

# A new take on native

Forget any preconceptions you have about native gardens being drab and scruffy, says *Teena Crawford*.

In the 1970s, native gardens were overgrown, scrubby messes with 100-foot silky oak or gum trees planted too close to the house. But the modern native garden is stylish, complementing both traditional and modern architecture, and suited to all types of environments including coastal, inland and mountainous regions. With society's changing ecological values and the desire to be more waterwise, native gardens offer a sophisticated, environmentally friendly garden solution.

As with any successful garden, good design, correct plant choice and appropriate maintenance are needed. The native gardens of the 1970s were planted and left to their own devices, but after installation, some regular maintenance including pruning, watering and mulching are a must for achieving a garden you will truly enjoy.

Despite their bad press, not all natives are grey, dry and drab in appearance. Many have lush, shiny green foliage. A good specimen of the Illawarra flame tree, *Brachychiton acerifolius*, would have to be one of the world's most spectacular trees. Most suited to coastal eastern Australia, its large, lush green foliage and upright stately growth make this tree ideal for home gardens. In early summer, it sheds some foliage so its bright scarlet flowers are fully displayed: truly a glorious sight, and a bonus because it flowers for Christmas. Another magnificent red flowering tree is the firewheel tree, *Stenocarpus sinuatus*, with its large leather-like leaves and curiously shaped but beautiful flowers.

For smaller gardens try growing native crinum lily, violets, tree ferns, cordyline and other rainforest plants to create a tropical theme.

Flower display is high on the priority list of most gardeners. Traditionally camellias, rhododendrons and roses have been the mainstay of the floral display, but many Australian natives are among the best flowering plants you could choose.

The native hibiscus, *Alyogyne huegelii*, is a versatile shrub producing bright purple flowers for most of the year. Happy to be



grown in sun or semi-shade, it provides a particularly colourful display when planted en masse. Hibiscus establish quickly and growth habit and flower production are enhanced if the shrubs are pruned regularly when young, to develop a good framework.

Correas are also easy to grow. They come in an array of flower colours and their long flowering habit makes them a welcome addition to the garden.

Correas look best when planted in groups or drifts, but many respond well to clipping, making them excellent subjects for hedging and borders.

Brachyscome are reliable evergreen groundcovers or rockery plants providing colour in the garden all year. Recent breeding has produced a range of varieties to suit any garden.

Architectural plants are popular in today's gardens and for striking plant forms you cannot go past Doryanthes. Both varieties available have a strong architectural presence, with upright, broad, bright-green fleshy leaves, and produce scarlet-red flowers on spectacular spikes.

Strap leaf plants are very fashionable and are ideal in long, narrow beds, a common feature in the modern garden. Most are low maintenance, requiring no regular pruning. Dianellas, or flax lilies, have attractive long leaves and produce sprays of small deep-blue or purple flowers in spring and early summer.

Orthrosanthus bears clear-blue flowers on wiry stems above narrow grass-like leaves in spring. Only growing to about 60 cm tall and wide, it makes an excellent plant for the home garden.

Hedges are used to soften fences, screen out ugly views and provide structure and definition to gardens. The blueberry ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*), *Syzygium* (such as lilly pilly), *Callistemon* (bottlebrushes) and hakeas are excellent for tall screening. Most can be grown untrammelled or they can be clipped and manicured into neater forms.

Westringia and correas make good medium-sized hedges. They look their best when clipped more informally with curved edges.

# gardens

A garden is not a garden without fragrance. As its name suggests, lemon ironwood, *Backhousia citriodora*, has strongly aromatic foliage with a delicious lemon fragrance. This narrow, evergreen tree grows to about 10 metres and bears clusters of small, white flowers in summer.

For large gardens the lemon-scented gum, *Eucalyptus citriodora*, is hard to beat with its wonderful fragrant foliage and majestic smooth grey trunk. In early spring the native frangipani, *Hymenosporum flavum*, bears sweetly scented flowers reminiscent of its tropical namesake. There is a dwarf form available that is ideal for small gardens or pot culture.

Some would say a garden is also not complete without the presence of birds. Native gardens provide habitat, protection from predators and food. By growing a range of hakeas, banksias and grevilleas, among others, you are providing flowers and food to sustain an array of birds and other creatures.

There is a native plant for every purpose, so forget suggestions that natives are dull and boring. Look further and you will appreciate their beauty and diversity; try gardening with them and you will become more in tune with your environment, the earth and your country. ■

## Q Can I grow gum trees in a small suburban garden?

A Most people perceive gum trees, or eucalypts, as too big for small gardens and more suited to the bush. However, research projects on native plants have led to a better knowledge about which smaller-growing species are good for gardens. Further, extensive breeding programs have resulted in a huge array of new varieties that have characteristics suited to the requirements and restraints of urban design.

I have spent my whole professional life immersed in the production of exotics, yet if I were to be left on this earth with just one plant, it would have to be a gum tree. There is something very 'Australian' about a gum tree, and it generates a great deal of national pride!

The following are some of the types suitable for smaller gardens:

- *Eucalyptus caesia* 'Silver Princess'
- 'Euky Dwarf', small-growing, grafted *Eucalyptus ficifolia*
- *Eucalyptus crenulata* 'Silver Gum'
- *Eucalyptus pyriformis* 'Pear-fruited Mallee'
- *Eucalyptus lansdowneana* 'Crimson Mallee Box'.

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Kuranga Native Nursery (Mt Evelyn, Victoria)  
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*Australian Planting Design* by Paul Thompson, Lothian Books 2002.

*The Australian Garden: Designing with Australian Plants* by Diana Snape, Blooming Books 2002.