

GARDEN NOTES

AVOCA STREET GARDEN

The more unusual varieties of plants in the world have always interested me, and I have been extremely lucky to have this garden to collect some of them.

Perhaps most exciting of all was hearing of a huge Dragon Tree (*Dracaena draco*), landlocked and completely hidden (and in danger of being chopped down!) behind a block of 1970s flats near Camberwell junction. With lots of effort from Julian Ronchi Nursery and Established Tree Transplanters it was hand dug out, trucked down the Monash Freeway and craned into position in the front garden. It is well over a century old and I often wonder who had the inspiration to plant it all those years ago when it began its life in the Victorian era in the grounds of some long-demolished mansion. There is a similar sized one at Rippon Lea in Elsternwick. To keep it company I have planted another Dragon Tree, about 15 years old, grown by Dr Joe from seed collected from a tree in Moonee Ponds, from the Dracaena Draco Farm in Hoppers Crossing. Dragon Trees originate from the Canary Islands and have red sap, hence the common name 'Dragon's Blood Tree'. Another interesting fact is that when a branch flowers, it then branches out again according to the mathematical 'Fibonacci Sequence'.

Another tree that has travelled, is the Canary Island Date Palm (*Phoenix canariensis*) in the back, which came from the Riverina. It was quite a sight seeing the crane reverse down the driveway with great finesse and with only a couple of centimetres each side to spare – certainly done better than me in the car!

We are fortunate in that there are several mature trees that surround the 1930s Georgian house and soften its height. These include the Algerian Oak in the left front corner, the Sweet Pittosporum to the right, the beautiful Peppercorn in the school ground, the ash next to it, the Queensland Box in the right back corner, and finally the Silky Oak (*Grevillea robusta*). The trees create a three dimensionality to the garden that I have emphasised by introducing the Dragon Tree, palm tree, grotto, columns and aloes on the balcony to draw the eye to different levels. Adding to this there are bougainvilleas that scramble in the pittosporum and up the sidewall.

Boston Ivy grows on the house, and also eventually on the brick sidewall. The aim is to create something interesting to look at across many different heights.

The front is planned with exuberant symmetry, with both form and colour in mind to echo and contrast with the strict Georgian lines of the house. The pink-orange brickwork has inspired the planting of the orange crocosmias, nasturtiums, sage, abutilons and bougainvilleas. The clipped cumquats sometimes co-operate and carry their beautiful but very sour fruit and the miniature pomegranates in the two front pots develop their fruit in autumn. In winter, the aloes and Red Hot Pokers flower and attract the wattlebirds. Clivias – planted in the shady areas to the right – flower in early spring. They are a mixture of the original narrow-leafed variety, which flowers a pale orange, and a new broader-leafed variety, which has a darker orange flower.

Taking inspiration from the 'green wall' concept, there is a black chain mesh fence at the back, which should eventually become covered with a mix of creepers, mainly English Ivy, jasmine and *Ficus pumila*. Another idea, this time coming from the 'green roof' concept, are the plants growing on the grotto roof. The *Agave attenuata* is the variety 'Nova', which is more blue than the regular green variety. It was chosen to match the blue tones of the iron pergola structure on the roof, and also the iron owls with their bluish patina.



The ground plantings are chosen firstly because I like them, secondly, they are relatively robust and drought tolerant, and thirdly, the mix of them provides seasonal interest all year round. The Sea Squills (*Urginea maritima*) in the front came from the Royal Botanic Gardens when they moved their bulb bed. They seem to thrive along with the orange crocosmias, *Agapanthus* 'Nobbies Blue Giant', *Acanthus mollis*, and Red Hot Pokers. Out the back there are plenty of large strappy *Beschorneria yuccoides* and *Beschorneria septentrionalis* on the grotto roof. There are various purple and white flowering plectranthus, furcraeas, Japanese Yews and clipped cumquat trees. Violets provide a useful green ground cover with very appealing tiny purple flowers in spring.

Intermingling with the violets, Angels' Trumpets and beschornerias is the hot pink geranium 'Walter', bred by a relative of mine on the Darling Downs in Queensland. The Angels' Trumpets are a mix of the white, orange and pink varieties. The white and yellow have the most wonderful scent when in full flower in the evening. I can only assume that back in its South American home the perfume attracts night foraging insects.

The lawn is a tall fescue, which seems to work so far. The initial 'Santa Ana' Couch died down completely dead in winter and was replaced by 'Sir Walter' Buffalo which rapidly looked like a mangy dog. Time will tell. The original front lawn always struggled, so that was replaced with decomposed granite, or granitic sand, as was the area around the palm at the back. This has subsequently been replaced by slate, which does not wash away and is easier to sweep.

A redoing of the back of the house a few years ago provided an opening to install a grey water system and put in a large capacity underground rain tank. I certainly know a lot more about pumps and solenoid valves than I ever did before. Whilst the garden would probably survive without additional watering, having this water available certainly makes it look a lot happier than it would otherwise, and makes the potted plants, including the Dwarf Date Palms (*Phoenix roebelenii*) possible.

The new section out the back was started some 10 years ago with the transplanting of the two Canary Island Date Palms. Very slowly it took shape. The gargoyles spout water into the pond populated by Murray River Rainbow Fish and brown goldfish (golden goldfish are very rapidly eaten by kookaburras and keen-eyed egrets). There are *Sonchus* daisies, *Geranium maderense*, small Dragon Trees (all from the Canary Islands) planted in the bed along the brick wall. There is also *Tagetes lemmonii* (a bushy marigold with a very unusual foliage smell) and winter flowering salvias.

Guinea pigs, rabbits and chickens are housed in a fenced area. The chickens are the last two of about 16 that one of the children brought home from the school egg hatching about eight years ago.

Aside from the plants, one of my great joys is the many birds that visit. Tawny frogmouths perch on the balcony railing in the evening, magpie families turn up over summer, currawongs, rosellas and kookaburras all make their distinctive sounds at various times over the year, tiny silvereyes nest in the 'green wall', and of course there are always the mynahs stealing the dog's food. There is even the occasional sighting of a peregrine falcon dive-bombing and eating a pigeon, much to the children's amazement.

I hope you enjoy your visit today as much as I enjoy finding the plants and having fun in the garden.

Sally-Anne Hains