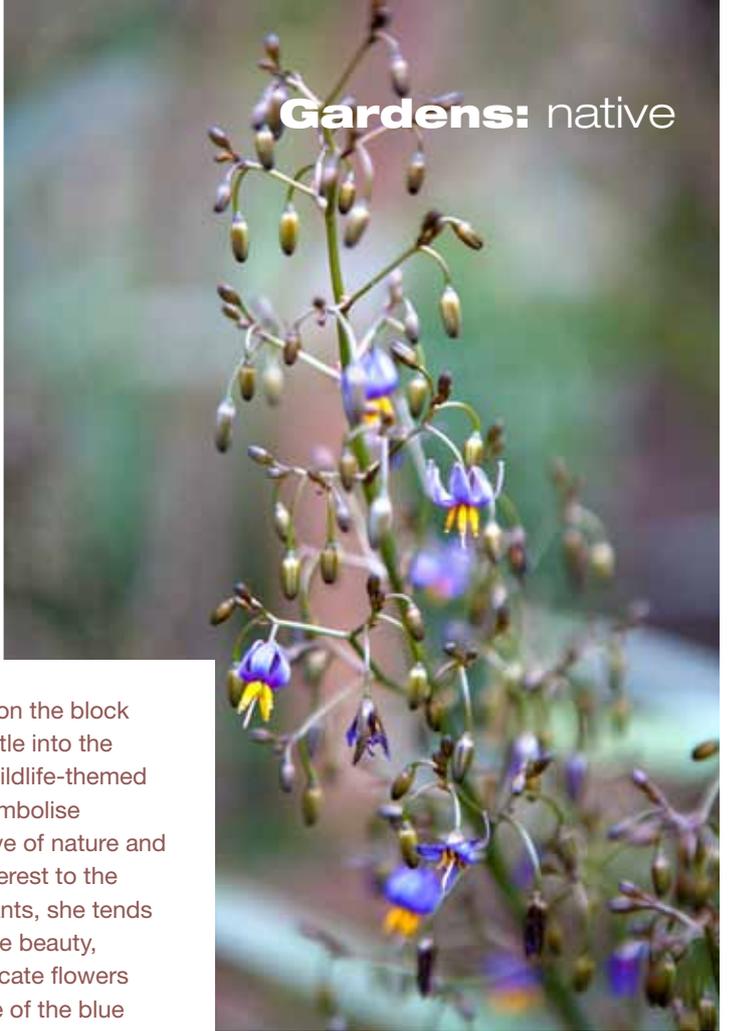


Author and naturalist Christine Lister knows a thing or two about native plants, growing more than 160 gum trees in her hideaway in the Melbourne suburb of Montmorency. Take a stroll through her garden for some local inspiration.

Story Deryn Thorpe Pictures Simon Griffiths



Both houses on the block (opposite) settle into the landscape. Wildlife-themed sculptures symbolise Christine's love of nature and add visual interest to the garden. In plants, she tends towards subtle beauty, favouring delicate flowers such as those of the blue *Dianella* (above right) and *Hakea macraeana* (below left) and plants which feed or shelter the birds.



Gardens: native

Ask her about her feelings for the bush and Christine will tell you that she feels an affinity for gum trees. So much so she grows 29 different species and thinks of them as the true elders of our country. She appreciates their graceful form, the variety of barks, the different sizes and shapes of the gumnuts and the delicate fringed blossom that attract birds and insects.

At her property tall gums ring the perimeter with smaller eucalypts planted close together in groups nearer the home to create a natural effect.

Twenty grafted gums, which have a long flowering period and more spectacular flowers than the species, have more prominent positions in the garden. They include the lovely 'Summer Red', which has been blooming on and off for nine months and has the added attraction of sculptural gum nuts.

Shadow of a drought

Since the long drought, she has chosen to revert to mostly native plants creating a garden of bright dappled shade. She loves plants with fine foliage, such as the Willow Needlewood (*Hakea macraeana*), and those with a multi-stemmed or irregular habit, such as the Snowy River wattle (*Acacia boormanii*) and the Zig zag wattle (*Acacia macradenia*).

How to design and maintain natives

When planting trees, Christine now avoids the larger growers preferring to plant copses of the lower growing, multi-trunked, mallee-style gums.

