

Carol's Hillside Oasis

109 O'Connor Circuit, Calwell

Open 30 April – 1 May 2016



Heading down the Monaro towards the Tuggeranong Valley four years ago, I was glad to have my daughter beside me to explore the place that was soon to be my home. Leaving an apartment for a big house and garden came with a sense of apprehension and adventure.

We stumbled down the side of the house pushing our way through long grass, overgrown shrubs and trees, keeping our footing on what we presumed must have once been a path. I had been told there were three ponds though they were also hidden from view, and we were somewhat anxious about snakes, spiders or anything else that might be lurking in all this under- and over-growth.

Above us, something caught my eye – Chinese Windmill Palms, *Trachycarpus fortunei*. My excitement started to grow and I wondered what else was here to be discovered. Exploring further down into the yard on my own (my daughter would only go so far with a baby in her arms) I eventually called out that I had caught a glimpse of the back fence!

Realising that all this overgrown or dead vegetation was no small task to take control of, I put out a call for help. My husband cleared walkways in readiness, and an army of family and friends spent the next weekend helping us clear the block. And yes, we uncovered the ponds, the windmill palms became my centrepiece and the garden started to evolve.

My first project was to establish a herb patch outside the back door as I enjoy cooking. I discovered that black plastic covered the

beds everywhere. Under it lay compacted, rock-filled, parched ground, lifeless except for nests of biting black ants. Before my herb patch or any other planting could begin this earth was in need of some major improvement.

Not shy of a challenge, full charge ahead it was! I needed tools, compost and manure and of course I poured over gardening magazines for further ideas, inspiration. Before long I started cruising garage sales, the Green Shed etc in an endeavour to curb garden costs.

"Work one section at a time" I was advised, my reply *"aren't I supposed to rid the garden beds of the weeds before they flower and seed? And they are everywhere!"* What to do, where to start?! And so in tandem I began to rid the garden of the weeds and work on breaking down the clay soil.

Eventually I went seed potatoes to help. Even today, four years on, new potato shoots continue to appear, a reminder of those early beginnings. Before long, wriggling worms began to appear as I turned over the soil – evidence that progress was being made. I was excited as I could now start planning what to plant and where.

While waiting for the soil structure to improve in other sections of the garden, I turned my attention to the ponds. I was eager to see water cascading from the top pond and under the bridge to the bottom pond. The wait was arduous. I was given the name of a person experienced in ponds and had him come by. He looked at the job and turned it down. Feeling there was no other option I embarked on redoing the ponds on

my own. But it was too much. I found a student looking for work and every second weekend we worked moving rocks and installing irrigation, with my husband always at the ready to assist in any way he could. It was no mean feat lifting all the rocks out, relining the ponds and putting the rocks back in position. This was done numerous times as water continued to disappear at a rapid rate each time we reworked the ponds. My husband commented that I must know all the rocks individually given the number of times they were removed and put back again. I was so frustrated, there was so much more that needed to be done.

A veggie patch with my micro gardener grandson was on my agenda, so the pond saga was put on hold and we began by planting strawberries and carrots. Seeing him literally devour the first crops when they matured spurred me on to expand the veggie patch – Legumes, Brassicas, leafy greens, planting based on Owen Pigeon's article in the Canberra Times. When my grandson, family and friends visit and we wander through the garden picking and eating raspberries, strawberries apricots, veggies – whatever is in season – I see their pleasure as they savour the flavours and I am delighted to share these moments with them.

Accessing the yard was a challenge as existing paths had eroded and furrows had formed over the years. Eventually we had steps built into the paths making it safer and easier to move around the garden.

Another great project, recalling the Chinese Windmill Palms, was to have a garden bed with a tropical feel. Given that a palm upper storey was already in situ I threw caution and the rule books to the wind and went ahead in frost prone Canberra. To set

the scene I laid crazy paving in the space where we'd removed two overgrown cypress and planted Helxine (baby's tears) for some greenery to creep between the stones. Frost sensitive plants such as Strelitzia and Banana trees are in pots under the palms and readily moved under shelter when needed. Other plants survive well under the canopy – Birds Nest Ferns, Agaves and Mandevilla – while other hardier but still frost sensitive plants quickly revive when the warm weather returns.

Native bird attracting plants are interspersed with exotics and succulents throughout the garden. Correas, Grevilleas, Acacias and Callistemon nestle around Cypress, Japanese Maples and Yuccas which keep company with Abelias, Mona Lavenders, Oleanders and Violets. Iris flower under bare limbed Crab Apples (*Malus ionensis*) and Ornamental pears (*Pyrus calleryana*) through the colder months, and a hedge of *Escallonia* 'Iveyi' behind my veggie area will eventually hide the fence. A bird bath now attracts King Parrots, Crimson and Eastern rosellas and more to visit my eclectic garden.

I endeavour to spend some time in the garden every day, often working yet I always find time to sit and enjoy it or meander the paths. This is my time to enjoy and observe the results of the effort that I have put into bringing this garden to life. New ideas unfurl, I look for new growth as plants fill their allocated spaces, and I wonder why some plants just don't make it while others do. This is my time to stop, touch and admire all that is around me, both within my garden and further, towards the beautiful views from the garden of the Brindies beyond.

It is my space, my passion, my oasis.

**Watch our website for gardens opening
in the 2016 – 17 season!**

www.opengardenscanberra.org.au

