

STORY AND PHOTOS: WILLIAM MARTIN

William Martin from Wigandia believes that we should learn to appreciate and enjoy the beauty that a harsh environment produces in the garden



living with plant stress

The era of the plump and green look of our traditional English garden is under threat. For too long we have endeavored to create gardens which are more akin to the drippier climates of the Northern Hemisphere than the much harsher reality of our own. Our gardening history can be mapped by the patterns of water availability from first settlement onwards.

Lust for exotic plants

The early settlers quickly realised that water was a boom and bust affair as they experienced wet seasons with abundant supplies of water and, more often than not, even longer spells without it.

Much has been documented about the lust of the “first footers” for recreating the gardens of the old country. I suspect this notion was rather quickly suspended with the realisation that this was quite impractical, given the capricious nature of the most important ingredient for survival in this new far-flung land—water.

The main game (and it was NO game!) was survival in this alien climate, with the cultivation of foodstuffs, both animal and vegetable, taking the highest priority, and any purely ornamental plantings taking second place.

One need only study, and indeed observe, the range of plants that were used in those early days. Many of the plants were introduced from the Cape in South Africa, a stopover and convenient collection point for ships en route to the new colony. All manner of supplies were sourced for the remaining journey and for use in the new colony, including many strange plants.

The coastal belt in this region of South Africa has a very similar climate to much of the first settled areas of Australia. In particular, the area has a climate that can be approximated as Mediterranean with predominantly winter to spring rainfall and a dry, hot summer period. Many of the Cape's plants were quite at home in the newly settled areas of the Australian colony.

The first few decades of settlement corresponded closely with the British lust for new and exotic plants from all her colonies. This golden era of botanical enthusiasm for the newly discovered had a huge impact on garden content in both Britain and Australia. Many plants now regarded as common were planted with due regard for their uniqueness, toughness and exoticism. A vast range of plants was used in this



OPPOSITE PAGE: Flax stands sentinel to the rustic bench. *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii* and canna fill the gaps. FROM ABOVE: *Cordyline pumilio* glows in the sunlight; *Agave americana* 'Variegata'; *Aeonium arboreum* with the imposing leaves of *Agave attenuata* and aloe flower in the foreground. Irish spurge *Euphorbia hyberna* and *Juncus* complete the picture.



period, from the humble agapanthus and aloe from the Cape, to many native, drought-resistant trees, shrubs and exotics from around the globe.

Enter from stage left the reticulated water schemes, and all climatic sensibility was thrown to the wind. The age of unsustainable (and unrealistic) horticultural practices (particularly in our major cities) had now begun.

Our rivers and lakes became reservoirs for the indulgence of all manner of water-related usage, compounded by governments who saw water supply as a major vote-winning "catchment". This new era could easily be summed up as the hosepipe culture, where a scarce commodity was distributed at peppercorn rates, and was used by most gardeners to support the popular practice of growing climatically challenged plants.

This practice was influenced by the elitist view that the only plants worth growing were the rare and the hard to cultivate. This culture was inherited from the British horticultural institutions, and their champions, the landed gentry. In their country estates, some aristocrats sought to grow (in some cases with an almost obsessive competitiveness) the "un-growable"—climatically speaking—in their conservatories.

Much printed matter was available from British publishers and any ideas instigated by the "better" classes quickly filtered down to the suburban garden owner as part of the emergence of the middle class, with all its attendant mimicry of the values associated with a higher station.

How values have changed... or have they? In the 21st Century, we have embraced this "alien" land in cultural and social terms. Our identity is stamped on almost all facets of the arts—with the notable exception of ornamental gardening.

