



The Garden of Joy

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Leaving behind a thirty year old garden can be devastating, especially if that same garden held ones history of gardening with native plants. Exiting Melbourne was heavily influenced by the opportunity to start a new garden in a bush setting and the privilege of being able to share the wonders of the far south coast of New South Wales, magnificent views and an abundance of wildlife.

Our property in Tathra, purchased in December 2002, is opposite a reserve over looking the Bega River. It is only a small block, 1423 metres square, but the outlook from the front of the property gives the impression of being in the middle of the bush. Although we have neighbours in very close proximity at the rear and on either side, it is that view from the front facing west, through the trees and down the river with the blue hills in the distance that convinced us that we could make something special out of this property.

Starting the Garden

We were presented with a relatively new home facing west on a steeply sloping block of land covered with Kikuyu grass. Doesn't sound ideal does it? The house stood out like a sore toe when viewed from the street . To accommodate a steep slope the house is built up at the front and gradually decreasing in height to ground level at the rear. We were impressed with the house being open plan inside and on one level, and myself enthused by the surrounding grounds begging for a garden. I intended to spend my retirement gardening and I always enjoy a challenge.

I am not known for my patience, but this garden has curtailed my impulsive nature. After moving in I spent a lot of time just observing the way the water ran, the shadows caste by neighbouring trees, and the wildlife that passed through our property. The previous owners had planted numerous trees on the northern boundary, but I knew by observing the length of winter shadows from a neighbouring block that some trees on our boundary needed removing. I wanted trees for privacy, and to give balance to the height of the house, but not a thicket casting long, dark winter shadows.

We waited until September to make some even ground at the front of the house. Max and I toiled for weeks building a terraced area and retaining wall of grey besser self-locking blocks three meters out from the western side of the house. This extended the whole length of the house and rear of the garage, totalling approximately 30 meters in length. To make a flat surface we back filled with decomposed granite. This gave us an even walking track around the front and a level to start the garden from. We had to accommodate a very steep slope in front of the garage, so two terraces were created in this area, incorporating the pathway that gently slopes down into the front of the house and continues in a stairway and path to street level.

The exciting part came when the local landscaper came with the bobcat and started the earth moving. I had made up my mind that I wanted a pond (hoping to bring an illusion of the garden being part of the river) and mounds to add interest and remove the steepness of the slope. The earth removed to make the pond 6 metres x 3 metres, was mounded in heaps in front of the pond. These were then sloped down to the edge of the block. It then drops away quite sharply, about 4 metres down to the road. The pond is directly in front and below the balcony and can also be viewed from inside the house by looking down into the garden. Numerous large rocks were bought in to line the walls of the pond and placed around the garden. A decomposed gravel path was put in from the roadway at the front, cutting diagonally across the slope then turning at the pond to form a stairway up to the retaining wall in front of the house. The path was then continued on around the side of the garage to the rear of the property. The kikuyu grass was poisoned and left intact. The landscaper advised me not to disturb the soil, because of the steep slope. Every thing was then left for six months, any kikuyu grass that was determined to survive was promptly removed. In late February we had about 34 cubic metres of heavy mulch, (ground up tree roots) spread all over the garden. We were advised that this heavy mulch would not slip on the steep slope nor blow away in the wind, we were ready to plant.

Very little land at the rear of the property where all our bedrooms are placed posed a problem of privacy. Vehicle access to the property is at the rear via a lane way. We are obliged to give other neighbours access to their property through our land. A load of strategically placed rocks allowed us to mark our boundary and keep traffic to a designated road way, I still back fill this area with any compost or mulch trying to create small mounds to add interest to the garden . The neighbours have their access, but instead of driving up a barren dusty track, it is now lined with hillocks of native plants and we have a living green screen that gives privacy to us humans, shelter and food to bird and animal life and helps to filter the dust.

A problem evolved with excess water from a house at the rear on a higher elevation. . The storm water from their hard surfaces ended up on our property, often under the house. This was rectified by digging a huge drain right across the rear of the property. To allow the water to drain away it had to be nearly 2 metres in depth at the deepest end. This was back filled with blue metal and works extremely well when we get huge down pours. I then covered this area with various sized river stones, it has become known as The Dry River Bed. I have planted this out with grasses, correas and two *Westringia longifolia* that give a little height but are light and enjoy the trimming I constantly give them. This area extends 18 metres along the rear of the house and graduates from 3 meters to 1.5 meters in width before it turns around at the southern corner of the house into a stone covered stairway.

The area above the dry river bed 22 metres x 3 metres, on the eastern side, had been raised using railway sleepers by the previous owner, and planted out with *Pittosporum* and Mondo grass. I decided to leave these plantings, as they provided some privacy. I have used half a dozen *Acacia cognata* 'Green Mist' that I had grown from cuttings in our Melbourne garden, along with *Prostanthera*, lilly pillly (orange twist), *Callistemon*, *Grevillea johnsonii*, dwarf banksia and for height two *Eucalyptus leucoxylon*. Over the years as the natives established I have gradually been removing the *Pittosporum*. This area will need rejuvenation in a few years time as it is heavily over planted.