"I also prune the lower branches of the larger shrubs such as the hakeas, banksias and casuarinas," she says. "This allows your eye to be drawn into the garden so it can wander through the undergrowth." That undergrowth is made up of a wide variety of grass-like plants and correas which are long flowering and attract nectar-eating birds. There are many sorts but her favourite is the Chef's Cap Correa (*Correa baeuerlenii*) which has fuchsia-like flowers. In grass-like plants, she prefers those with fine leaves for the way they move, even in gentle breezes.

Most plants are pruned once a year after flowering to keep them bushy. They are watered at this time and fed with a native plant fertiliser and, like all good gardeners, Christine is prepared to remove plants that are not doing so well rather than nurse them through ill health. >



Christine, with Kiki, her beloved Welsh terrier, says gardens are "about hope, beauty and the future".

Why you should go native

Christine says, when planning your garden, you should go with local plants as they have "a different palette of colour, shapes and patterns to those of introduced plants".

She says many people discount gum trees because they are not as interesting as imports but argues, "Gum trees have a subtle beauty in their elegant array of trunks. Some look like old gnarled wood, others like the patterns have been painted on them."

Get the look for yourself

Ironbark (*Eucalyptus sideroxylon* 'Rosea') flowers from late autumn to spring with red, pink or cream flowers and a dark furrowed bark.

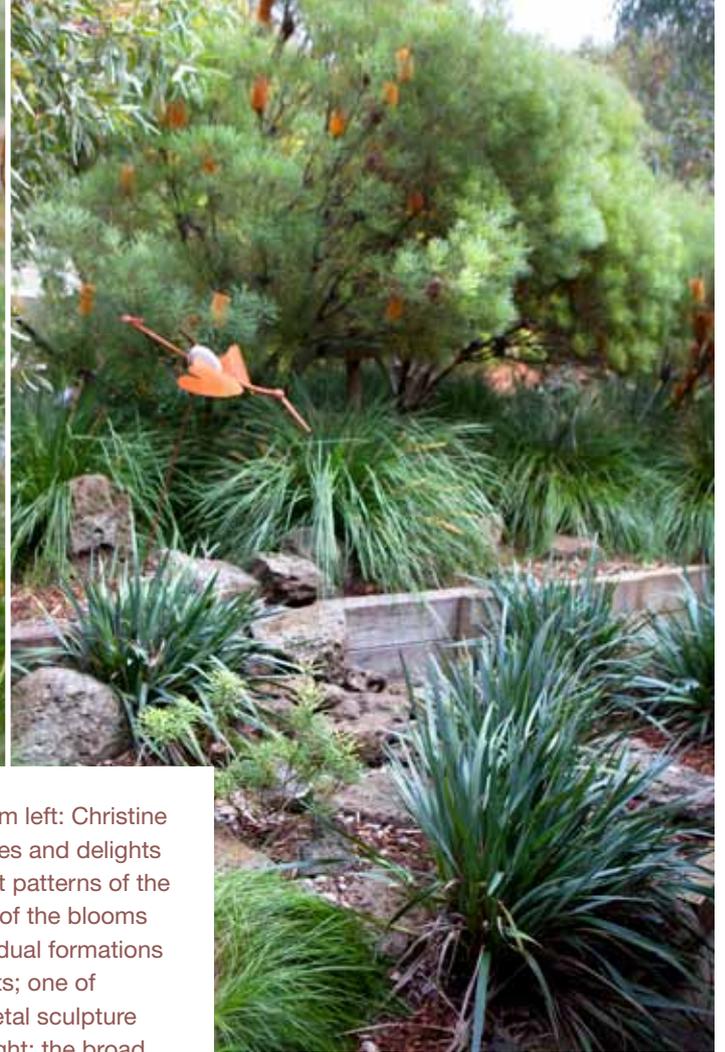
Geebung (*Persoonia piniifolia*) has fine foliage and yellow flowers followed by yellow flower spikes then edible fruit.

Rose she-oak (*Allocasuarina torulosa*) has needle-like foliage and a deeply fissured corky trunk.

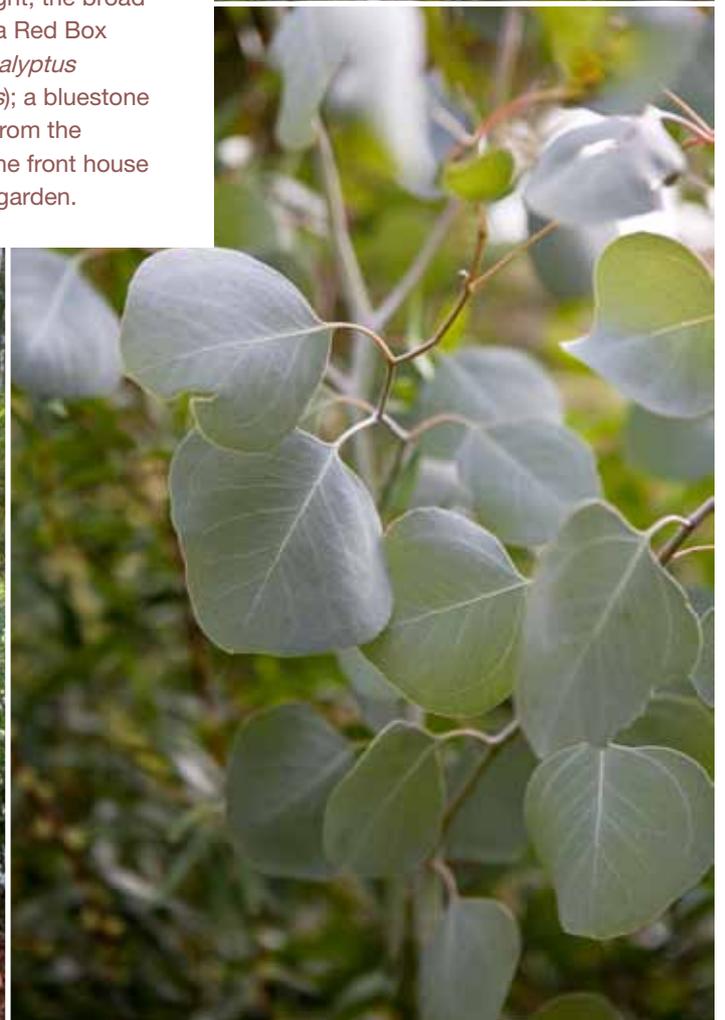
Grass tree (*Xanthorrhoea australis*) are quintessentially Australian and prized for their sculptural form.

Silky oak (*Grevillea robusta*) is a big tree that teams fern-like foliage with spectacular golden brushes in spring.

"Native gardens have a subtle beauty that touches my soul."



Clockwise from left: Christine loves gum trees and delights in the different patterns of the barks, colour of the blooms and the individual formations of the gumnuts; one of Christine's metal sculpture birds in full flight; the broad flat leaves of a Red Box eucalypt (*Eucalyptus polyanthemos*); a bluestone path leading from the verandah of the front house into the front garden.



Gardens: native

Precious metal

Shade houses and shaded areas feature lush ferns and orchids, which have been Christine's passion for more than 25 years. They are watered using two 3000-litre rainwater tanks beside the front home and two 5000-litre underground tanks near the rear house.

"I love the element of surprise and delight these areas bring along with the clivias, daffodils and freesias springing up at the feet of the native plants in spring," she says. There is also a collection of stag and elk ferns, belonging to her brother-in-law, which are suspended on a reo mesh wall.

"The other elements of surprise in the garden are my quirky metal sculptures – my garden friends. The older ones have names – Percy the Pelican, Onslow the Owl, Champagne and Charlie Crane and others, now too numerous to name, are just there to capture the imagination," she says with a smile.

Bringing birds to her paradise

Water is a key element in the garden for its ability to cool the space and attract wildlife and there are dozens of bird baths providing water for birds and insects.

Christine used to put out seed for the birds but found that it attracted big birds that kept smaller varieties away.

"So when I built the new house I put in lots of plants that have bird-attracting seeds and planted a dense middle storey for the mid-sized birds like honey eaters and spinebills," she says. "A friend living nearby bred frogs and he released some into the front pond and they come back each year to breed." ■

Strap-leaf plant suggestions

- *Dianella* 'Little Rev'
- *Dianella* *revoluta*
- *Dianella* *longifolia*
- *Lomandra* 'Nyalla'
- *Lomandra* *fluviatilis*
- *Lomandra* 'Tanika'
- *Lomandra* 'Seascape'
- *Lomandra* 'Cracker Jack'

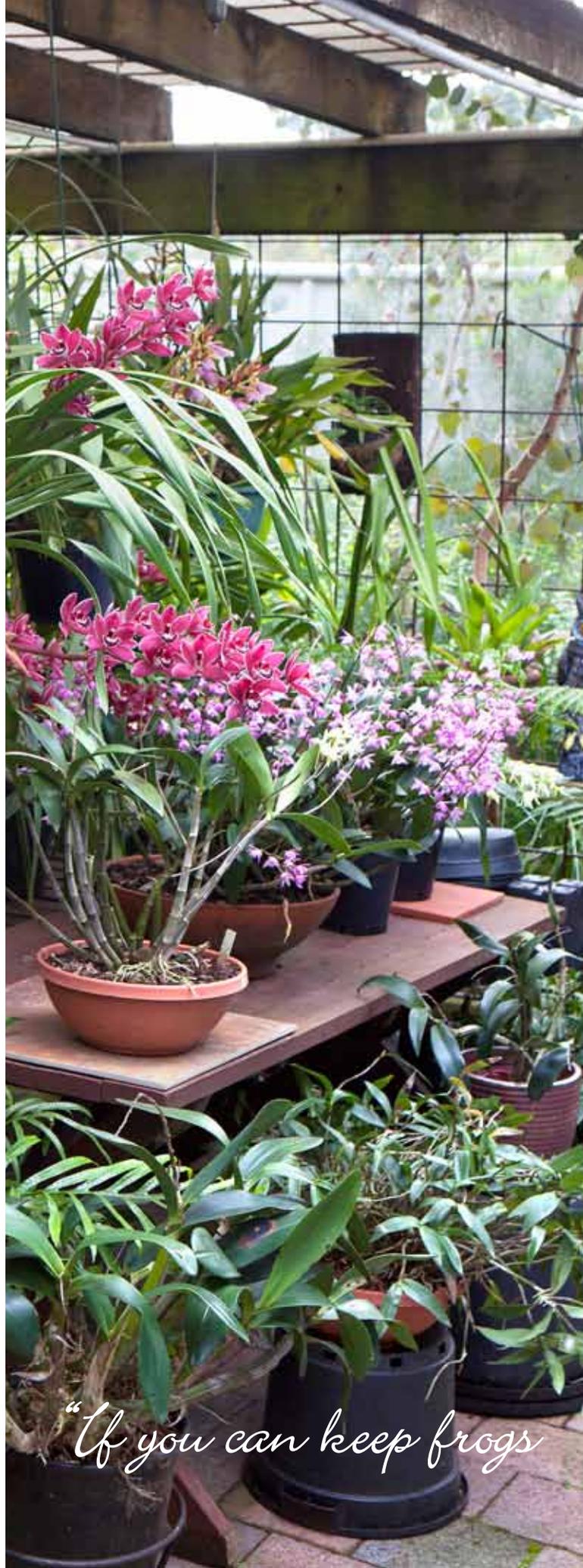
Christine's tips for Correas

- Rock Correa (*Correa glabra*)
- *C. pulchella alba*
- *C. backhouseana x reflexa* 'Marion's Marvel'
- Chef's Cap Correa (*C. baeuerlenii*)
- Mountain Correa (*C. lawrenceana*)

