



Change in the Garden - Good or Bad?

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A major characteristic of a formal garden style is its lack of change over time. Once set out at the beginning, the pattern is maintained and is there for life. There is much repetition of plants in the design; growth in each individual plant may be allowed until a certain size is reached, then will probably need to be restricted by regular pruning. This work is ongoing but straightforward and repetitive. Such order and certainty does appeal to many people. Of course there are variations each year throughout the seasons but once the garden is established, that's it!

Can this style appeal to a keen gardener? Assuming plants were well selected initially (more of a challenge with less tested Australian plants) a completely formal small garden would present few challenges. The box hedges, rows of white roses, pencil pines and centrally placed green spheres (or whatever) would always be there. How many times a week would you really look at it - really see it? In a large formal garden, there are more plant varieties to select and a greater range of design possibilities, and pruning could be quite a complex and demanding operation - and I suppose there's always the weeding. Small areas might need redesigning but generally there'd be little temptation to visit a nursery or even another garden for ideas and inspiration. A garden might be 'perfect', always symmetrical and controlled, static over time.

In a naturalistic garden, change over time and the resulting evolution of the garden present continual challenges (and rewards). Plants of the same species may be repeated in the initial design but may be grown under different conditions in the garden, in various microclimates, with different neighbours. So it is difficult to predict the final size and form of every plant. Although of the same species, they may develop different forms at different rates, and therefore ask for individual attention. One specimen may happily reach an appropriate height and shape, another may be pruned to restrict its size, a third to modify its shape. There will probably be a greater number of species in a naturalistic garden, so management obviously presents more challenges and greater interest. The delightful seasonal variations throughout a year increase in proportion to the number of species.

In Australia, a formal garden can be composed of either exotic or Australian plants, or a combination of both. Once the composition formula is decided, the aim is for it to stay. A naturalistic garden based on the Australian landscape and ecology will feature predominantly Australian plants. New species, hybrids and cultivars of these are constantly appearing in nurseries (or other APS members' gardens). Some tempting ones are superior in their form, foliage or flowers and we may want to incorporate them in our own gardens. Our attitude to the benefits of including indigenous plants may change too. So every year our palette of plants is quite likely to change, perhaps only slightly to bring about subtle changes in our design, or perhaps dramatically. The planting design of a naturalistic garden usually tends to be more fluid.

Many of our Australian plants are fast growing, so the pace of change in our gardens may be rapid. When I look back at earlier pictures of our garden, taken over the years, this is very obvious. I still find it difficult to estimate future sizes (and sometimes fail to try hard enough) so we may be faced by a shrub too large for its allocated position. Pruning is one answer, of the shrub or of its neighbours. If it needs repeated pruning, it may be time for removal and redesigning with one or more smaller plants. Generally the design is flexible. If a particular species fails, we may try the same one again, or decide to replace it with a similar species, or one which is quite different. There is often (usually?) more than one possible solution for any design question.

In just a few cases, such as some wattles, rapid growth can mean a short life. We might then decide to replace the same plant, which will quickly reestablish. (With foresight, we might have taken cuttings.) Or the speedy grower may have been a temporary 'nurse' plant as we waited for a slower growing companion to take over its spot. Otherwise we might choose to replace it with another species. Severe weather such as storms with strong wind or hail, prolonged drought, or frost can also kill or damage plants. The death of any plant is sad but the chance to do a little redesigning is not. Apart from the loss of a tree, I find it rarely leaves a conspicuous hole in the garden (unlike one dead box plant in a formal row). Extra space in a maturing small garden can often be a benefit.

Change in the garden is also initiated by plants self-sowing, sometimes with generous abandon. Correas, croweas, grevilleas, grasses, bulbines, orthrosanthus, etc. - different ones for different gardens. We can leave them, transplant them, give them away or just pull them out. If self-sowing is too prolific (some pandorea forms spring to mind) the plant may be a potential weed and itself need removal. Groundcover plants that spread by suckering can be let loose or pruned to size, or bits transplanted. This sort of choice is possible only in a fluid design.

It is interesting to compare a created, naturalistic garden with a natural garden, self-sustaining with (of course) all indigenous

plants. Here the cycles of life, growth, death and decay go on ceaselessly to produce a coherent and very fluid whole. The overall appearance is remarkably constant although the components are ever-changing. The age of each individual plant varies roughly with its mature size - many trees live for hundreds of years, groundflora maybe just a few. In a created garden we mourn or regret (or at least notice) the death of one plant; in a natural garden (apart from a mature tree) it is usually just a small part of the total pattern.

We can choose the degree of change we want in our gardens. If we want to minimise change we can select reliable, proven plants (especially for the framework) and not introduce wildcards - tempting but untested ones. We can make sure we choose plants of appropriate mature sizes and space them accordingly. If we plant daisies etc. for infills, we can even remember to treat them as infills - cut them back, transplant them or even pull them out as shrubs mature. We can prune plants to the size we want (though preferably not too frequently). We can choose a more formal look. Alternatively we can go for change and spontaneity in the garden, a more natural look though still largely designed. The overall framework of hard landscape and major plants can be designed and retained but the details allowed a degree of randomness - more work for the gardener in some ways but greater interest. As years go by, the detail of the garden can become finer, with the introduction of tiny plants and the appearance of mosses and lichens.

I cannot imagine enjoying a garden fully without some change over time. I think designing a naturalistic garden is far more than the initial plant selection and layout. Designing continues throughout the life of the garden (or gardener) and gets more and more interesting as the years go by. There is always something new to see, something new to learn from natural processes - letting nature take a hand. I believe that there would be much less reward in gardening (or designing) without the challenge and opportunity of change in the garden. What do you think?