

GARDEN NOTES

CHRISTINE'S GARDEN

GOWRIE



"The environment informs and engages the viewer"

Reggio Emilia Philosophy

When I moved to Canberra in 2005, my garden could only be described as a "barren BMX track". All that I inherited from the previous owner was a row of pittosporums just 30cms high and hastily planted along the fence line and two recently purchased 'Mop Top' robinias. Fortunately, being a keen gardener, I came loaded with pot plants and rooted cuttings from my previous large garden at Burra. I set about working on my blank canvas to try and change it into an inviting garden oasis. Working full-time as a teacher, I enjoyed the advantages of daylight saving and school holidays to allow me to forge ahead with my gardening ideas on my large 1200sq metre block.

My budget was very limited so I haunted the markets and garage sales to purchase cheaper plants. I struck hundreds of "English Box" cuttings and I also kept an eye on the media to discover when the nurseries were having their sales. One of my first purchases, and the most important, was a large black plastic compost bin. I soon found that by layering the ingredients of manure, grass clippings, leaves etc, I could have beautiful compost ready in four weeks. I was desperate for green material for my compost bin, so I even mowed the neighbour's lawns to gather material. During the autumn months, I drove around the suburbs of Red Hill and asked residents if I could rake up their leaves and remove them. I filled many chaff bags and brought them home. They went straight into the compost bin. I have since added three more of these compost bins and they are now allowing me to top up beds with rich organic material.

I scavenged rocks and old sleepers from neighbours who no longer wanted them and used these as garden edges so that I could build up the soil and encourage the worms. In one section of the garden, there was a huge Red Gum stump over 1 metre in diameter. I enlisted the aid of a professional stump-grinder and had it removed. In its place is the parterre. I tried my hand at brick-laying for my circular parterre using the lovely old Canberra Red bricks. I was thrilled when the last brick fitted in perfectly at the exact level. I bought an electric drill and learned how to build retaining walls with treated pine sleepers. A nearby garage sale provided me with a large mirror that I attached to the wooden fence. This has given the garden a new dimension and the birds love to admire themselves as they bathe in the pond.

There was a concrete path running along the side of the house when I moved in. I knew I wanted this area to be a garden bed so I set about smashing up the path with my crow bar and sledge hammer. Instead of disposing of the large broken pieces of concrete, I decided to use them on edge and half buried in the steeper banks of the garden. They allowed me to grow rockery plants as they held the compost on the bank. They are still there but are hidden by the shrubbery.

The addition of water tanks allow me to collect 23,000 litres of water from the house and the large garage; a very good investment as it has enabled me to keep my two small lawn areas nice and green during the harsh summer months. The back lawn is on very poor ground, with a lot of shale. I tried rotary-hoeing the area in preparation but could only get down 5 centimetres. I began to wonder if my lawn seed would ever germinate. I sought some advice on the matter and as you can see, the lawn area today is healthy and lush. The secret was to mow often but with blades set on high and not to use a catcher. This way all the clippings acted as a mulch. I was also advised to spread 'Dynamic Lifter' once a month and allow the worms to do the rest of the work.

A wonderful addition to the garden is the chook pen, known as "Cluckingham Palace". Here my chickens provide manure to speed up my compost bins as well as providing delicious eggs.

The secret to a good garden is good soil and drainage. Over the past year I have been building up my beds with mortared rock walls. These allow me to add more compost enriched soil and help to retain the moisture.

I am now concentrating on establishing more unusual plants around the garden. Some of these include the lovely "Snail Creeper" (*Phaseolus caracalla*) at the front door which is a picture in summer, the unusual *Bystropogon canariensis* next to the tank, the Calicarpa with its striking purple berries, the pretty flowering *Tricyrtis hirta* ("Toad lily") and the strange Amorphophalus Lily with its striking flower but horrible stench.

It is fascinating to watch a new micro climate develop now that the trees I planted in 2005 are providing lovely shade and protection to more sensitive plantings.

As you can see, I enjoy every minute that I work in my garden and it is a pleasure to be able to share it with you today.

GARDEN OWNERS

Christine Gascoyne