

BUSHLAND ESCAPE

Celebrating the subtle beauty of Australian natives, Christine Lister's garden is a place of reflection and quiet contemplation

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After struggling with the drought, author Christine Lister decided to work with the brutal landscape rather than against it, creating an Australian native oasis that can withstand the worst that the local climate throws at it. These little battlers are layered in a medley of colours and textures, from gumnuts {top left} and the fuzzy flowers of eucalypts {bottom right} to the tufted heads of grass trees {top right}. The indigenous flora is a lure for native birds, which Christine celebrates in a flock of quirky sculptures, such as this cheeky kookaburra {bottom left}. >



A place of regeneration that has its roots in humble beginnings, the glorious garden of author Christine Lister reflects her life journey. This native oasis bears scant resemblance to the tangle of weeds it once was in 1974, when Christine and her husband Rex purchased their small weatherboard house on a large, overgrown block. Then, two huge cypress trees bore down on the yard, while below, a spread of environmental weeds ran riot. Wandering Jew, ivy and honeysuckle choked the native species, while cans, rusting car body parts and even an upturned bath lay half-buried in the knee-high grass. Undeterred, the couple drew strength from a lone *Grevillea robusta*, which would preside over the couple's marriage ceremony a few years later.

Working together, Christine and Rex slowly set about reviving the neglected land. "We were a formidable team," says Christine. "Rex did much of the stump, tree, weed and rubbish removal and, later, the landscaping, while I was busy doing the planting and pruning, the dreaming and scheming."

By the early '80s, the garden had been regenerated as a bushland haven, but the couple's struggles were not yet at an end. As the drought wore on, the two cypress trees suffered, becoming increasingly unstable and dangerously shedding limbs. Beneath them, plants struggled in the dark, dry conditions, with precious little sunlight or rain penetrating the cypresses' dense canopies. By the end of 2000, all that remained were two stumps amid a sawdust wasteland.

The silver lining in all this drought and destruction? "It left a palette I revelled in," admits Christine, who set about planting blackwoods, banksias, callistemons, grevilleas, persoonias, correas and dianellas

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of varying heights and shapes, transforming the area into a thriving multi-storeyed habitat in gentle hues of dusty grey and soft green.

Tragedy struck a few years later with the death of Christine's husband, Rex. Christine sought solace in her garden, immersing herself in nature and busying herself by overhauling the space with new stone paving, rock landscaping, the installation of rainwater tanks, a grey-water treatment system and the creation of a new orchid house. She continued lovingly planting, pruning and planning, with a new focus on drought-resistant species.

Today, the garden is a very different place to the ravaged casualty of drought it once was. Banksias, callistemons, lomandras and dianellas spill over retaining walls while casuarinas, grafted gums, hakeas, persoonias, lilly pillies and correas vie for space in the landscaped rock beds.

Paved pathways meander through the garden below towering eucalypts. Orchid houses are filled with orchids and palms and, to the sound of water cascading gently into the fishpond, birds, possums and tiny creatures abound.

Drawing strength from the life cycle of her garden, Christine's patch of green now reflects her life philosophy: "I always loved my garden, but now being in it has a rapturous edge. I love the way it ebbs and flows," she says. "As I round each corner, there is always something that sets it apart, giving it a character of its own. Rocks and plants are intertwined, looking as if they had grown there naturally. The eye can wander as far as the mind." >

Christine's new book, *In the Garden of My Delights – Inspiration For the Heart and Soul*, is due for release in 2010.

