

GARDEN NOTES

VICTORIA ALBERT TOWN RESIDENCE

The Victoria Albert Town Residence (VATR) comprise 144 apartments with a 5,984 square metre footprint. The two main courtyards and four smaller courtyards make up about 1,600 square metres of that area, forming the 'green heart' of the complex.

The garden areas are built on top of the buildings' two levels of underground car parks – so technically they are roof gardens. The shallow soil structure consists of 100-300mm depth with poor drainage. The garden is shaded for extended periods from the apartment buildings that surround it. Most areas receive an average of 2.5 hours of sunlight per day. Some areas receive no direct sun year-round, while others on the east–west axis receive little in winter but are blasted with six to eight hours of sunlight in summer!

Planted with more than 150 different plant species/varieties, the gardens are designed to be viewed from all angles and provide year-round pleasure through continual seasonal interest.

Andrew Hewat of the Australian Garden Party, together with a team of three other gardeners, maintains the gardens for an average of 33 man-hours a week.

A brief history

When Andrew Hewat first became involved at VATR in spring 2005, the building and gardens were in their tenth year. Although the original garden layout and planting had been decent enough – insufficient, uninspired and under-resourced maintenance had allowed the outdoor common areas to decay rather than flourish.

In late 2005, the Owners Corporation commenced a major building rectification/renovation project. For the works to proceed at speed, the degraded outdoor areas had to be largely torn apart. Being onsite at the time, Andrew was utilised by the project manager to firstly manage the removal of all problematic garden elements, and eventually to complete restoration and redevelopment of the outdoor common areas.

The first few years of the redevelopment project saw immense difficulties, including three years of outrageous summers, water restrictions, and a steep learning curve regarding the various horticultural factors peculiar to gardening within such a physical structure. In time, a fuller understanding of all relevant factors (horticultural, social, institutional and aesthetic) ripened, and a gentle upward trajectory brought the gardens to where they are now.

The gardens today

The main creative influences for the garden design have been the Japanese printmakers, Hokusai and Hiroshige, as well as Monet, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, and Lewis Carroll. The gardens contain elements of many styles, to suit many tastes, all well slotted together so that no section seems out of place.

During the extreme summers between 2006–07 and 2008–09, the Owners Corporation installed a stormwater capture and storage system with 160,000 litres total capacity – enough to keep the fountains running and the garden lush for more than 10 weeks without rain during the hottest summers ever experienced in Melbourne. The irrigation system is used only as needed – drainage from the shallow concrete 'beds' is terrible, and it would be just as easy to damage many of the plants by over-watering as by letting it all dry out.



The plantings at VATR have developed around the simple guidelines of 'practicality' and 'aesthetics'. Nothing should touch the walls, nor be so large that it is not maintainable. All ground floor windows should be at least lightly screened. Aesthetically, each and every entrance/exit should be 'special' and every plant or design element should perform more than one aesthetic function. Planting has been selected to endure every micro-climate.

In the main axis of both courtyards are low *Buxus* hedges (although *Murraya paniculata* 'Min a Min' has been substituted in some cases), and the main hedges are *Syzygium australe* 'Bush Christmas'. In each shorter, east-west axis, hedges of *Camellia* 'Early Pearly', *Camellia* 'Sweet Jane', and *Murraya paniculata* have been shaped, and in some cases blended together to provide more playful and 'transportive' effects.

The main trees are birches (*Betula pendula*), Crab Apple (*Malus floribunda*) and three different varieties of *Lagerstroemia indica x fauriei*. The birches and Crab Apples are from the original plantings, while the Crepe Myrtles have replaced other trees that died or became problematic.

A variety of succulents have been used, especially in the mosaic arrangements ('The Great Eye' and 'InGrid'), but also for certain sculptural pieces ('Fuji', and 'the Cocktail Olive') because they provide fantastic colours, are tough, easily propagated, and low maintenance.

Other distinctive planted areas are:

Country cottage plantings – these soften the general formality of the Albert courtyard main axis, providing an ever-changing feature that also acts as framing for the 'Great Urn' beyond. At different times of year these beds are dominated by processions of *Iris germanica* (mostly purple), digitalis, canna, camellias, hydrangeas, azaleas, and daffodils.

Native garden – plants include *Syzygium* (lilly pilly) hedges, *Murraya paniculata* hedges, native violet groundcover, various *Dendrobium* orchids, *Adiantum* (Maidenhair Fern), *Alocasia brisbanensis* (Native Taro), *Asplenium australasicum* (Birds' Nest Fern), *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana* (Bangalow Palm), *Macrozamia* sp. (Cycad) and *Pandorea jasminoides*.

Edible garden plantings – parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, basil (Italian – in warm months and perennial all year), coriander (there is never enough!), mint (too much – please take some!), Vietnamese Hot Mint, curry leaves (*Murraya koenigii*), spring onions, chives, citrus (lemon, lime and cumquat), oregano, marjoram, dill, Bay Tree, chillis (in the warmer months), dwarf pomegranate, beetroot (for salad and root), lemon grass, and Red Perilla (Tito) – used in Asian dishes for its peppery flavour, but also a great purple foliage plant.

Orchids – *Cymbidium*, *Dendrobium*, and *Oncidium* are the main genera used at VATR, and between them, in a good year, they enhance the place from late summer through to late spring, with the main shows being from late autumn to late spring. Heavenly!

Mosaic plantings – these low, patterned plantings, such as 'The Great Eye', are not only entertaining at ground level, but are also designed to stand out and 'look back' at anyone who views them from above. The *Portulacaria afra*, and *P. afra* 'Variegata' are of particular interest – densely planted to create low, tough shapes with an almost porcelain-like finish.

The gardens at VATR prove to us again that good gardening can really make people's lives more enjoyable, and that it is possible to have just about everything you could possibly want in a garden, all at the same time. You can leave for work in the morning knowing that you will get to come home to a place that makes you feel good. Be it a suburban block or a small balcony in an apartment complex – you have the capability to make it high, and highly useful art.

Thank you for visiting our gardens. *Now go forth, and get gardening!*