Nothing pleases me more than to wake of a morning with the sun streaming in through the window, and watch the birds that have taken up residence in this little wilderness. Blue wrens, Thornbills, Eastern Spinebills, Redbrow Finches, Wattlebirds, Crimson Rosellas, King Parrots, Eastern Whip Birds, Magies, Kookaburras, Flycatchers, Bower Birds, the occasional Whistling Kite or an unrecognizable surprise that has me jumping out of bed for the bird identification book.

I always enjoy taking visitors for a walk through here, as it often gives out wonderful surprises, like Lizards, Echidnas, or a multitude of birds species. Even the occasional Red Bellied Black snake has been know to surprise us, along with a very large Goanna.

I wanted our garden to have an empathy with the bush in the Reserve opposite, which consists mainly of large *Eucalyptus*, *Casuarina*, and native *Pittosporum*. Although I didn't want to grow these in our garden, I wanted to mirror the feeling of serenity that the reserve gives off as you drive into Riverview Crescent. I made an adamant decision to keep all colourful plants to the top of the slope, where they couldn't be viewed from street level. The temptation to grow plants that don't fit into this plan is always with me, and I constantly have to remind myself that our garden when view from street level, is a serene garden, subtle being the key word when looking for plants as fillers.

The Planting Begins

Acacia cognata 'Green Mist' were mass planted below the terraced area in front of the house in a V shape, ending at the edge of the pond. Along side a massed planting of *Austromyrtus dulcis* (I was attracted to the copper tinges of the new growth). Although I don't regret planting this plant I do regret putting these next to the *Acacia cognata* as it has not grown high enough to achieve a height balance and *Dichondra repens* that grows rampantly in our garden tends to choke it.

My impatience shows here, obviously I didn't read the height of the plant correctly. Next to these I have mass planted *Austromyrtus inopholia* the rich burgundy foliage working exceedingly well as a contrast to the bright green of the *Acacia cognata*. The idea being to create a colourful foliage garden above the pond, contrasting foliage giving interest all year round.

I have recently mass planted *Agonis* 'Forest Magic' amongst the *Austromyrtus dulcis*, to add to the the foliage contrast and to rectify the height balance. (*Agonis* 'Forest Magic' foliage being a delightful mixture of cream, light green with a tiny tinge of pink, that deepens to almost burgundy in the cooler weather).

These three plants are then repeated in isolated places around the rest of the garden. *Agonis flexuosa* 'nana' dwarf form has also been used repeatedly because of its weeping habit and the red tips that appear in winter. *Grevillea lanigera* has been used extensively as ground cover.

Three *Agonis* 'After Dark' were planted to add height and colour contrast, but they have struggled, but I refuse to remove them living in hope that my patience will reward me. The weeping growth habit of many of these plants works exceedingly well on the steep slope and is really appreciated by the eastern whip birds and bandicoots.

Being on a septic system, or Envirocycle I had to take this into account when choosing plants for many parts of the garden. There has really only been one area that has caused me grief. It is an area that is on a very long slope and also gets the bulk of the grey water that automatically sprays out of the Envirocycle. I have been growing members of the Asteraceae family here, as they tend to cope well with the spasmodic spraying that has to be tolerated at all times of the day, often in glaring hot heat in summer and prone to a little water logging in winter. After 5 years I thought this area of the garden to be out of balance with the rest of the garden that is mainly based on plants 1 metre high and 2 metres wide.

Although the daisies give a wonderful display in spring and cope well with the instantaneous watering system I have been giving serious thought to this area on how to improve its appearance in relation to the rest of the garden and maintain the balance.

After recently attending a workshop on garden design I am beginning to think that this area does work as it gives a feeling of space into what would otherwise be a very crowded garden.

To get some shade in summer, add balance to the height of the house *Eucalyptus mannifera* 'Little Spotty' has been planted, along with *E. pauciflora* 'Little Snowman' on the western side of the house. Both trees have grown exceptionally well, 'Little Spotty' being kept trimmed by the family of possums that prefer its leaves to the apples we put out each night. We also have two *E. caesia* on the northern end of the pond and directly below our dining room window. They are now high enough to view as we sit at the dining

table and watch the birds feed in the upper branches. These plants have made it possible for me to achieve two of my aims with the garden, that being, to bring the garden into the house and to camouflage the house when viewed from the street.

The pond has proven to be a great success, and on various occasions we have recognised five calls from different species of frogs. The sound can be deafening of an evening when they all decide to call at once. Locals tell us they enjoy their evening stroll past our garden when the frogs are most vocal.

Lazy summer mornings can be spent leaning in safety on the balcony railing out of harms way, watching the resident red bellied snake look for his morning snack.

