

My Space Genista Whittaker



SHE grew up in Zimbabwe and he is from England but, when it came to fixing up their Balwyn back garden, billabongs and Australian natives were on their minds. As soon as Genista Whittaker saw a Phillip Johnson-designed garden in the Yarra Valley, she knew he was the landscaper for her. But that doesn't mean she did everything he said.

What was it about Phillip Johnson's rocks and water features that you found so beguiling?

I never wanted lines of box hedges, privet and gardenias in the garden and I didn't want anything tizzy or frizzy. I liked the way his gardens looked natural, as if they weren't landscaped and were meant to be there. I had hoped I was finding someone undiscovered, who could work with me in landscaping the garden but I very quickly realised he was not that. When I visited his place on the side of a mountain in the Dandenongs with its huge rocks and waterfalls I was blown away. **Given his high profile, was it hard to pin him down to do your job?**

He was fantastic because we only had a 10-day window in August 2007 — after a neighbouring house was demolished — that we could bring trucks and heavy machinery into the garden. I said to him he had to bring in all those rocks within that time. He brought truckloads of rocks

here and personally arranged them with this huge machine with chains. He would spend a lot of time pouring water over them to see how the water flowed and the sort of shapes the water made and I stood at this window mesmerised.

But you didn't feel compelled to follow all his suggestions?

No, and that's why we didn't go down the planting route. Phil's horticulturist Katherine Kok (and designer) could have planted it all and she did give us planting suggestions but in the end it was our garden and (my husband) Andrew and I planted almost everything ourselves from tubestock. Sometimes we followed her suggestions, like the native pigface around the pool, but other times we chose, like the native frangipani and the *Acacia cognata*. The kangaroo paw I bought from a roadside market driving to Mallacoota once but Kuranga is my favourite nursery.

Kath did all the water planting because I didn't have any idea about that. As for the fish, Phil suggested silver perch for the billabongs but literally 24 hours after we put them in, grey herons arrived and started plucking them out of the water. So we put goldfish in, which Phil wouldn't like because they are not native and eat the plants and aren't so good at controlling mosquito larvae. But we never saw the perch because they were so dark and we enjoy being able to see the

goldfish. Interestingly when the bottom billabong almost dried out last year and we were taking fish up to the top billabong with nets, we found the perch were still there.

Do the billabongs and the stream that links them use any mains water?

No; all the water is captured off the roof of the house and the tennis court, which we sloped towards the garden. Between them the two billabongs collect 60,000 litres of water and we have a pump so that we can take water out for the garden, but in reality we so love the billabongs being full that we rarely remove water. Phil wanted the garden to be used and rocks have been strategically placed all the way down for sitting on. The kids sit on top of the waterfalls and put their feet in the water and move small rocks around to change the water flow. Phil encouraged the idea of that, he was a big kid at heart, and when he placed that big rock next to the swimming pool, he did it with the idea that the kids would jump off it into the pool. His whole team stripped off and jumped in to check it worked.

You are lucky to have the mature eucalypts not just on your half-acre block but in the neighbours' places as well. Were they the starting point for this garden?

Yes, they are so majestic and beautiful. When we bought the property about

eight years ago the lemon-scented gum was full of ivy and, even before we moved in, I cut the ivy off at the base because I couldn't bear it choking the tree.

But you have also planted exotics.

I did want some plants that reminded me of Zimbabwe. We had an avenue of jacarandas at my childhood home, so I wanted to keep the jacaranda that was already here and I have planted other Mediterranean-climate plants like red hot pokers, strelitzia, South African daisies, and, how could I have forgotten, the plant of my namesake *Genista monosperma* or the bridal veil broom.

And what about the line of weeping lilly-pillies near the pool?

They are my personal challenge. When I planted them they didn't thrive so I took them all out and put a load of compost into the bed, which is very dry because of the neighbour's river red gum. Unfortunately the compost turned out to be too alkaline, so now I go to parks and collect pine needle mulch to give the bed some acidity. Most people would just throw them out and start again but I have a thing about not wasting anything and now they are showing signs of coming on. I am giving them another six months.

A multimedia presentation on Genista Whittaker appears at nationaltimes.com.au next week.

INTERVIEW: MEGAN BACKHOUSE

PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS