

GARDEN NOTES

BELLEVILLE

Belleville was built in the mid 1860s by James Bell, a very successful young businessman and Borough Mayor, who was well on his way to an illustrious career in politics, business and banking.

The first garden typified a large, Victorian garden, with assorted cypress, a summer house and rose garden – all enclosed within a high paling timber fence. Of the early garden, only the Norfolk Island Hibiscus and loquat remain, along with several self-sown peaches, a magnificent pink tree peony, one nearly-expired pomegranate and a perpetually stunted camellia. The large stables on the old Lawrence Street boundary have long gone, but the side-by-side privy and the underground cistern to capture rainwater remain. Side blocks along Market Street that housed Bell's storage sheds were gradually sold off.

The current garden was largely planted in 2005–06 in the midst of the millennial drought, after we purchased the property in 2004. The iron gates, carriageway and garden design at the front of the house were developed from old photographs taken at the turn of the 19th century. On completing the gates, Andy Dannett, master blacksmith from Yapeen, was astonished to find that his new gates matched the original pair that survives at Grimwade House in Caulfield.

Dianne Thomson, who managed the Buda garden in Castlemaine, developed a garden concept that blends formal lines and circles with informal plantings of hardy perennial and deciduous exotic and Australian shrubs and trees. Rosemary and pomegranate hedges and the walkway through the spine of the garden, covered with ornamental grapes, help to create distinct areas, such as the kitchen garden, with its pond, and the 'Oriental garden' – so-named as the plantings were inspired by the original tree peony and camellia located there.

Local gravel is used for paths and to mulch the orchard. Like most of the Goldfields Region, the climate is harsh: substantial variations in temperature (-7° to 44° in 2017) with moderate and often unpredictable rainfall (long-term average 525mm). We seem to be blessed with fine soil, enriched with subterranean water that flows through the gravelly soils in the surrounding hills.

Important objectives have been to create shade and a sense of cool, to mask adjacent houses, sheds and fences, and to produce our own fruit and vegetables. Many shrubs were specially propagated by our neighbour, Loreta, and at the Buda nursery.

After planting, nearly all the garden survived a further five years of drought by spreading their roots deeply in the soil and barely growing above ground. The drought broke in spring and summer 2010–11 with torrential, flooding rains that drowned many drought-tolerant plants and killed off a cherry tree, plus lots of lavender and lilacs. However, most trees and shrubs flourished and at last began to form a green canopy. Further flooding in 2016 brought canker to the elegant, eight metre tall pencil pines along the terrace and they perished in three weeks. As a safeguard, we replaced this loss with four large pots of pencil pines.

An important recent development was to complete the shed, by recycling materials from the old shed to create a pleasant aspect at the rear of the cottage. A further development for 2018 is to plant an advanced Algerian Oak in the centre of the rose garden and to gradually pull back the roses. With the persistently hotter summers, roses now tend to fry rather than bloom after December.

Belleville has always been a private residence and will hopefully remain as a family home for at least another 150 years.

Fiona Lindsay