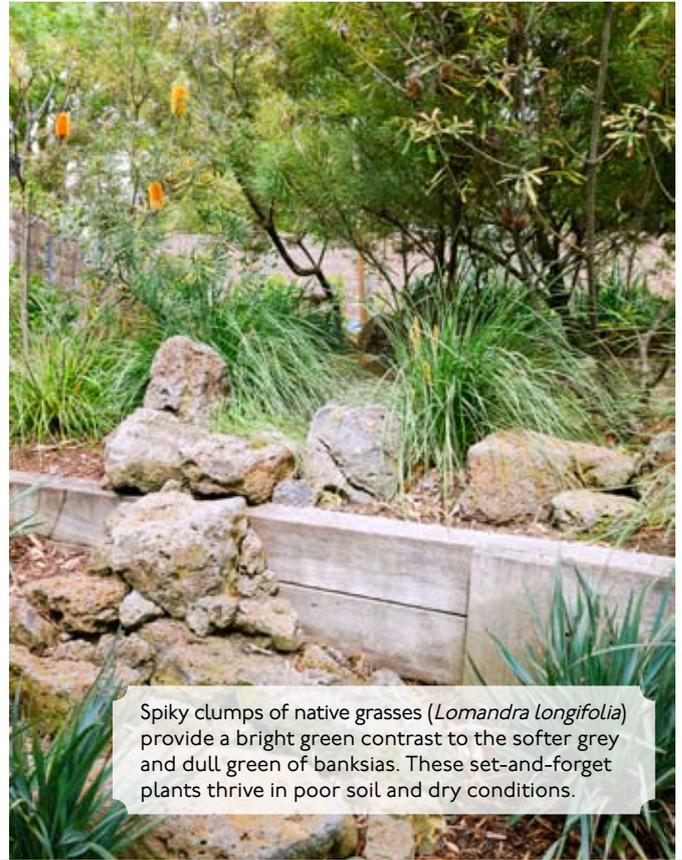
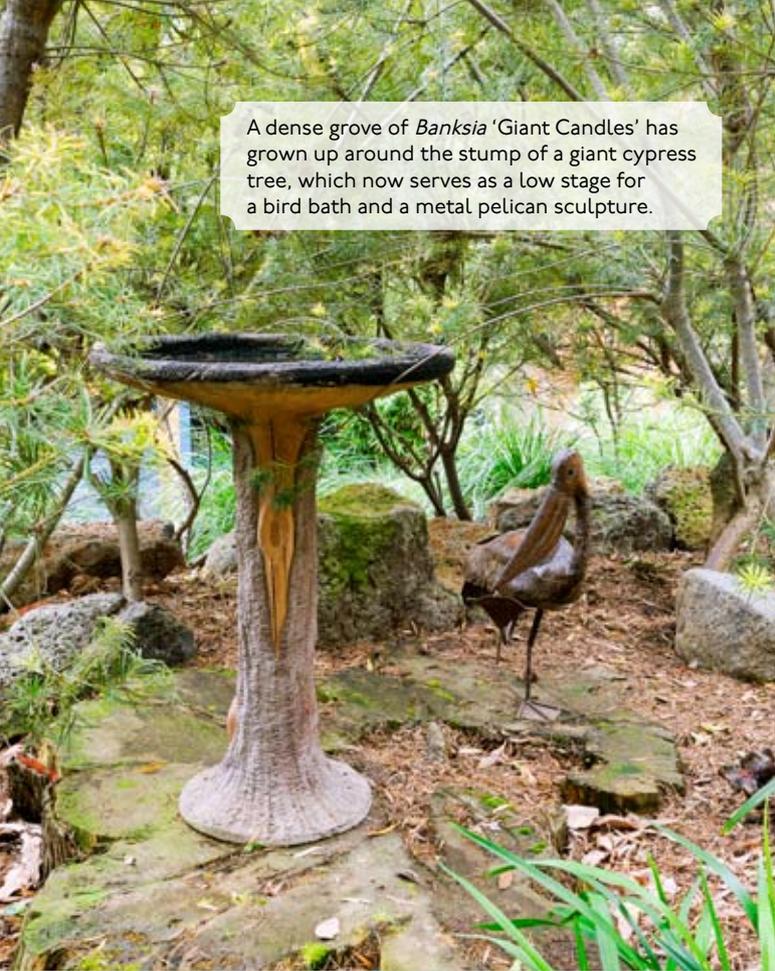


Above left: While Christine (pictured with Welsh terrier Kiki) has built her garden around natives, she has also planted a few drought-hardy exotics, including this *Protea repens x aristata* 'Venus' {top}. Azollas {above} thrive in a water feature, while ironbark {left} – viewed from a window seat set with comfy Carina Sherlock cushions – grows happily in the dry earth.



Elegantly curved bluestone paths wind around the property, embracing the rocky gardens and the hand-carved stone water feature (far right). Here, a crested crane sculpture stands among bushy clumps of flax lilly, next to an indigenous yellow box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*). Across the path, rock correa (*Correa glabra*), a Victorian native, thrives in its indigenous domain.

A dense grove of *Banksia* 'Giant Candles' has grown up around the stump of a giant cypress tree, which now serves as a low stage for a bird bath and a metal pelican sculpture.



Spiky clumps of native grasses (*Lomandra longifolia*) provide a bright green contrast to the softer grey and dull green of banksias. These set-and-forget plants thrive in poor soil and dry conditions.

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Stay local

Most nurseries have a native plants section these days, but the smartest gardeners have gone one step further and are choosing indigenous plants. While natives originate from somewhere in Australia, indigenous plants are natives that are specific to a local area and, depending on where you live, might include beautiful species such as the flannel flower, waratah or chocolate lily.

Since they're perfectly suited to the soils and climate in your garden, 'improving' your soil, or even extra watering once they are well established, is not an issue. Many indigenous plants provide habitat and food for local native bees, butterflies and small birds, so you'll attract and keep your area's wildlife, too. Some are even bush foods.

By growing these plants in their home regions, not only will you save on fertilisers, pesticides and water, but your soil may contain beneficial microbes, including fungi, that will keep them thriving.

Best of all, there's no need for you to be a plant specialist. Around the country there are many local councils providing cheap – sometimes free – indigenous plants as seed, tubestock, or in pots. Give yours a call, or talk to your local branch of the Australian Native Plants Society about sources, or visit their website at asgap.org.au. There are a number of groups who specialise in the plants of a particular area, such as the Victorian Indigenous Nurseries Co-operative (www.vinc.net.au). Botanic gardens are also excellent sources of plants and information. **166**

Christine's star plants



Eucalypts Gums will grow almost anywhere, adding drama with their gumnuts and long flowering periods.



Banksias Their erect brushes are a magnet for the 'nectar junkie' birds. Plant them in sunny spots.



Waratahs Prune this sturdy shrub back after flowering for a good display the following year.



Casuarinas With uniquely furrowed trunks, these hardy screening trees house birds and possums.



Orchids Native orchids need light, air, moisture and biannual feeding to ensure abundant flowering.