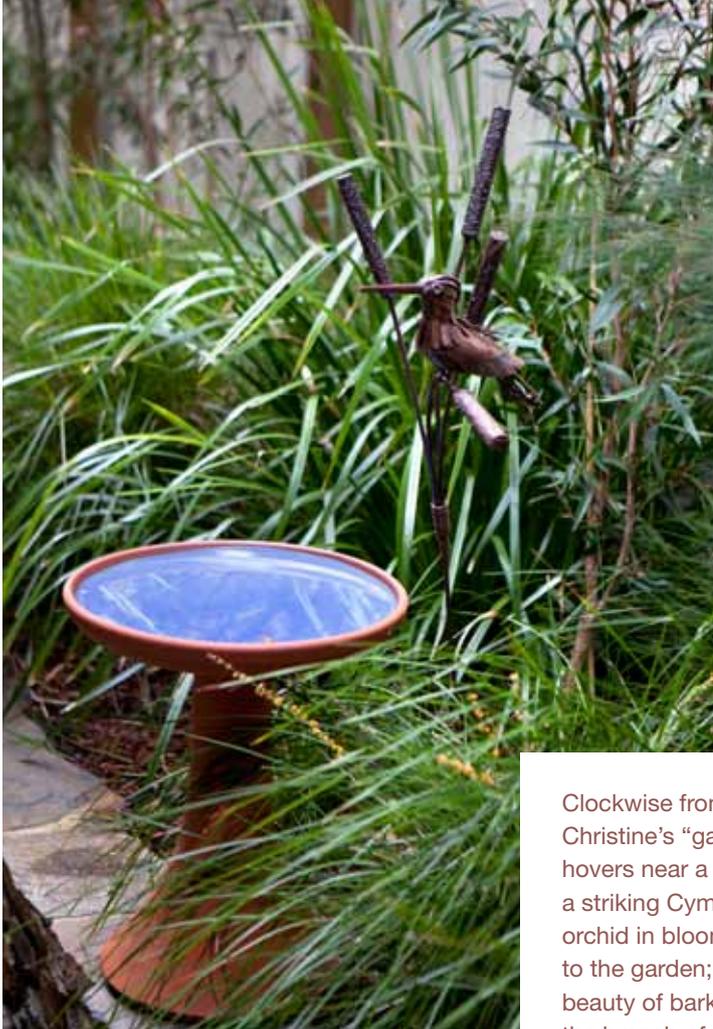
Photographs of Christine's garden are accompanied by inspirational quotes in her book

In the Garden of My Delights.

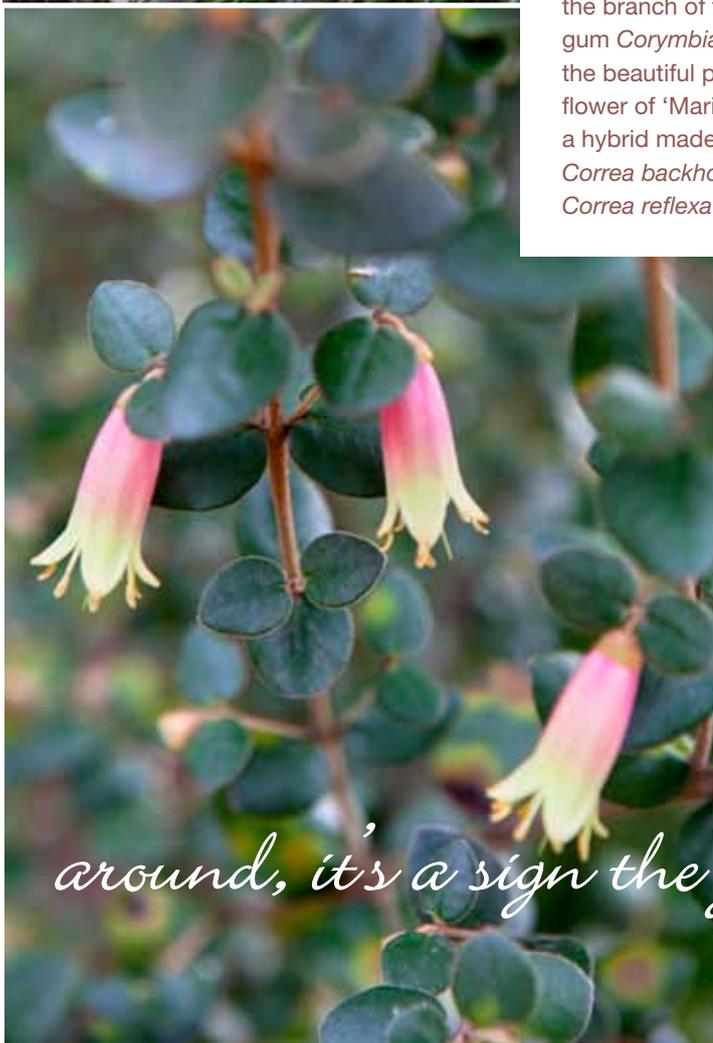
For a preview, visit her website, christinelister.com.au



"If you can keep frogs"



Clockwise from left: one of Christine's "garden friends" hovers near a bird bath; a striking Cymbidium, or boat orchid in bloom adds colour to the garden; the subtle beauty of bark curling on the branch of the flowering gum *Corymbia ficifolia*; the beautiful pendant flower of 'Marian's Marvel', a hybrid made from crossing *Correa backhouseana* and *Correa reflexa*.



around, it's a sign the garden is healthy."