A sustainable approach

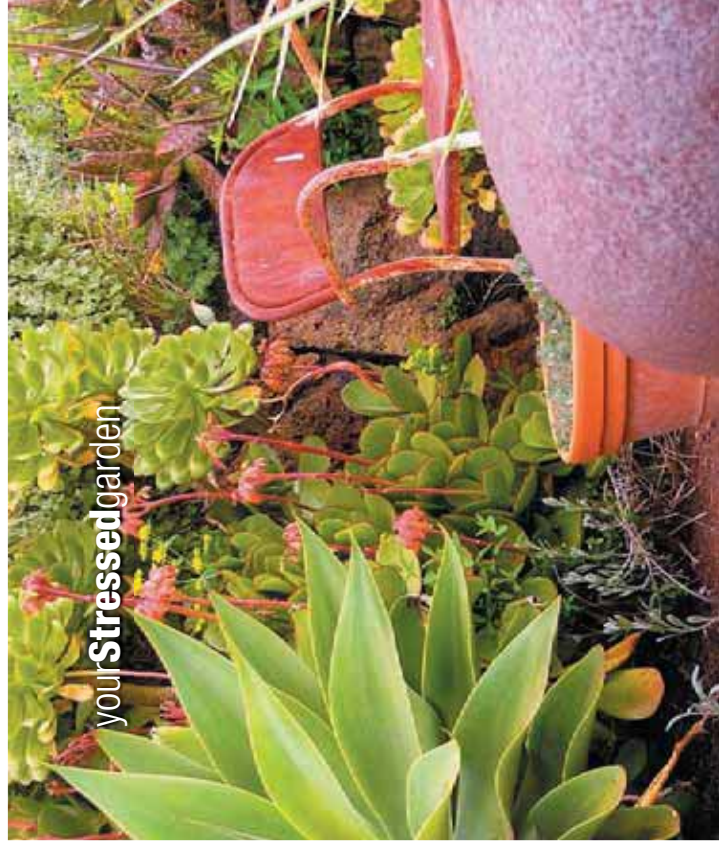
Few inroads have been made into the climatic and cultural sensibilities of our garden-making under the sun. The lust for this unsustainable look seems ingrained. How odd for a seemingly modern and proud nation, full of highly independent aspirations and competitiveness.

We are one of the most urbanised western countries, though our regularly spun myth is one of a people surviving against all odds in this vast, dry, inhospitable continent. But, I ask, where is this idea reflected in our home surrounds?

In recent times, the realisation that we must



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR TOP LEFT: The hardy flax or phormium is planted below a fruiting pomegranate; early morning at Wigandia with the mist lifting from *Salvia canariensis* the strappy leafed furcraea, while *Verbena rigida* is the purple covering below with clumps of drought tolerant grasses; *Aeonium 'Swartkop'*; cardoon heads; copper conduit with a harrow disc atop is surrounded by *Miscanthus sinensis 'Variegatus'*, *Aeonium arboreum 'Atropurpureum'* with the orange alstroemeria flowers behind; *Cotyledon orbiculata* with agave; the spiky spires of acanthus and the rounded heads of agapanthus with one of William's creations.



your **Stressed** garden

consider the impact of overuse of natural resources on not only local existence, but global existence, has spurred a move towards a more sustainable approach. My garden, Wigandia, and others have played prominent roles in the pseudo-ecological garden stakes. I have long believed that the somewhat slavish adherence to hosepipe culture has rendered us rather impervious to the true opportunities our climate presents. Some of us have tuned into the notion that native plants are best, a simplistic but positive step forward.

I believe we are on the cusp of a great era of ornamental gardening in this country. We are beginning to embrace native plants as equals, as well as the exotics so loved by the high-Victorian plant collectors. There also appears to be a growing realisation that we cannot expect to attain the glossy look portrayed in garden magazines from both here and abroad. We are all victims of fashion to various degrees—let's just hope this new-found direction continues.

Taking advantage of our seasons

I have now been gardening for more than 30 years and the more I garden, the more I am taken aback by the dry and heat-stressed look of plants throughout the warmer months. We live in an evergreen climate; I say, why not take full advantage of our seasonal vagaries?

A blend of sturdy, cast-iron evergreens and softer spring high-flyers that summer-stress gracefully or fade into the background can provide a character-filled garden year round that's not beholden to the traditional big bang theory of high spring, or the hosepipe.



FROM TOP: Aloe saponaria, agave, kalanchoe and Aeonium; a close-up shot of Aloe saponaria, scented pelargonium flowers; Cotyledon orbiculata flowers.



PHOTO: RORY MARTIN (AGE 9)

Magic Murder and the Weather

If you'd like to see more of Wigandia, you can buy a CD with a PowerPoint slide show of more than 300 photographs. Send \$28, which includes P&P to PO Box 46, Noorat, Vic 3265. A selection of his art prints can be found at www.photoloot.com. (Click on "Photographers", then select "Martin, Wigandia")

William is available for garden design and construction and can be contacted by email on wigandia_martin@dodo.com.au, or by phone on (03) 5592 5349. Visitors are welcome by appointment.