



Despair and Desire- A Short Diary

Chris Larkin

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While parts of the country - Queensland and New South Wales - are in some places submerged under flood waters, here in Victoria where I live the drought is biting harder than ever. Before I went away in mid January to Egypt, one of the driest places on earth, the garden was looking possibly the best it had ever looked due to December rains and relatively cool weather. I returned at the end of January in the middle of an extraordinary heatwave with a run of extreme temperatures that included 3 days over 43°C. Before I left brachyscomes were gaily flowering when they would have normally been past their best and the weather was benign lulling me into an imagined kind summer. I returned home after 2 weeks to view a different scene where a torcherous (new word!) sun had already caused the death of some plants. I entered the house around 10pm and it was like stepping into an oven.

What a difference 2 weeks can make! What a difference even 1 day can make! Since the aforementioned heatwave there have been the record breaking temperatures of Black Saturday when the sun beat down and dangerous high winds fanned the flames of those now infamous killer fires. Victoria is in a state of shock and mourning. The dry weather persists around Melbourne and for part of each day we are blanketed in smoke haze.

This is the driest start to a year on record. Last night (17/02/09) it was reported that Melbourne had received 2.2 mm of rain to date compared to a normal average of 76 mm. It's not a good start to the year and summer is only half over. Where to from here for the gardener? Will autumn rains, if they do indeed materialise, and they haven't always in recent times, wet our appetites and nourish our thirst for gardening?

My garden has lost weight and volume; many plants take up much less space; they are wasted shadows of their former selves. I have seen this happen before and know when reasonable rain does fall stems and foliage will re-hydrate and the garden will expand; it will stand taller like a great weight has been lifted. In the meantime the final death count will depend on how much longer the garden goes between drinks. My tanks are getting low and only so much is achievable with a hand held hose and an acre of garden.

At this point I can mention that some plants have been laid to rest due in large part to sun exposure. *Correa numularifolia* and other prostrate types in full sun did not make it through the scorchers, whereas those in shade or semi-shade soldiered on. It has been much the same story with respect to *Grevillea lanigera* prostrate. I have lost several leptospermums - 'Little Bun', 'Pink Cascade', *L. morrisonii* and 'Flamingo' - due, I suspect, to lack of water. In some cases the loss of these plants hasn't been heartbreaking as they have (a) never been happy or (b) outgrown the space. Trouble is with so much death, brown mulch extends its reign once the plants have been removed; so much less restful than green and greys. Right now the garden isn't growing - its shrinking!

30 March 2009

It is the second last day of March and we have thankfully had some rain this month; Melbourne is sitting on about average for the month and unusually I haven't done any better. The rain hasn't been what you could describe as a break but we are getting used to being grateful for small amounts. The days are still hot but the nights are cool and the increased angle of the sun produces a gentler light; entrancing and enticing it hooks me into involving myself in the garden in a positive way once again.

I am removing all dead plants. Three loads to the tip so far with a high-sided trailer packed tight and I think there will be at least a couple more trips. I have brought back 'cooked' tip mulch to improve the soil particularly in areas I'm reworking. I'll also be digging in some gypsum for the same reason. I think it will be necessary to add to existing rockwork for soil retention, root protection of plants and to improve the aesthetics in some areas. Planting out seems a long way off but I've already started to purchase a nice little collection, and as many of these plants will go into existing beds where I don't actually need to do any ground work, I should be able to get many of them into the ground anytime although ideally this would be after penetrating rains.

There is so much to do and so many challenges - not least of which is the decision about replacement screen plants on the western boundary - which plants will be able to take a day of sun - possibly extreme temperatures - cope with very dry conditions near the top of a hill, be quick growing but long lived and grow at least 4 meters! There is always more to do than the time to do it.

Redesigning the small pond may have to wait yet again as tasks are prioritised and it finds itself well down the list. But now at least I've made a start.

8 April 2009

There has been 40 mm of rain so far this month - it's a good gardening omen for my 2 weeks holiday. I continue to remove plants - not just the dead and dying but also plants severely damaged by the hot days. Some of these plants may in time have recovered but I suspect that if we have similar hot days again next summer than they would be scorched again. *Austromyrtus dulcis* is a case in point; I use a crowbar to prize its tuberous roots some of which are as big as a large swede or kohlrabi out of the ground; a powerhouse of energy root, a root for the future, a root for future regeneration, but not one able to protect the plant against a sizzling hot sun.

I have now taken 4 large trailer loads to the tip and there is at least one more trip to be made. I am being ruthless. Sections of the garden that are 2 years old and younger are coming along well. Most plants are thriving; a few that were heat affected have been replaced. When I want to get some gardener's tonic I go into these areas and look and look and look enjoying the fresh beauty and vigour bordered by older robust plantings. From different angles many older sections of the garden are also visually rewarding. I must build on the garden's strengths; I must take strength from the garden's success and resilience. We dance together into the future; the one with feet of clay and me the spinning partner ever in attendance.

12 April 2009

I've had phone conversations with friends in the last couple of days. "How is your garden going"?, they ask. "I'm being ruthless", I say. "Oh, change is wonderful in the garden", says one friend now over 80. "How exciting". She is still so engaged with her own garden, trying to meet the challenges, trying to achieve a beautiful and workable design. None of her enthusiasm is lost to age and I want to bottle her attitude and energy. I know I can talk to her at any time about my theories and progress, she will listen, she will question and take a real interest. "What would be the point of a garden without change", says another. Yes, well sometimes I think no change would be a nice change but what I'd really like is to control the rate of change. But that's not the way the naturalistic garden world works particularly with the hot breath of climate change panting in the wings.

More than ever I am going for those 'toughies'. I know I'll never be cured of trying new plants in the garden but I am also looking for ideas from my own garden and doing the repeat shuffle.