The NATURALISTS Open Gardens Canberra

28 Marrakai Street, Hawker

Open 4-5 March 2017

The moment my partner and I took our first steps up the drive of this overgrown garden, we both realized that our search was over. We were leaving a five-acre bush block on the Western Slopes and relocating to suburbia.

The sense of privacy from neighbors and the dramatic size of the block itself delighted us, but it was the trees and the native plants that provided a sense of place. The house diminished under the canopy of a pre-settlement stand of Red box, while the Pinnacle Reserve on the southern boundary ensured a visual continuity with the garden plantings.

After settling in with our two young boys I realized the massive task ahead. Our previous acre of garden was built from scratch on a gently sloping block blessed with deep clay loam and cheap water rates. Our new overgrown garden was not only cut into a steep granite hillside, but there was no topsoil and vast tracks of cracked bitumen to remove!

Undaunted we gradually began replacing many of the tortured trees and shrubs from the original 70’s native garden.

We were mindful of choosing a wider selection of natives and allowing ample space to avoid competition. On the northern end of the block the replacement of the watering system alone took me six months!

The garden was originally a 70’s ‘native ‘ experiment’. It was over planted, left un-pruned and watered with an ad-hock watering system. The original owner had incorporated some raised gardens comprising of 40cm layer of sand laid over solid granite/clay. The second owners extended the original Pettit & Sevitt cottage, removing protective trees and courtyards, and added a ‘Billabong’ swimming pool.

Over time we replaced the rotting timber sleepers with stonewalls. We dug up the large expanse of bitumen driveway and parking area at the top end of the block, and built a garage, orchard and raised vegetable beds.

This garden has continued to challenge our resolve. We have had many deaths from poor drainage and phytophthora fungus, hydrophobic soil, and competition from several large Cyprus on our eastern boundary.

Over the ensuring ten years we have replanted extensively with resilient natives and exotics, which also happily provide food for our resident bird-life and our family. An attempt to create a blended naturalistic and diverse garden continues to evolve.

In addition to the original Blakely’s red gums, the main structure of the garden comprises of Eucalyptus mannifera, Eucalyptus globulus, and Eucalyptus melliodora. Larger shrubs & trees include Banksia, Acacia, Baeckea, Protea, Westringia, Syzygium, Casuarina, Indigofera, Callistemon, Grevillia and Leptospermum species.

The understory is varied with many familiar hardy native shrubs and grasses. We have also had a great success with WA natives planted in the terraced gardens. Apart from the fruit trees:- Japanese plum, nashi pear, apricot, nectarine, fejoa and fig, I have created a cottage garden of roses, herbs, and hardy perennials.

Biodiversity has been our main goal. We now have many fruit trees, vegies and chooks incorporating the ideas of a permaculture system. But most satisfying of all is the increasing abundance of birds, insects, reptiles and native mammals that either live in, or seasonally visit, our rather untidy & rambling Naturalistic garden.

Felicity Green