

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN

By Sue Jackson

First published in 07 in VAFT News

At lunch-time on a Friday last December I arrived from Melbourne in the parched hinterland north of Bendigo to spend a long weekend with my sister and her partner on their farm. Over lunch, I complained at length about the tantalisation of current weather reports – where the promised rain is a mere sprinkle or never even eventuates. Finally, my brother-in-law said, ‘Come with me.’

We strolled some distance from the house, before Brien, who is an Aboriginal Elder, squatted down at the edge of the dusty garden path. ‘See how they’re open at the top?’ he said, pointing to several tiny mounds of red earth, surrounded by ants. I nodded. ‘That’s so the ants have easy access to their homes. Well, all you have to do is keep an eye on them. When they start dashing around, collecting twigs and covering the tops like this,’ he said, laying small pieces of straw over an opening, ‘you know you’re in for a real good downpour in the next forty-eight hours. Don’t like getting their furniture wet,’ he added with a laugh.

On my way back to the house, I noticed myself following my sister Jude’s usual practice - averting my eyes as I passed the ‘orchard’. Seven years ago, when dams and expectations were both high, I had helped plant apricot, plum and ancient varieties of apple and quince trees there. Rows of dead sticks in battered ‘protectors’, giving the heavens the finger, are all that remain of those heady times.

The orchard marks the outer limit of the land they once cultivated. On my arrival earlier, I'd been sad to see that the 'unkillable' agapanthus, which Jude had planted as a welcoming committee along both sides of the driveway, had keeled over. The lavender bushes lining the lane to the chook sheds had suffered the same fate. Inch by inch, as the rains failed to arrive and hand watering became the only option, outlying plants were sacrificed. It was as if the house's gravitational pull was sucking the garden inwards, towards the only remaining water source. With the beleaguered farmers in full retreat, the garden had been reduced to a narrow ring around the house.

It was there Jude and Brien were making their last stand. Plastic bottles 'planted' to provide a continuous water trickle to the kitchen garden had become so numerous that our six-year-old niece recently asked, 'Are you growing bottles now?' The garden beds were overhung with so many sheets and old gauze curtains to shade tired plants that it looked like a huge outdoor laundry. There was every variety of mulch, from hay to bracken to rocks. Vegetables were planted at different levels – ground, medium and high - so one watering fed all. 44-gallon drums were stationed at the edges of all the sheds and outhouses so not a drop of roof water was lost. And 'grey' water was either stored in a holding tank or seeped into the garden via diverter and hose. They were trying everything.

Knowing what a hard time Jude and Brien were having, I'd come equipped with diversions. So on Friday evening we settled down to watch Nick Cave's 'The Proposition', about the harshness of frontier life in nineteenth century Australia. It seemed apt somehow.

In the film, Mrs Stanley, the impeccably dressed and groomed police captain's wife, had created with a huge outpouring of labour and resources a glorious garden to adorn her home. Although the gate of their picket fence opened directly on to what appeared to be an endless desert, her perfect replica of an English country garden boasted luxuriant imported trees, orderly rows of blooming roses and meticulously swept paths. 'Just like ours,' Jude commented with a laugh. I laughed too.

It was only later, in bed, that I thought Mrs Stanley's model English garden mightn't be much like theirs, but it wasn't all that different from mine, at least in intent. Standard roses peep over the palings of my front picket fence, and the desiccated grass rectangle that used to be a lawn is lined with flower beds predominantly of thirsty imports - daphne, hydrangeas, azaleas and magnolias. And there's not a plastic bottle or shade cloth in sight.

At breakfast the next morning, Jude said softly that she'd dreamt in the night that it had rained. Like many city dwellers, I've only recently become concerned about rainfall. Living in Melbourne, I'd always taken it for granted that when I turned on the tap, I could have my fill of the best drinking water in the world. I had sympathised as my sister's tanks and dams emptied and she had to buy in water for the animals and plants. But Bendigo had seemed a long way away. Over the previous weeks that had all changed.

All of a sudden, the environment wouldn't stay put - out 'there' - where it belonged. Day after day, as smoke from the bushfires obscured the skyscrapers, there was no denying it was moving from the bush into the heart of the CBD. And

the 'great divide' between the city and the country was proving more and more illusory.

Perhaps that was why on Saturday afternoon, as the three of us worked steadily - topping up the water bottles, immersing fatigued pot plants in buckets of water and shifting the shade cloths - the email I'd received the previous Thursday gnawed at me.

