



MICKEY'S MORNING WATERING RITUAL MAY LOOK LEISURELY, BUT IT'S ALSO ABOUT AVID PEST INSPECTION AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE MENTAL NOTES FOR URGENT TASKS TO BE TACKLED.

the making of A GARDEN

FORMER CITY GIRL AND INTERIOR DESIGNER MICKEY ROBERTSON TURNED HER TALENT TO THE GARDEN OF A COUNTRY PROPERTY SOUTHWEST OF SYDNEY AND HAS CREATED A LIVING MASTERPIECE THAT IS BOUNTIFUL AND BEAUTIFUL.

Although it seems like yesterday, it's 28 years, since my husband, Larry, and I discovered the small stone house and collection of dilapidated vernacular farm buildings that form Glenmore House. It sits, along with 30 acres of undulating country, in the foothills of the Razorback Range to the southwest of Sydney.

While Larry grew up in the hills of Scotland, I was a city girl who, like so many, dreamt of living (no doubt a romanticised version of life) in the country. Of course, reality is quite a different thing, but I reckon if the urge to fulfil a dream is strong enough, you'll go to any lengths to bring it to fruition.

So it wasn't long before our weekends were taken up with dismantling long-forgotten and overgrown structures, uncovering the likes of hazardous submerged water tanks and, covered in muck, pushing barrows and wielding everything from saws to secateurs in the undergrowth.

A quiet evolution

I'd been enamoured with gardens all my life, but looking at gardens is entirely different to making one, so a steep learning curve lay ahead, from grasping some understanding of soil structure to what kind of plants might actually grow. We made many a mistake early on. When we arrived, the landscape was deceptively green after a few good seasons,

but during our first year we were rudely plunged into drought. Any notion of planting a soft-hued cottage garden was quickly abandoned. Indeed, we wondered if we might be able to make any kind of garden at all.

Our broad-ranging climate isn't easy for planting. While soaring summer temperatures are to be expected, freak days can truly scorch, and high humidity levels during wet periods cause fungal disease and rot. Winter temperatures can reach the low to mid 20s and plunge to freezing at night, with the occasional cracker of a frost meaning that in any given season we are bound to lose some plants.

Along the way, the kind of plants I consider favourites has changed enormously as I've investigated the history, origin and tales of discovery of various plant groups and how they might contribute to the narrative of Glenmore. This has been as important as their colour, shape, form, texture, perfume and likelihood of survival. So the style of the garden, such as it is, has evolved over time.

For example, a swathe of shell ginger (*Hedychium zerumbet*) runs the length of the bedroom wing, meeting a tall bird of paradise (*Strelitzia Nicolai*), still immature Canary Island date palm and clump of crinum lily, which combined, lend a romantic, early colonial atmosphere to this particular pocket of the garden.



In contrast, Mediterranean-style plants such as teucrium, phlomis, santolina, achillea and the California tree poppy (*Romneya coulteri*) enjoy a barren spot, which bakes in the sun all day long. These plants – their form, colour, texture and scent – recall travels, family, friends, early garden explorations and link to interiors of the house.

Nestling into the landscape

As we restored the buildings, adapting their use to suit our needs, we gradually laid out the garden. Tying the buildings together was the driving force in the design, while the plants reflect the nature of each of the simple buildings – you'll not find anything that is grand or pretentious.

Olive, almond and fig trees grow in the orchard, grasses, dahlias, canna lilies, cardoons, oleander, lavender and sage elsewhere. It's all rather higgledy-piggledy, but within an organised layout.

Many plants have been included for their scents that waft over the garden to envelop the senses and drift inside through open windows. Among these are night-scented jessamine, ginger, gardenia, Burmese honeysuckle, rose and osmanthus.

The garden is all about enhancing our lives, stimulating our imaginings and memories and heightening the senses. From ironbark fences to drystone walls, crushed sandstone drives and winding, mown grass paths, the garden nestles into rather than dominates the landscape.

The kitchen garden

From the start, making a kitchen garden was a priority. In my mind's eye, it was inspired by a cross between Mr McGregor's garden in Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* and a perfectly laid out French potager of geometric patterns, paths and enclosures, containing enticing rows of flowers and veg alike.

I craved something as symmetrical as possible (almost nothing here is) and the area that was most likely to fulfil my vision was behind the old dairy. At the time, I was running back and forwards to Sydney and around the countryside in my capacity as an interior designer, Larry was commuting each day to the city, and our eldest daughter was a baby. Suffice to say, the vision took time to implement.

Fast forward to today, where the kitchen garden is at the very core of all activity at Glenmore House (workshops and events, including kitchen gardening days where we share as much information as possible about growing your own food). It's made up of eight 3m x 3m raised beds: four laid out in their family groups (leafy greens, legumes, roots and fruiting veg) to one side of my original apple arch, and four to the other. These family groups are interspersed with other species to confuse pests.



