

## **A Blended Garden**

A garden which blends native plants with exotic plants to create an harmonious whole. Thinking beyond the plants with which we are familiar. In the pretty end of horticulture, our palette of plants is slowly diminishing and often only noticeable over a period of time. The hardy shrubs of the 50's and 60's are rarely seen in nurseries now.

There are many new releases (usually variations of well known species), but TV gardening created a demand for particular plants, gardens suffer from fashion trends, and the end result can be quite a degree of uniformity. We are fortunate to live in the sub-tropics where because of our climate we can grow a wide range of plants and can afford to be adventurous.

There is clearly value in using endemic species (those native to the region) as they are already adapted to the soils and climate, but for the ornamental garden don't set the endemic bar too high. Locating smaller rainforest plants from this area and suited to the average garden isn't always easy. Rainforests are shady places so creating a rainforest garden with an understorey needs a bit of planning.

In sunny areas look for plants adapted to exposure. At least our broader region encompasses more than rainforest plants and we can look to the colourful wallum plants of the coast, particularly for spring colour, or to some of the understorey plants of our open eucalypt forests, like the purple flowering *Hovea acutifolia*.

By all means use free flowering small shrubs from the southern states or WA. Some do quite well in the red soils of the plateau but may not survive our humid summers as they evolved in an opposite rainfall pattern (wet winters and dry summers). Sensitive ones can be tried as potted colour. Use a good quality potting mix and a native blend fertilizer.

There is a wide range of native plants from which to choose, many of them at least reasonably local and many suited to blending into any garden so long as the soil is suitable.

### **Plant selection**

Avoid plants which set lots of seed or are very easily propagated vegetatively. This applies to natives as well as exotics. Leaves are really important. Plants are predominantly green most of the time.

Some examples:

Strappy foliaged plants blend well. Try day lilies with lomandra, agapanthus, crinum lilies, grass trees, dianellas (flax lilies), diplarrena (native iris), kangaroo paw. Choose your variety carefully to suit your soil type. All of these are happy with sunshine or filtered light but not too much shade. Diplarrena in particular may not flower in shade.

Society garlic, *Tulbaghia violacea*, can be blended with native iris, a temperate climate prostrate blue-foliaged kangaroo grass, *Lomandra multiflora* (unfortunately hard to find) and forest sedge. The linking theme in this case, apart from the narrow foliage and height, is flower colour – pink, blue and cream.

Rainforest understorey plants. Native and exotic cordylines are an obvious choice, add some crows nest ferns (*Asplenium*), the prickly rasp fern *Doodia aspera* as a spreading understorey (its young fronds are pink) or *Adiantum hispidulum*, rough maidenhair fern, also with pink new fronds. The little Walking Stick Palm (*Linospadix monostachya*) which grows to about 3m is worth looking for. Cycads, bromeliads, philodendrons and other well known foliage plants can all be grouped because of similarities. The more colourful cordylines can be used as a focal point. Glossy laurel, *Cryptocarya laevigata* is a very attractive large shrub worthy of any garden and with a bonus of round bright pink fruit popular with the birds. Its natural habitat is the rainforest understorey but it can also be grown on the rainforest edge where its habit will be more compact.

Fine foliage, narrow leaves. There are two major groups; the soft lacy group and the hard, low moisture loss types in which the bottlebrushes and many non-rainforest natives belong.

Soft lacy foliage. My favourite is a medium specimen tree, *Lepiderema pulchella*, fine-leaved tuckeroo. This would grace any garden other than one specializing in cacti. Its pinnate leaves have wavy margins with the new foliage a soft pink.

“Typical” Australian plants with tough leaves. These include bottlebrushes, banksias, pea flowers such as Hovea and Pultanaea and most of the wallum plants. They tend to look best grouped together and of course the water requirements are similar which makes maintenance easier (very little required). Tip-prune bottlebrushes to maintain shape and density. Banksias can be pruned quite heavily.

Shrubbery - an area you can really play with. A dwarf Penda with cream flowers from NQ is a very neat shrubbery plant and could potentially be blended with Ixora. Smooth psychotria, *Psychotria daphnoides*, has neat glossy leaves, small white/cream flowers and cream fruit for the birds. *Graptophyllum ilicifolium*, holly fuchsia, has hard glossy leaves and intense lipstick pink flowers in spring. Avoid excessive contrast. The purplish-pink flowers of *Syzygium wilsonii* next to the orange-red flowers of *Alloxylon flammeum* definitely clash.

Crotons (*Codiaeum spp.*) are very bold and lively. Blend the leaf types, possibly using *Pittosporum revolutum*, an upright shrub to 3m but it can be trimmed to keep it in scale.

Pachystachys and NQ or brown gardenia (*Atractocarpus fitzalanii*) could be tried together. Tibouchinas and Melastomas are closely related and therefore blend.

There are cultivars and selections of a number of our locals. Many of the named varieties of lillypilly have been selected from the ubiquitous *Syzygium australe* and to a slightly lesser extent *S. luehmannii*.

Lemon aspen *Acronychia oblongifolia* has glossy leaves and masses of creamy fruit – another small to medium tree for most gardens. It could go in the background to the shrubbery along with syzygiums and sasanqua camellias.

Cottage garden – more of a challenge in this region but definitely worth the experiment. I've seen excellent examples in Melbourne using natives only. There's a range of native daises to choose from which provide the required colour mass; kangaroo paws are good. Our natives tend to have individually small flowers which can be lost amongst the large flowered exotic hybrids so choose the exotics carefully.

Hanging baskets and display pots. These are useful when your soil is totally unsuited to certain plants or you want something which flowers profusely in a high profile area.

*Scaevola aemula* and its cultivars give the most dense leaf cover and lots and lots of small fan-shaped blue flowers.

*Hibbertia aspera* and others have masses of bright yellow and moderately large flowers in spring and summer.

*Lobelia trigonocaulis*, forest lobelia, for its flower spikes and *L. alata* if you want really long trailing stems. The flowers are smaller and paler.

Pimelia, rice flower, from NSW, is a mass of white flowers and for me is best in a good potting mix, hence the well drained hanging basket.

Davidson Plum is a really good pot plant and the upright form of *Phebalium woombye* is looking promising.

Ispogon, drumsticks, from NSW has done very well and the local *Petrophile shirleyi* is another possibility. It's worth experimenting

Climbers. Many of our less invasive climbers like *Pandorea jasminoides* and all its selections are of course native or at least derivatives but on the reverse, try a Hoya on one of the more open native trees. A *Hoya carnos* planted against a sandpaper fig, *Ficus fraseri*, climbed up and produces long trails of pink flowers over a long period in spring with sometimes a secondary flowering in autumn. The local white flowered Hoya isn't quite so spectacular. The general collection in this area is tree with Hoya and staghorn, *Platycerium superbum*, maidenhair fern, native violets spreading into what's left of the grass, *Adiantum hispidulum*, the really tough maidenhair, and a couple of taller ferns. As it's a shady area some Tillandsias and orchids have been attached to an adjacent wire mesh screen, the completely prostrate and mat forming *Lobelia membranacea* has arrived of its own accord and a few Aspleniums complete the picture. This is a favourite part of the garden and very low maintenance.

This is only a small selection of what might be added to the ornamental garden but the key in a successful blend is really the type of foliage. This of course assumes that the plants selected will need a similar soil pH, have similar water requirements, and similar drainage needs. Flowers are a bonus and because there's diversity, there'll be likely to be at least some colour at many times of the year.