

Peter and Jenny John's Garden, (text by Jenny)

When Pete and I bought 1044 Punkalla Tilba Road Narooma in late 1998 we were told that the two small rooms at the west end of the property had originally been the offices for a staging post that provided coaches with fresh horses and that the impression of the stable foundation can still be seen in the garden. We have the original deeds that show a one acre block (part of a declared goldfield) was purchased for eight pounds by Richard Simpson of Moruya in 1890. Nineteen years later he purchased the forty acre block around the original one acre and that is the extent of the property now. Since then various owners, including us, have modified the land and the house for differing purposes.

We bought the property while we were still working in Canberra, as a holiday house that would later serve as a home in our retirement and spent what time we could here introducing native plants into the garden around the house. We anticipated that the temperate coastal climate of Narooma would make for easier gardening than Canberra, being frost free and with a compliant productive soil. We were wrong!

The Punkalla valley collects frost during the winter months and although never as severe as

in Canberra it does put some limitations on our choice of plants. The basic soil is shale with layers of clay which is very productive with the right amount of moisture but is very hard to work if it is too dry or too wet and does not drain well enough for some species.

We have never sat down and drawn up a design for the garden. We bought the old house with its surrounding garden of mainly exotics with a scattering of natives. The Magnolia grandiflora on the lawn is at least 100years old and now acts as host to *Dendrobium kingianum*, *Dendrobium linguiforme*, and the fern, *Pyrrhosia rupestris*.



Jenny discusses plant choices with members. She also has a shallow, well used bird bath close to the house, but protected by shrubby plants

The Kurrajong (*Brachychiton populneus*) in front of the old house has a flourishing colony of *Dendrobium linguiforme* which flowers spectacularly in October. As we extended the house we planted all natives in the adjacent areas to give a pleasant outlook and to encourage the birds. The Spear Lily (*Doryanthes palmerii*) has produced its second flower spike in 11years but three Gynea Lilies (*Doryanthes excelsa*) planted in various spots have never flowered in this time.

Because the property is on the side of a hill several areas are steeply sloping and very difficult to maintain especially by gardeners of advancing age. The slope at the east end of the house has proved so impossible we are now exploring the possibility of making terraces that will provide some flat areas to work from. Pete has put much work into the



Not the old house, but a charming reflection of past use of the property

store garden

sloping bed between the house and the shed, killing the rampant weeds, pruning shrubs and spreading mountains of mulch. We now have a somewhat better understanding of the requirements and potential of various plants to choose more appropriate shrubs for the gaps in that bed. The extent of the garden makes the maintenance required a bit like painting the Harbour Bridge and some parts are badly neglected. We are working to develop a garden that requires less work using large amounts of mulch and less ambitious plantings.

The little hut on the north side of the garden was built by the then owners in the 1930's. It originally had a fireplace and chimney on the south wall but this was removed by the owners before us and the extension added. We use it to equipment and materials. It is too dark to work

in and prone to mosquitos from the water butt, but it provides useful shelter to bats and possums and there is now a large hole at one end where a wombat explored the possibility of a burrow underneath it but found it not really suitable. We built the big shed to bring together storage previously provided by several separate structures round the property. The shed now houses the tractor and its attachments, ride-on mower, two cars, a trailer, a canoe, a workshop and a toilet.

Apart from the geological and topographical restraints we also have to take into account the zoological factors. Part of the enjoyment we derive from the garden comes from the variety of birds and animals that we encounter. With no resident dog, the swamp wallabies particularly enjoy this garden. We have found that they have very broad tastes and will try any shrub they happen across in their wanderings. A limited number of genera seem to be completely unpalatable. These include *Philotheca*, *Leptospermum*, *Calothamnus*, and *Zieria*, though an aging male wallaby that visits regularly will force down the flowers from some of these while avoiding the foliage. (Interestingly, other members find that their wallabies enjoy especially *Philotheca* and *Leptospermum*)

Other genera become unpalatable as they grow so just the growing tips are consumed, severely restricting the growth of the plant. *Grevilleas* are the main sufferers in this category. Others such as *Hardenbergia*, *Hypocalymma* and *Eremophila* are just irresistible to such an extent that the plant will be completely defoliated at a sitting if the animal is left undisturbed. We have examples of all these types around the garden.

Having proved to be unreliable as propagators ourselves we have purchased plants from various sources. When we were in Canberra, at a time when few natives were available commercially, we relied on the SGAP sales. Now, we have found the ERBG nursery sales to be increasingly varied and always reliable. The local nurseries at Tilba, Narooma and Dalmeny have varying amounts of natives but the turnover is low and unless you are lucky enough to coincide with a delivery, the plants are invariably pot bound. We always call into the Tambo Vale Nursery at Nicholson when

we visit our son in Melbourne and come away with a box of plants of species we never see locally. The surrounding area and forest contains a mixture of trees, shrubs, and small plants of which I can identify only a few but at different times we have noted the orchids *Diuris sulphurea*, *Pterostylis pedunculata*, *Calochilus gracillimus* as well as *Prostanthera lasianthos* and *P. incisa*, *Clematis aristata* and *Hibbertia dentata*. I'm sure an expert eye would identify many more and an expert propagator would use the bush as a source of garden plants.



Part of the older, established plantings. Friendly wallabies use the plants too frequently, and new plantings are protected by the visible wire cages



Some success with a white flowered *Hypocalymma angustifolia* and mauve *Zieria* "Pink Crystals"



It's great to see plants rarely available these days. Jenny has collected many, including *Spyridium parvifolium* (Dusty Miller) and *Banksia blechnifolia*