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MICKEY IN THE KITCHEN GARDEN; HYDRANGEAS BORDER THE BARN; THE POTTING SHED IS SMOTHERED IN THE ROSE 'ALBERTINE', WHICH FLOWERS IN SPRING. THIS PAGE, ABOVE RIGHT: MICKEY PICKING LEAFY GREENS. RIGHT: THE SUMMER KITCHEN GARDEN INCLUDES BEANS, TOMATOES, CUCURBITS AND SWEET POTATOES GROWN UP BAMBOO STRUCTURES.



Organic heart

I garden using organic methods, with a huge emphasis on building the health of the soil. We make our own compost on a large scale (using spent growth from the entire garden) so at the time of crop rotation (twice annually, at the end of the summer and winter seasons), we add barrow loads of compost before new planting begins.

We also have a worm farm in an old bath, so there's plenty of worm liquid to splash around as a tonic, and I make comfrey tea to promote fruit growth. Every now and then everything is also watered with a seaweed-based liquid.

A row of espaliered fruit trees – peach, apricot, cherry and plum – runs the length of the garden behind these beds. The entire kitchen garden is surrounded by companion plants, including rosemary, thyme, calendula, borage and poppies, which help to attract good bugs.

The aesthetic of the garden is as important to me as the produce. I've long been mildly obsessed with all manner of wigwams, tunnels and garden structures and it's really only in the kitchen garden that I can let this passion run wild! While the framework adds height and interest, the structures are also practical, growing crops such as climbing peas and beans, tomatoes and cucumbers (see 'Practical Harvest' box below).

Companion plants contribute another element to the atmosphere of the kitchen garden. I allow many of the veg to go to flower, which in turn makes them into valuable companion plants. Many have umbellifer-shaped flowers,

ABOVE LEFT: MICKEY PICKING A SUMMER BASKET OF CUCUMBERS, AUBERGINES AND TOMATOES. LEFT: TYING TOMATO STEMS TO A BOX FRAME.

Practical harvest

I build plant support structures out of locally available materials. Not only do climbing plants create a romantic aesthetic, they're also much easier to harvest from waist-height than on your hands and knees. I also prefer my legumes clear of the earth and find that bush beans, for example, are inclined to lurk on the ground without staking, resulting in fungal disease. So I prefer them up in the air where they can hang, encouraging good air circulation.

I also use a combination of twigs and sticks (prunings from the espaliered fruit trees), rammed into the soil, to delineate areas where I sow seeds. These enclosures resemble basket-like structures and act as quite effective pest barriers. At the end of the season, they go into the compost with all the other spent material.

which attract bees, ladybirds and all manner of insect life.

Fennel is my absolute favourite and over the years I've encouraged it to take over the beds under the apple arch to ensure that for many months, pale yellow flowers wave above fresh green, feathery foliage, lightly scenting the air. When parsnip, carrot, dill and parsley flowers join in, a delightful meadow-like haze is created. As the weeks move on, flowers become seeds, which I gather to begin the process again.

A nourishing reward

Just being in the kitchen garden is such a joy. I water by hand each day. Although time consuming, it's a wonderful way to start the morning, enveloped in the scent of herbs as water splashes on their aromatic leaves, and this way I can check on progress and pests alike.


It's food though, of course, that is the real reason for having a kitchen garden at all. Growing our own produce has completely altered the way we eat and taught me so much about seasonality. Certainly we no longer eat veg in prescribed bunches, and while at times we have an overload of one veg or another, at others I scratch around and may combine four or five I'd never think to buy in a shop.

But with every crop of garlic and onions, batch of potatoes, colander of beans or peas, haul of figs, bunch of rhubarb, stalk of artichoke or asparagus, basket of tomatoes and cucumbers, comes such a thrill. The smell of just-dug root veg covered in soil is a delight and no store-bought lettuce can equal the colour and texture of a perky homegrown leaf. Each trip from the garden to the kitchen yields yet another still life of wonder, beauty and fascination.

Floral bounty

Similarly, the ornamental garden yields its own bounty, from baskets of roses to windfall frangipani, stems of ginger to branches of blossom. Roses, alone, bloom for so much of the year at Glenmore. Among my favourites are the Bourbons, a group originating in the early 1800s, that are multi-petalled and highly scented, and include 'Madame Isaac Perreire' and 'Souvenir de la Malmaison'.

Forming the backdrop are the many trees – established and ones we have planted – including eucalypts, persimmons and pepper trees, the oldest of which dominates the garden courtyard and we believe to be around 175 years old.

The garden grew in tandem with our two girls, now aged 19 and 26, forming a canvas for their young lives, and ours. Where once young saplings were watered by bucket in a hot, bare paddock, we picnic in pools of shade during summer and delight in colourful autumn foliage. What began as a family garden – somewhere to play, run and squeal in delight – has evolved in time to a place where, in collaboration with others, we provide the opportunity to learn, dream, eat and, perhaps in a very simple way, to be inspired. 

ABOVE RIGHT: A LEAF SALAD WITH NASTURTIUM PETALS ON ITS WAY FROM THE GARDEN TO THE KITCHEN. RIGHT: MICKEY WITH A HUGE BUNCH OF TANSY, A HIGHLY PUNGENT PERENNIAL USED HERE AS A COMPANION PLANT.

