

**Persephone @ 17 Julius Street** – Garden Notes

*Persephone* is a semi-formal garden set on a 740 sqm north facing suburban block at the base of Mt Taylor. The block faces a nature reserve, featuring large eucalypts that provide welcomed afternoon summer shade. *Persephone* itself features a variety of exotic trees, shrubs and perennials that offer year-round interest. Hedging, mass plantings and paths have been used to provide privacy, continuity and to create and delineate a number of physical and visual spaces.

The front garden, with the exception of two established trees (a 50 year old crepe myrtle and a Chinese pistachio) was fully re‑landscaped only 8 years ago, prompted by the loss of a large Tulip Tree (*Liriodendron)* in the 2001-2009 drought and the loss of necessary shade for the understory.

My design brief was to create a semi‑formal garden that allowed private use of the north facing aspect, maintained the north-easterly views and didn’t feel too closed in. I also wanted to incorporate the 2 surviving trees and to level the natural slope of the block to minimise water run‑off and to ensure that the garden was accessible for people of all ages and levels of agility.

Finally, despite the emerging trend toward no-lawn landscaping, I just *had*to have a little bit of cooling, green grass. In hindsight I wish I’d been more optimistic in the allocation of the lawn area. On the plus side, the lawn takes about two minutes to mow and I can (and do) water it by hand.

I worked quickly to get most of the primary structural plantings (trees, hedges and large shrubs) in the ground and established. This was not before investing a lot of time and back breaking effort into improving the heavy clay soils by incorporating loads of quality garden mix, compost and gypsum. The infill of smaller flowering shrubs, perennials and annuals is a work in progress as I discover plants that are tough enough to cope with the extremes of Canberra’s seasons. I also want to focus on plants that suit my colour scheme, attract beneficial insects and birds and that are easily propagated to maintain a fresh, verdant look - at no cost.

In time, I envisage that the sandstone sitting circle will nestle into the background of *pittosporum* hedges and the overhang of the *Chinese pistachio, coral bark maples* and mop-top Indian Bean trees (*catalpa bignoniodes)* to create a more distinctive garden room. I also look forward to the *Forest Pansy* offering more privacy for bird watching, brunches, lunches and refreshments on the front deck. I plan to keep the hedges more or less at their current dimensions so that we can continue to enjoy the sense of space offered by the borrowed landscapes.

I started re-landscaping the back garden in November 2014 following completion of the studio/workshop which replaced an unattractive, rusty and leaky metal carport/shed. Again, apart from two established trees and some plants in the main courtyard, I started with a blank canvas.

My design brief was to continue with the level, accessible and semi-formal style of the front garden. I also wanted to create a seamless fusion of places for relaxing, entertaining, adventure and play. Importantly I wanted to headline, rather than hide, the productive elements of the garden. In particular the chickens, greenhouse, *parterre,* espaliered *pommefruits*, citrus, nuts and vines.

Like the front garden, I started by improving the soil before planting the primary structural plants. Investing in your soil allows you to use smaller (cheaper) plants. They will catch up and even overtake larger more expensive ones in a season or two.

Having kept chickens in my pre-2014 garden I knew the value of getting these guys back on board as soon as possible. I designed and built their coop based on the building materials leftover from the studio and I picked other bits I needed (including a lovely cedar window) from the Green Shed tip shop. I also had to build the greenhouse quickly because it forms two walls of the chicken enclosure and provides important shade and wind protection. The six ‘girls’ have worked wonders as compost accelerators and food waste-to-egg conversion units. They are an asset to any garden/household.

I also built the ‘blue door’ rose trellis with reclaimed materials sourced from the Green Shed. I built this structure to mask the harsh colourbond fence and to store spare pots and tomato stakes etc. In time, as the *Pierre de Ronsard* roses and surrounding plants grow, the door will appear more recessed and suggestive of a gateway to another secret space.

The sheltered aspect of the newly created ‘Studio Garden’ provides the perfect microclimate for some of the plants I rescued from the former front and back gardens. I love camellias, fuchsias, rhododendrons etc but they would struggle in the more exposed parts of the garden. This area had been suffocated by concrete for nearly 50 years so, *once again*, dealing with a mass of orange Canberra clay was my first challenge. Gypsum, compost, hard yakka, more gypsum and more yakka was the only way forward. This is my favourite section of the garden - at the moment!

The garden is still very much a work in progress. I look forward to my vision coming to fruition and the garden settling into itself over time. As a self‑taught gardener I still have much to learn and I know that I will have to rethink some of my ideas and plantings. There will be some natural (and not so natural) attrition of plants that are not thriving or performing as I expected they would.

The ever-changing nature of gardens can be a source of both joy and disappointment. My years of gardening have taught me many things. I have learnt about soil and plant science, construction methods and chicken husbandry. I also have a deeper understanding of the impermanence of all things. My garden enables me to practice and experience patience, acceptance, toil and reward.

My garden is called ***“Persephone”.*** Persephone was the only daughter of Demeter, goddess of agriculture. Her father was Zeus. Persephone’s beauty and purity stole the heart of Hades, god of the underworld, who abducted her and made her his bride. When Demeter learned of Persephone’s fate she fell into a deep despair and the earth went cold and the fields lay barren. (As the mother of two precious daughters – I totally get this!) A perpetual winter seized the land and humankind was close to starvation. Zeus finally intervened, ordering Hades to free Persephone. However, because Persephone had already eaten from the forbidden pomegranate fruit she was bound to the underworld for eternity. It was agreed that Persephone would spend the bountiful months of each year on earth with Demeter, but in the winters she would be forced to return to Hades.

Persephone is the mother of contradiction. She is light and darkness, life and death, she gives and she takes away. She is perfect balance and a fitting metaphor for gardening. Persephone teaches us to respect, observe and obey the cycle of nature.

I love being in my garden and sharing its amenity and bounty with friends, family and a vast array of birds and insects that seem to love it too. I hope you also find joy and inspiration in this space.

Gabrielle Sheen 2017