

# Brave New Garden Down Under

Australia leads the way in combining slick design with ethical choices, reports  
Francoise Elvin



The red earth centre



Bold stripes of scaevola albida contrast with corten steel in the cultivar garden



Carefully considered layered vista in the 'bush garden'

Sue Phillips was my knowledgeable and enthusiastic tour guide, giving me her undivided attention (kindly organised by the Melbourne RBG Press Office) for a couple of hours on a glorious summer day in January. I was very grateful for her well-trained eye in describing to me the flora and design features contained in the newly completed Australian Garden at Cranbourne, Victoria. Having just arrived for the first time Down Under from the UK, I didn't have my 'eye in' at all! I was struck as I flew in to land - looking out the porthole of the plane - how everything appeared as green fuzz!

The latest phase of the Gardens opened only a few months ago in October 2012 and showcases exclusively Australian natives to outstanding effect. The whole is encompassed in a world-class garden, characterised by a robust modern design template by landscape architects Taylor, Cullity, Lethlean, and landscape detailing carried out to the highest standards. There is corten steel (stabilized rusty metal) by the spadeful, and the most precisely angled and built dry-stone wall I have ever seen (the cracks between the stones are so tight they look drawn-on!).

There are demonstration gardens built with the homeowner in mind, graded by how much water they consume, covered with mulches of all sorts, from crushed mussel shells to grape vine pruning. These are all sourced as by-products from local industries, and harmonise well with the native flora. The resulting plant palette is one that relies heavily on textural variations, and reads as an exercise in subtle, muted colouring – think predominantly sage green - as in eucalypt leaves - punctuated by silvers (plectrathus argentatus,) the glaucous blues of acacia baileyana, and the rusts provided by mottled jigsaw bark, grasses and the 2m high velvety flower heads of 'kangaroo paw' in burnt orange and yellow.

...“Waterhole Bridge” below the Greg Clark wall sculpture was made using reclaimed planks from station pier in Melbourne. Tens of thousands of immigrants took their first steps towards Australian ‘terra-firma’ over them more than a hundred years ago. The historic resonances present in additions such as these lend a layered, considered, soulful approach to the garden. This is repeated in the vistas one encounters everywhere. These are also layered, considered, and resonant with the landscape architects’ vision of creating a complex, but nonetheless unified, garden composition.

The visitor centre by Kirstin Thompson blends seamlessly into its environment, exploiting ground source heating and cooling systems that maintain the ambient temperature at a comfortable 20°C all year round. This is combined with cleverly angled wooden slats on the south-facing elevation that capture a maximum of the sun's rays in winter, and deflect its fierce glare in summer. It's hardly surprising that the first stage which opened in 2006 garnered a total of 20 planning, design and landscape awards between 1997 and 2008.

The overall feel is modern, chic even, and yet the designers have been at pains to incorporate recycled materials and low-impact technologies at every turn. The results are fresh and completely captivating.

The design has been mapped onto a north-south axis marked by a bold yellow stripe of "Billy buttons" (*chrysocephalum apiculatum*) dramatically dissecting an expanse of the "red earth" representing the centre of Australia. (After a long quest, the materials to recreate the colour were found close to home – a striking combo of sand and brick dust). There are earth sculptures here reminiscent of Charles Jencks – crescent moon 'lunettes' in red ochre that rise gracefully from the dust: elevated ellipses contrasting in colour and form with the improbably perfect, endless blue sky.



The corten steel wall sculpture with red earth lunettes visible above

Water flanks this red expanse on the eastern side proceeding from a "billabong" and making its way via wondrous architectural design features to a lake shaped unusually (but successfully) by 2 hills whose contours, at their base, slice the water in dramatically clean lines... These are further accentuated by the 'melaleuca spits' area which re-creates an abstract version of Australia's "rich and distinctive" estuarine environment.

The garden has also been subdivided along the east-west axes. On the east side are the newly created demonstration gardens. On the western side the subdivisions are less conspicuous, since this constitutes "phase 1", which was completed in 2006 and has therefore reached a reasonable level of maturity. In some respects this was my favourite part of the garden

– a stylised "bush" created under the expert tutelage of plantsman Paul Thompson... He flew across Australia observing land patterns formed by alternate flooding and drought, and based his design for this part of the garden on what he saw.

These extreme weather conditions move soil and silt around creating sinuous fertile strips where vegetation flourishes. He has also included a dry river bed in this part of the garden. One wonders whether there is a nod to Japanese design here, although the vastness of Australia's landscape (I saw one map where the whole of Europe fitted inside her boundaries) provides ample scope for inspiration.

The overall site extends to 363 hectares so that the intensively designed 15 hectare garden in the centre nestles in the midst of some of the best preserved bush land in the whole of Victoria. Traditionally the territory belonged to the Boon Wurrung Clan. Contact with sealers in the early 1800's led to a rapid decline in their numbers "due to the effect of alcohol, guns

and introduced disease". The garden occupies high ground and must have been used at one time as a vantage point by the indigenous inhabitants... The Australian Garden hopes to resurrect the Spirit of its ancestral occupants... a Spirit that is

"strong and persistent". Unfortunately I was unable to meet with Vicky Nicholson-Brown, the cultural liaison officer appointed by the Gardens, and Elder of the Kulin Nation.

There is undoubtedly a sense of "honouring the land" deeply embedded in the ethos behind the new Australian Garden. One hopes that, although the methods chosen to go about this in the modern day couldn't be more different from those employed by its original inhabitants, somehow the resonance of intention might bridge the gulf between ancient times and our modern world...

This is a Brave New Garden, but one that doesn't just point to a Brave New World. It has imposed limits and constraints on itself that give a hint of humility and credibility to its powerful presence. If you make it to Victoria, and you want to see the splendours of Australian flora showcased in one spot, this garden should be your first point of call.