



A Marriage of Aesthetics and Ecology

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I'm a landscape designer with a passion for designing eco-friendly gardens in visual harmony with the natural landscape. I was born in England and during my early years, my twin passions were art and nature: drawing and painting landscapes and period houses, and visiting galleries; climbing trees, fossicking in ponds and paying more attention to my plants, menagerie and aquariums than to my despairing teachers.

After my release from school and following a variety of jobs, I graduated as an osteopath, opened a practice in Sussex and married an Aussie girl. We eventually settled in Australia with our three children, and I qualified, in 1991, in landscape design.

In a few moments I'm going to talk about five problems facing gardeners and growers today, and the multiple benefits that flow from using selected indigenous species to solve them. Before I do though, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this part of Australia, the Awabakal and Worimi peoples.

The first problem is bushfire. Of course, bushfire has always been a huge problem, and global warming is likely to make it even more so. How many people here live in a bushfire area? . . . Are you familiar with plants that spread fire and those that retard fire? . . . Do you know how best to use them?

For native plant growers like ourselves, the good news is that many Australian species that are in other ways worthy of garden cultivation, also have fire retardant properties. These species therefore have a significant role to play in combating this dreadful problem. There's a lot more information about bushfires and fire-retardant plants you need to know, that I haven't got time to cover today. This includes a list of fire retardant species indigenous to the greater Sydney region; that you can find [on my web site](#). On the main menu, click on 'Plants', and on the sub-menu, click on 'Fire retardant'.

Wherever you live in Australia, there is sure to be an abundance of fire retardant species that occur naturally in your locality or bioregion. If you live beyond the Sydney region and haven't yet discovered them, you may need to do some research, because it could save the lives of your loved ones . . . and your property . . . and yourself.

The second problem I want to talk about, is drought. As the world's driest continent, Australia is unsurprisingly home to an abundance of drought tolerant species. The good news is that these include many species of strong architectural form and high aesthetic value, plants that are well suited to garden cultivation. I have identified over 260 of these desirable species that occur naturally in the greater Sydney region - between Newcastle and Nowra, east of the Great Dividing Range - and that meet these criteria. Once established, they should all survive without additional watering, assuming there is some soil moisture at the beginning of summer, plus a mulch layer and protection from excess exposure to sun and wind. The full list of 260 species, appears on my website. Go to 'Plants' and click on 'Drought tolerant'.

As you may be aware, drought stimulates seed formation and therefore the invasive weed risks of drought tolerant exotics. This represents a further benefit of drought tolerant natives, and a good reason for us all to congratulate ourselves as ANPSA members, for being so far ahead of the others.

The third problem concerns ecology. Since the indigenous garden fosters biodiversity and guarantees ecological integrity, it naturally attracts a spectrum of desirable native songbirds and other wildlife. Depending on your location and vegetation, these may include bandicoots, bilbies, gliders and koalas, and small endangered birds such as the Eastern Spinebill, Fairy Wren and Regent Honeyeater, among many others.

By providing protective nesting habitat and an endless supply of natural food sources, the indigenous garden helps save these little creatures from possible extinction. An extra benefit is that the indigenous garden also attracts fewer sedentary, territorial birds such as the Pied Currawong, Noisy Miner, Wattlebird and others that monopolise artificial hybrids with enlarged flowers and extended flowering, and drive out these small endangered birds.

Indigenous plants also eliminate the risks of exotics and artificial hybrids that provide a haphazard mix of nutrients; plants that may invade the natural environment, pollute the local gene pool or contribute to the spread of the deadly *Phytophthora* fungus and other

plant diseases.

The fourth problem is about sustainability. I doubt it will come as a surprise to most of you, that flat manicured lawns, and gardens filled with exotics, bedding plants and artificial hybrids are unsustainable. Most need excessive water, fertiliser high in phosphorus and an assortment of chemical fungicides, herbicides and insecticides to keep them happy. Aside from their ongoing costs, these products collectively contribute to the decline in wildlife numbers. They may also contaminate the soil, facilitate the spread of environmental weeds and promote excessive algal growth in natural waterways.

Conversely, the majority of carefully selected and practically situated Australian plants thrive without these nasties. They're also adapted to infertile, low-phosphorus soils, and respond well to small applications of low-phosphorus fertiliser or none at all. The well designed garden is thus a sustainable garden that looks after itself with minimal maintenance. Resurgent insectivorous birds such as the Rufous fantail, Scarlet Robin and Spotted Pardalote work ceaselessly to their and our mutual advantage, keeping insect pests at bay and eliminating the costs and hazards of toxic insecticides.

The fifth problem, if it is a problem, concerns the aesthetics of garden design.

Perhaps the greatest principle, and the one most lacking in the garden today, is a sense of unity. It is a quality found in all great landscapes. When we say that a landscape has been spoilt, we mean that it has lost this unity. Sylvia Crowe "Garden Design".

A predominance of indigenous plants in a garden will work their magic and help achieve a sense of unity.

So, as night follows day, the benefits of selected indigenous plants, as fire retarders, drought survivors, restorers of ecological balance, sustainability and aesthetics are clearly overwhelming.