

THE MILLERS' GARDEN: 'FORTY UP'

42 Couvreur Street, Garran, ACT



Our 1,200sqm triangular-shaped hillside garden is at the top of a short but steep cul-de-sac on the western side of Red Hill, with views of Woden Valley and the Brindabellas. The block rises steeply to its highest part, about three storeys above street level. It has narrow paths and numerous rock steps, with handrails in a few places. Much of the garden is shaded in summer by maples and other deciduous trees, underneath which are rhododendrons and many azaleas. A central feature of the garden is its main terrace, which is partly bounded by large boulders exposed by excavations for the house. The boulders are now mostly covered by creepers and ferns. A few maples and azaleas have also been planted among them and a small waterfall flows through them into a pond along one side of the terrace (photo below). The garden has not previously been opened to the general public.



We moved into the house early in 1979, about two years after it had been built by its first owners. Some trees and shrubs had by then been planted on the bank in front of the house and on the south side of the driveway. But the main part of the garden on the north, east and south sides of the house was still like the adjoining open bushland of Red Hill Nature Park – except for some ivy which had been planted along the north fence and among the boulders around the main terrace. The six large eucalypts still in

the garden, and three others which later died after the long drought, would have been well established on the site when it was first occupied.

The garden has evolved rather haphazardly over our forty years here. Soon after we moved in, a professional landscaper was engaged to provide a design. This was closely followed for a few years until its defects started to emerge and we began to develop our own ideas. I should add that many of our own subsequent plantings over the years, including numerous fruit trees, were also misguided. The larger maples, not in the professional plan, were planted in the second half of the 1980s; and shade from these now cools the downstairs of our house adequately in summer. In retrospect, it was probably the planting of maples that began a change in the character of the garden, such that there are now very few relics from the original plan.

The big challenges and opportunities with the block were its abundant rocks and the steep slope of the land. Particular issues were how to take advantage of or work around many large immovable rocks above and just below the surface; use the countless smaller and movable rocks encountered almost everywhere on and below the surface; and reduce water run-off. The approach taken initially was ad hoc rather than visionary. As rocks were collected they were used at first to back-fill small pockets of soil for individual plantings, and to cover PVC irrigation piping laid around the perimeter of the block in the late eighties. But over the years, digging up rocks and constructing terraces took on a life of its own, easily understandable to anyone who likes rocks and can become absorbed in digging them up and making walls with them.

The terraces gradually got longer and higher. This involved much use of a crow bar, and the hiring of an electric jackhammer so often that it would have paid to buy one. All the rocks in the garden are either in their original locations, because they were too big to move, or were dug up and moved to where they are now. Many tonnes of soil were brought in over the years, mostly to the top of the driveway, and distributed from there by wheelbarrow and bucket to back-fill terraces. This involved a massive amount of in-house labour and (life extending?) exercise, which would almost certainly not have started if its eventual extent had been foreseen.



A growing family and two year's absence overseas limited attention to the garden between the early eighties and mid- nineties. While we were away, the ivy flourished so vigorously that by the time we returned it had covered much of the garden, including the boulders around the main terrace, and was smothering smaller plants, climbing trees and attacking the house. A spontaneous attack on ivy over a path one day later in the nineties led to a sustained attack on it over several months. This resulted in its removal from most of the block, and a renewed focus on establishing a garden.

Coincidentally about this time we inherited six advanced azaleas, and the problem of what to do with them led to the azalea phase in the garden's history, and a frenzy of terrace building and renovation between 2000 and 2010. This included a major renovation of the front bank, helped this time by a suitable professional plan and a serious earth mover, in 2004. More recent changes to the garden have included renovation of the vegetable garden and a nearby area around the swing seat (2015); and creation of small rose and bulb gardens, and renovation of a few other areas (2017-19).

For those interested in technicalities, virtually all shrubs, most smaller plants and some trees are watered by automatic drip irrigation, supplemented by less frequent and briefer spray irrigation. There are nineteen stations in operation, each with many metres of dripline and numerous assorted drippers, managed through two controllers. Because of the precise targeting and control of watering and extensive use of mulching (including from abundant autumn leaves), use of water is now less than it was in the early days of the garden, when plantings were only a fraction of what they are now. Annual water use averaged 920kL over the five years to the end of 2018. Supplementary rainwater storage was investigated in 2004, during the height of water restrictions, but the idea was abandoned because of practical limits to the amount that could be stored relative to usage,



and its poor economics. Natural and slow-release fertilisers are used, and the azaleas, rhododendrons, weeping cherries and viburnum hedges are sprayed when necessary to control thrip and cherry slug.



Evolution of our garden has been accompanied by a gradual increase in our knowledge and understanding of what makes a pleasing garden – for us. Leisurely reflection seems to have been an important part of it all: such as thinking about what we wanted; thinking and learning about ways of achieving it; and imagining how plantings might look from different viewpoints as they grow, from inside the house as well as in the garden. Physical work also came into it, obviously, not to mention enjoyment and relaxation! Evolution rather than master planning can produce a satisfying garden, particularly if you have forty years for evolving. But a professional plan is likely to be a sensible first step, particularly for amateurs like we were when we started our garden. A plan can usually be modified later if, as in our case, it doesn't seem suitable or, perhaps more likely, your ideas change. A little attention often rather than a lot occasionally also seems to be a good approach for maintaining a garden.

Robin & Sue Miller

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