.

That this was the order of things is evident the minute one arrives to confront the cottage perched on the highest point of the hill, with the garden falling away from it, tumbling downhill in a riot of forms and colours like bolts of rich cloth.

This is dry country and only plants that thrive in these conditions are admitted. There's no soil to speak of, just red ☞

This page The groom's cottage that William moved from the grounds of a nearby mansion to his mountaintop garden. **Opposite 1** The striking contrast of massed grey *Cotyledon orbiculata* edging a red earth garden path. **2** Typical William whimsy: a "Corinthian column" of discarded roofing rolled into a cylinder and topped with an industrial scrubbing brush. This unexpected use of traditional bush materials is a highly personal style of garden ornament that Martin calls 'Bunyip Classicism'. **3** A rusting bicycle hangs in a gum tree, another of William's improvised sculptures. **4** Another industrial scrubbing brush topped with a tin tub of succulents is the central feature of a terraced area. **5** William and wife Robyn's six-year-old son, Rory, hides in a tin 'temple'. **6** The William Martin 'look': the bold, silvery leaves of a cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*, left), the russet-red seed heads of *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy' (centre), and a choice collection of succulents.







This page 1 A stone trough filled with many-coloured succulents. **2** A William Martin-designed bench for quiet contemplation, with the sedge *Carex comans* in the foreground. **3** Echiniums are among William's favourite plants and are found throughout the garden. Here grows a forest of the flowering spires of *Echinium fastuosum*. **4** Rory ignores the rich plantings and concentrates on his toys. **5** *Agave americana* 'Marginata'. **6** Even barbed wired is used to decorative effect. **7** On the main path to the house Ooty, William's kelpie cross, sits beside a serpent, its sinuous form made from curved galvanised iron that's infilled with the succulent *Sedum acre* 'Aureum', chosen because it resembles snakeskin. **Opposite** Few people could fail to respond to the dazzling variety of plants in William's masterpiece, many of them rare. An exacting concentration on minute variations in form and colour – details that would escape all but the professional botanist – is what gives *Wigandia* its subtlety and impact.







rocks of all sizes, spewed up aeons ago in volcanic eruptions. Thus the paths are red and rocky, but there's no sense of aridity or sparseness, for they're bordered by astonishing, fearless planting. Thick, grey *Cotyledon orbiculata* is used en masse. Less confident gardeners would use three or four plants. William has deployed maybe 300. He has roses (not many) and they sit alongside stiff cacti, furcraeas and phormiums. There's no such thing as

iron; 'urns' formed from tin bathtubs or old coppers; and 'traditional troughs' that, on close inspection, turn out to be tin containers mounted on stiff-bristled industrial scrubbing brushes.

More than one visitor has had the uneasy feeling that William is, as the old Aussie saying goes, 'having a lend' of them – that this is all a big piss-take. It's no such thing, of course. Wigandia, as the English editors of *Gardens Illustrated* realised

From whichever angle one looks at the house, it seems inextricably and naturally connected to the garden and vice versa.

at best exciting. They'll appreciate its larrikin qualities. Plantspersons will be agog at the variety of rare material he's used, but also at the absolute appropriateness of every plant to its surroundings.

It's perhaps only the garden conservatives who'll be disapproving. Force-fed on pretty pictures of misty Pommy plantings, they'll be unprepared for the robustness of colour and the vigour of forms. This isn't a pretty garden, but it's a beautiful one, full of wit and fun. It could not have happened anywhere else but on the spot where it exists and from which its inspiration flowed, and no one else would have had the chutzpah to do it, or the sensitivity to pull it off so completely.

William Martin is known in the world of gardeners as having firm views and the confidence to express them, no matter whose precious petals he ruffles. He is no wilting violet. And he knows how good he is. When I asked him how big his spread was, he replied, "Two acres. But there are enough ideas in it to fill 50." ■

"My garden is about murder, but it's also about magic and the weather. This is a magical spot."

a dead spot in this garden. Every bend in a path reveals a surprise, most surprising of all being the plethora of ornament.

When one thinks of one of William's despised northern-hemisphere gardens, one thinks of pedestals and plinths, of follies and grottos and ha-ha's and tempiettos – decorative elements interpolated for flamboyant or calming effect. William takes the mickey out of this grandiose tradition of ornament, creating his own versions from *objets trouvés*: a 'temple' and 'pedestals' made from corrugated

when they showcased the garden in their magazine, is the triumphant product not only of an original mind but of a true artist. One thinks immediately of late Australian artist Rosalie Gascoigne's assemblages of battered signs, or of late American artist Joseph Cornell's mysterious boxes.

