



Design.....and sticking to it!

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There is nothing quite like a rapidly approaching garden visit, whether through the Australian Open Garden Scheme (AOGS), a garden club or the local branch of the Australian Plants Society to focus ones entire energy, mental and physical on the why and the how of the garden.

This year *Yanderra* is stumping up again. It has been three years since it was last in the AOGS and there have been quite a few changes and of course we have had two wonderful years of rain during which the plants have actually grown.

There is the normal necessity of some areas needing to be completely overhauled, that is, most of the plants pulled out and new ones, quite possibly different species, replanted. I find I need the imminent deadline to encourage me to make the hard decisions. I am an unwilling nettle grasper both metaphorically and literally. I don't prune hard enough either!! Too prone to giving malingerers their second chance - probably due to a combination of sloth and misplaced pity. That said, I am always very pleasantly surprised by how successful the post nettle-grasp changes in the garden are.

In a never ending battle to achieve the ongoing design one holds in the mind's eye or for the more organised amongst us, in one's hand, many hours are spent organising garden hoses or eucalypt branches as indicators for future appropriately-shaped edging for garden beds, grass swathes, new paths and so on; or, wandering around staring rather vacantly at various parts of the garden, pondering how they can be improved upon; or spending an inordinate amount of time placing newly acquired plants in their correct (horticulturally and design wise) spots. Creating and maintaining a coherent design requires a certain dogged persistence!

Before an Open Garden, when my heart is left behind (if only momentarily!) and a hard and calculating eye is turned on the garden, there is an unwelcome realisation that, in the design aspect particularly, there may be something lacking. Ah! Total objectivity about one's own garden is, I think, extraordinarily difficult. However I think the answer may lie in the lack of simplicity in the plant palette, here, in my garden the KISS principle (keep it simple stupid), always deceptively difficult, seems to have succeeded, in places anyway, in eluding me.

Barb Buchanan's article, *In-decision* (Newsletter No. 63), touched a nerve about the difficulty of sticking to a design plan. It is indeed as she says, "all about the plants" and although I have never thought of myself as a plantsman's bootlace, there is still within, a desire to grow, experiment, learn and enjoy the plants which appeal (by form, colour, texture, scent and/or provenance), which fit my gardening philosophy and which will (hopefully) grow well in the prevailing conditions.

There is also, as Barb pointed out, the need to accommodate and design for other changes in the garden, apart from the removal of recalcitrant plants. The words "design" and "change" do not seem immediately to have a logical fit. How often do we start out to create a certain garden style and stick to it? Plant experimentation (or by another name, trial and error, often an interesting and simultaneously frustrating part of gardening with Australian plants) and garden design would seem to make strange bedfellows, add unexpected, prolonged or sudden environmental change on a macro or micro level (again, often a part of gardening in Australia) and three is definitely a crowd!

I think it is extremely difficult, even for the most talented designers amongst us, to forecast how a garden will look in 15 years time - unless it's a very formal garden using a limited palette of tried and true species or consists of annual and perennials bedded out, a *la* municipal parks. The trees that are now shading out the sunny spots in Barbara's garden may well have been necessary as a windbreak and shelter for lower growing species, possibly they grew taller than the label said, possibly they look magnificent and are worth sacrificing the few sunny spots available, or, possibly they were a mistake from the beginning - like my row of very tall silky oaks lining the driveway - a part of the early design that was not successful. In gardening, as in life, 20/20 hindsight or years of experience are valuable tools at the beginning.

Other factors, not necessarily pertaining to purely Australian plants, that may influence the implementation of a set garden design are:

- favoured plants which don't suit the prevailing conditions (which themselves may have changed - temporarily or permanently for a thousand reasons) and alternatives (possibly compromising the original design style) must be found,
- specimen plants die, leaving large gaps in important "design" areas of the garden, or

- the human element - the humble gardener - must make his or her own adaptations to the always variable human constraints of time, money and energy.

Whilst we don't become its slave, preferring style over fashion, which by definition changes often, the latter will certainly influence our choice of plant palette by dictating what is readily available at the nurseries. When visiting justly famous gardens it takes superhuman discipline (of the type shared by elite athletes and excellent designers!) to remain untouched and not to want to try and recreate a similar picture at home....again a form of experimentation with design as well as plants. If it is a garden that has stood the test of time then there is no harm in learning all the lessons it has to teach you and attempting an adaption at home. Experimentation is how we learn and there will always be a need for flexibility for all of the reasons above. When everything is considered it is not, as they say, that it's a wonder there are so few well designed gardens but that there are so many! Garden design certainly earns its place amongst the Fine Arts - an art achieved by working with living things and an extra dimension (that of time) thrown in for good measure.