A sudden absence of snails, made me suspect we may have a Blue Tongue Lizard. I once caught a glimpse of him as he disappeared up the water out let to the pond. His residence was definitely confirmed the day I opened up under the house to have him greet me with a "what kept you so long look" Jacky lizards love to sun bake on the rocks and watch me garden. I had been fooled that they were waving at me as I passed their way. I have learnt that their habit of the waving hand, is a warning to back off out of their territory.

A thicket of *Hakea* 'Burrendong Beauty' (a great favourite of the blue wrens and eastern spine bills) has been planted behind a large *Grevillea* 'Forest Rambler' that was purposefully planted to hide two large and ugly cement tanks that are part of our Envirocycle. The *Grevillea* 'Forest Rambler' is usually full of birds, bees or butterflies and offers a great refuge to the little birds seeking a quick get a way from those boisterous and bossy wattle birds.

Epacris impressa, *Correa* 'Autumn Blaze' and *Banksia blechnifolia* are planted by the steps along with various forms of lomandra and brachyscome. This area tends to be high maintenance and I do tend to loose the epacris, but my love of them has me keeping the local nursery people in employment and the small birds extremely happy as they feed on the flowers.

A visitor pointed out to me how wonderful the pink epacris looks growing near the *Agonis* 'Forest Magic'. It is always beneficial to have the garden viewed with new eyes. I had never noticed how subtly they compliment each other previously.

The thick fleshy leaves of the *Crinum pedunculatum* give upright balance in contrast to the weeping habit of many of the acacia and agonis. The *Doryanthes excelsa* have recently sent up flowering stalks and we wait for the flowering heads to add another dimension to the height balance .

Thryptomene 'paynei' and *Micromyrtus ciliata* have been used as fillers, to add colour and a feeling of lightness throughout the garden.

I consider ourselves extremely lucky, the garden has flourished, and our aim of having a garden that attracts wildlife has certainly succeeded, too well sometimes. The local wallabies managed to decimate my *Lythrum salicaria*. A thicket that flourished for four years on an Envirocycle outlet has disappeared. I wondered why, until one morning at 5am I spotted the local wallabies grazing between the bushes.

Two of the local Lyre Birds are often spotted strutting and digging in the mulch between plants. The bower bird has built his bower at the end of the retaining wall below the decking, and we are often entertained at lunch time as he entertains his lady friends. Bandicoots do the night shift turning over the soil for me, keeping it loose and aerated.

In spite of being exasperated by the local wildlife at times, we refuse to fence our property, we always feel we have intruded into their homeland, and cannot bring ourselves to locking them out. After all isn't a native garden about attracting native wildlife.

There is a new project in the pipeline, landscaping the steep bank down to the road side. Recently nine tonnes of rock was delivered and put into place, the area waits to be planted out.

My love of gardening with Australian plants continues to be rewarding in so many ways. A day hardly passes that I am not handed some small pleasure, be it from the animal or plant world. Together they continue to bring a smile to my face day after day.

The garden has also had an impact on the locals, it is very rewarding to be asked for the names of certain plants so neighbours can put them in their gardens.

We have been greatly rewarded, this garden has flourished in five short years.

We have had the advantage of knowing what we wanted from the start, the majority of plants have been planted at the same time. So there was very little competing from larger trees or shrubs to inhibit the growth of smaller species.

I feel the biggest factor that has made the garden a success, (my opinion strictly) being that I have restricted the number of species grown in the garden, I rarely plant just one of something, it is always in threes or fives. If these plants grow well I then tend to repeat them in isolated pockets to give a feeling of uniformity. The garden has developed a little environment all of its own. Not just a collection of individual plants as our previous garden in Melbourne was.

I consider our garden a large, living canvas that I am continually creating in hand with nature. I try hard to be in control, but most pleasure comes from the unexpected - that which I have no control over. Creatures come to the canvas and then leave to return another season. Changes in the seasons change the colour of my canvas, sometimes slightly, other days it is as if some-one has spilt a bucket of red or blue paint over the foliage, or cleaned off a paintbrush by splattering paint in disarray as feathered friends feed amongst the plants. I am always enchanted, and feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to garden with native plants on the far south coast of New South Wales.

I hope that as our garden develops it will influence others in the area to take up some of our ideas and adapt them in their garden using Australian native plants.

Living between two National Parks, I feel I have an obligation to be mindful of the habitat that was disturbed when our housing estate was developed. As more pressure is put on coastal areas for housing I like to think that by growing native plants I am replacing habitat for native species, and not adding to the problem of exotic garden escapes getting into the National Parks. I am mindful of any plant I grow becoming too dominate in the garden, and if I find it is reproducing itself too readily I remove them completely. As the years go by I hope that our home will continue to be garden of choice to a multitude of birds and animals seeking refuge and feeding grounds. I hope to be able to influence others in the area to change their gardening habits and switch to natives. After all we humans are not the only species that reside on the far south coast, we house dwellers have an obligation to create an environment where bush and urban landscapes can entwine in harmony.