Like any serious artist, William considers his effects, applies his colour with a combination of panache and restraint, and studies form and contrast of texture. To visitors unacquainted with many of the plants, it will appear at least interesting,

dry-climate gardening

Garden designer William Martin says: "We live in a climate far removed from the source of our most frequently used plants – those that often require copious amounts of water during our long, hot summers. Let us create a garden that reflects who we are and where we live."

At Wigandia, William's property in western Victoria, a thin layer of topsoil covers many metres of pure scoria, which provides excellent drainage. William believes that correct plant choice is vital in a dry climate. "Why waste time and space on folly plants and water? This garden survived three consecutive summers of zero irrigation." As well as rarely watering, William shuns fertiliser as he believes both promote soft growth that's knocked about by hot weather and wind.

Talk to your local nursery about plants that thrive in your area, then follow these simple rules to ensure success with a dry-climate garden.

Watering Instead of frequent, scanty hosing, give your plants long, less frequent drinks, which will encourage deeper roots and sturdy plant growth.

When installing a watering system, choose a drip watering style that's laid over or buried just below the soil's surface. Fiskars' Aquapore (made in Australia from recycled tyres, right) saves up to 70% of the water used by conventional systems. A 30m-long Aquapore weeping hose (D12mm) costs around \$70 from nurseries and hardware stores.



Mulch This is beneficial in keeping surface soil moist and helping plants to become established. To suppress weed growth, William used organic mulch when he first planted Wigandia, but he no longer finds it necessary now that the garden has grown and all bare earth is covered.

● For a consultation, contact William Martin on (03) 5592 5349; wigandiamartin@hotmail.com.



From left Mini nuggets, \$51 per m²; leaf litter, \$37 per m²; Greenlife Cow & Compost Mix, \$51 per m²; and cypress pine woodchip, \$43 per m² (all prices supply only), from Australian Native Landscapes, Terrey Hills NSW (02) 9450 1444; www.austnativelandscapes.com.au.

open garden

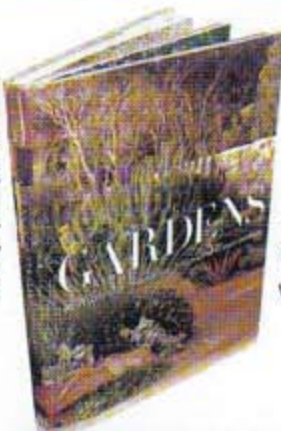
● Another of William's masterful creations – a very different garden to Wigandia – is one that surrounds a 1960s block of flats at 43 Narong Road in Melbourne's North Caulfield. It will be open for the first time this year as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme, from 2-3 March. Entry is from 10am to 4.30pm and costs \$4.50 per person.

● For more information, refer to Australia's Open Garden Scheme Guidebook 2001/2002 (ABC Books), \$16.95, or contact Australia's Open Garden Scheme nationally (03) 5428 4557; www.abc.net.au/opengarden/.

instant attraction

Wigandia has garnered a lot of attention. It won *Your Garden's* Garden of the Year award (1999), and has featured in UK magazine *Gardens Illustrated* (1999); *The Open Garden: Australian Gardens and Their Gardeners* by Neil Robertson and Louise Earwaker (Allen & Unwin), \$65; *The Australian Flower Garden* by Clive Blazey (Penguin Books), \$29.95; and recently in *Gardens in Australia* (pictured) by Sarah Guest with photos by Simon Griffiths (New Holland Publishers), \$69.95.

Words by Jenna Reed Burns.
Photographs by Jason Busch



plant it!

PETUNIA



Floriana's Petunia 'Lovely Lavender'

Miss Popularity

The winner in the popularity stakes this summer is the showy petunia! Not only do petunias come in stunning colours with shapely petal curves, they are easy to grow and thrive in the summer sun.

In colours such as white, lemon, blue and pale pink through to lilac, lavender, red and hot pink, you can see why the petunia is such a winner.

We love petunias because they...

- love the hot summer sun
- come in lots of wonderful colours
- are perfect in pots and garden beds

Experts' advice

- Pinch off the first buds to encourage fuller, bushier plants and lots of flowers.
- Cut back at the end of flowering for a second flush of blooms.

Colours

Floriana grow petunia seedlings in single colours so you can mix and match, or pre-mixed colour combos that give you a total look. In single colours, try Petunia 'Lovely Lavender' for its soft lilac tones or Petunia 'Bloom', the latest colour blend in rose, lilac and burgundy.

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