



Oh, Our Designing Ways

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I agree with Jo Hambrett that NOTHING focuses the mind and energy quite like a garden visit (see "[Design.....and sticking to it!](#)"). For an Australian Open Garden (AOGS) Scheme visit the 'i's and 't's of it ALL will be attended to. Or that at least should be the aim because the public after all is paying to see something good. A visit by a group of people will take me down the same path, but to some extent at least, how far I go may depend on how well I know the people. Recently I had 2 friends from Wangaratta visit the garden for the first time and I couldn't believe how hard I worked. Thank you Helen and John it was about time I dealt with some of those tidy-up chores. The Van Reits - active members of this group - have a beautiful young garden in Wangaratta so I had to pull my gardening finger out. And let's face it we all like to impress and dare I say it we even like complements.

I must also, however, have the devil on my back because even when no-one is visiting I'm still hard at it. Striving towards some vision is part of it, having to keep a large garden under control is another part, but then there is the personality factor - a tendency to be obsessive and want EVERYTHING to be perfect - which is the whip hand.

I was talking to a woman the other day. She wants to create an Australian plant front garden and she may then think about doing the same with the back yard. She had visited Bev Fox's garden in Jan 07 during the AOGS weekend (that is in fact how we met) and she loved the restful feel of the garden. We talked away and then our conversation took an interesting turn when I started to talk about the complexity of Bev's garden. I said the relaxed (and relaxing) feeling achieved in this garden is a result of a complex arrangement of plants within an informal hard structure. The relaxed feel hasn't been achieved by a relaxed attitude; a lot of thought has gone into the role, and hence placement, of each plant. I said it's about shapes and space primarily and to organise this well you need to have a good knowledge of a range of plants and how they will grow. Contrast that to the much simpler plant design of a formal garden. I said to understand HOW the garden works to make you feel relaxed would mean looking at the garden differently - critically - analytically. The woman said she had problems moving from experiencing/feeling the effects of a garden to looking at how it's put together. (I would suggest the problem for Society members is dragging their focus away from individual plants.)

My final comments were along the lines that if she wants to maintain a garden someone else has created for her she will need to start the long and interesting journey of thinking about how it works because only if she can understand that will she have any chance to effect - through design maintenance or redesign - her emotional response to the garden. This is in fact how I started out.

While this woman has trouble looking critically/analytically at a garden I sometimes think I suffer too much from the reverse and nowhere - surprise, surprise - more so than at home. Here I am the problem-solver; I go out looking for problems. I may niggle away at them until I solve them or more often I find times when I'm 'in the zone' and things just fall more easily into place. Do you find that? Sometimes you worry and work away at something without result but at other times decisions come as effortlessly as breathing.

If I dared to trust more to these creative times then I could (maybe) wean myself from the less productive, somewhat manic, niggle times. Being too critical and too focused on 'problems' I do need to remind myself that (a) I garden for pleasure and as a result I have a beautiful garden that (b) I can enjoy looking at or being in - when I take off the designer glasses.

Now to pose an interesting question: does an ability to move between two modalities - the experiential/feeling and critical enable you to have a greater appreciation of a beautiful garden or does the critical voice mean that experiences will always be moderated? As to sticking to a design or changing the design - well, gardens in some very real sense just can't be designed once and for all unless they are as static as a row of well managed mondo grass - for all the reasons stated by Jo H concerning the growth of plants and ourselves. More often than not it is the plant design that changes over time while the hard structure may remain largely unchanged. This does mean that the hard structure has a vital role to play and must be thought out carefully if it involves different levels and the use of rocks, paving, decking etc because changes at this level could be difficult and costly.