For more than a year I'd been on the waiting list for an allotment in our community garden. With its espaliered fruit trees adorning the fence, its well-tended communal spaces and beautifully maintained compost bins, it had developed into our local tiny taste of paradise. As I'd hung over the fence watching my neighbours nurture their patches of glorious greens, I had dreamt of the time when I would be able to transcend my small inner-city garden and join them. I'd already lined up Jude to help me with plot preparation and plant advice whenever the Big Day finally arrived.

The email from the Community Garden Committee put an end to all that:
Stage 3 Water Restrictions are about to come into force. The Committee assures members that with watering permissible only two days a week, we will understand if plot-holders have to let their plots go.

'Go' - go where? I remembered all too well the garden's former unhallowed state, back when it was an irregular strip of weed-choked, abandoned, ex-railway land. The prospect of 'letting it go' was hard for me to contemplate. The gardeners faced a hellish choice – just like those Jude and Brien had been forced to make so regularly over the last seven years.

That evening, with the windows shut tight to give ourselves a break from the smoke, we sat around the TV watching the coverage of the bushfires. We saw a young volunteer fire fighter decline to be interviewed because he didn't have time to stop and talk, forgoing his fifteen minutes of fame. We watched in silence as red-eyed and grey-faced residents bunked down in country halls; although facing the loss of everything they owned, they remained unstinting in their efforts to help neighbours and wildlife. We marvelled at the heroism of farmers turned fire fighters, facing walls of flames. We saw all those qualities on which we once prided ourselves – selflessness, mateship, community spirit - but secretly fear we have lost. It made me wonder if it is not just water lore our country neighbours have to teach us.

After breakfast on Sunday, I started loading the car with the produce Jude and Brien always insisted I take back for the family. As usual, the centrepiece was an Esky half-full of free-range eggs, guaranteed to impart a buttery lemon hue to any pancakes. Suddenly, something struck me that I'd never considered before – how come the chickens were not only holding their own, but flourishing under such adverse conditions? I consulted Brien.

'There's something we have plenty of that they're very partial to,' he said, directing my attention to the dark green-leaved ground cover, which I then noticed was all over the place. 'Indigenous salt bush – the creeping berried variety. It grows here all year. Lots of the animals eat it, but the birds are crazy for it.' Brien would know; he is a Jaara Jaara man, and the farm is right in the middle of Jaara country, so he has 40,000 years experience behind him.

Thanking him for the bags of warrigal greens – another indigenous plant that

grows in profusion on the farm and substitutes well for spinach – I made my way back to the car.

Slamming the boot, I reached a decision. I was going to make some changes when I got home. For a start, I would go for broke and get a 2000-litre water tank. It was time I did my bit, and stopped using drinking water on the garden. And in the future, when the household eventually shrinks to two, the tank will be big enough to provide flush water for the toilet.

I was also going to re-think what I planted. Despite all the water I'd lavished on them over the last months, the hydrangeas in my front garden were still wilting. Next to them, the kangaroo paws were flourishing. So, despite what Mrs Stanley might think, I determined to give up on the imports and replant with natives.

After all, it wasn't the first time environmental challenges had forced me to transform behaviour that was dear to my heart. As a child, I remember being encouraged to burn at the beach early in summer to 'toughen my skin' for the long hot days ahead. As a teenager, I lay motionless for hours in the sun on the same sand, marinated in coconut oil, bar-be-queuing my fair skin in a vain attempt to look like a 'surfie chick'. Not long after, on holiday in Malaysia, I was amazed to see Indian women swimming in the sea totally covered in their saris, and then hurrying back to shelter under the pine trees beyond the sand.

In recent years, information about the hole in the ozone layer and the dangers of UV damage has been so compelling that it just seemed sensible to make a complete about-turn. Nowadays, I behave exactly like those Indian women, and I'm not alone. Australians routinely 'slip, slop, slap', wear hats, and

our young children swim and play as decorously covered as Edwardian ladies and gentlemen, while the iconic image of the sun-bronzed Aussie fades slowly into the past. If our whole beach culture, so integral to our national identity, could change so dramatically, perhaps our gardening culture could go the same way?

Before leaving the farm, I decided to pay a final visit to the ants. Sadly, their doorways were still wide open, and they were busily engaged in their customary activities - collecting food and building materials for their community. No doubt, if rain was imminent they would have dropped their daily chores and swung into preventative action. After all, ants have millions of years' experience of dealing with environmental hazards. They have learned that they cannot control nature; instead they have become expert at reading early warning signs and changing course rapidly and dramatically. The cooperative and collective nature of their responses maximises the chances of protecting their homes. They are, as a result, consummate survivors.