

GARDENING



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Crafted by nature

Inspired by William Morris, a Melbourne couple have created a garden unified by diversity.



Changing palette: Sandra McMahon in her Kilsyth garden; and (above) *Rosa Tamora*, one of more than 30 types of roses in her garden.

PHOTOS: ANU KUMAR

William Morris died more than a century ago but Melbourne garden designer Sandra McMahon has recently gone crazy for the man. Her architect partner, Warwick Sheffield, is similarly smitten with this English all-rounder (poet, social reformer, environmentalist, educationalist) who interwove art and life and is now most famous for his wallpapers.

Not so long ago the couple made a trek to the "Red House" that Morris fashioned for himself and his wife in an orchard in Kent and then to other English Arts and Crafts haunts brimming with Morris touches as well.

And now in the outer Melbourne suburb of Kilsyth they have set about creating some Morris touches of their own. In 2008 McMahon and Sheffield bought an unremarkable 1950s weatherboard house on a 2000-square-metre block and began adapting the Arts and Crafts ethos to the locale. He took charge of the house and she the garden; what they have produced is unrecognisable from what they acquired.

Moreover, true to the spirit of the Arts and Crafts (and to Edna Walling whose Bickleigh Vale village is not far away), the place feels as if it has naturally evolved like this. The massive boulders introduced to the garden and reclaimed timber framework applied to the house are entirely at one here. The couple has even left loose a new timber section of the gravel driveway so that it makes a "worn"

clunking sound as you drive over it.

For all its easy, intimate homeliness, this place is as carefully devised as a Renaissance parterre. The emphasis is on natural materials, fine craftsmanship and an easy flow between house and garden. Like that of the Red House, McMahon's garden is all spaces within spaces – an informal succession of rooms.

It is one of 28 gardens – from Camberwell to Northcote to the Mornington Peninsula – open this weekend as part of Rotary's biennial Garden DesignFest.

While McMahon's garden alone could be described as a multitude of gardens (Australian plants at the front, a Japanese landscape to the side, a billabong at the back, a rose garden, a woodland, perennial beds, a vegetable plot, an orchard, a fernery) there is a sense of unity nonetheless.

It's partly to do with the palette – generous sweeps of yellow, blue-mauves and dark burgundy flowers – but also to do with form, texture and transition zones. For, despite the myriad themes, there are no sudden shifts in mood: the 30-metre-long native front garden (a moonah, snowgums, wattles, willow grasses, clipped shrubs, loose wildflowers) casually segues into Japanese maples and Thuja, partly thanks to a cluster of *Allocasuarina torulosa*, which McMahon says she has always found "slightly reminiscent" of Japanese black pine.

It's the same time and again in this garden: it's always the plants themselves (a mature elm or a Teucrium hedge or a sweep of prairie plants and grasses, say) that prevent jarring between "rooms".

With such a broad plant palette (there are more than 30 types of roses alone) McMahon says it's her most ambitious garden to date. While the property had what she terms "a very heavy clay", she has steadily amended it by adding organic material, gypsum and mulch. In the front garden where drainage was particularly problematic she and Warwick created a pebble "stream" that directs excess water to the backyard billabong dug at the lowest point on the block.

Some plants that require good drainage – *Actinotus helianthi*, for instance – are kept in pots. Not just any pots mind, but carefully chosen handmade-looking ceramic ones that tie in with the newly constructed front porch. Craftsmanship is everything here. When they wanted a pergola over which to train a fruiting grape they bought a hand-forged iron one from designer Neil Tait in Castlemaine.

And when they wanted curtains for inside, they got them made in a fabric by William Morris.

Sandra McMahon and Warwick Sheffield's garden is at 73 Pascoe Avenue, Kilsyth. It is open from 10am to 5pm today and tomorrow as part of the Garden DesignFest. Festival tickets can be purchased (at each garden gate) to cover all gardens or for individual gardens. Go to gardendesignfest.com.au for more information.

PLOT LINES

BOOK

Like Sandra McMahon (see main story), the late Stuart Rattle was a proponent of the garden-as-series-of-rooms school. And this week Paul Bangay launched a book detailing precisely how the interior designer went about it at his property Musk Farm. He took "lines from the architecture" of the one-time Musk State School and broke the property up into sections (think summer garden, chestnut lawn, woodlands...), all defined by plantings of English box, viburnum and privet. *Stuart Rattle's Musk Farm* has a foreword by Bangay, photography by Earl Carter and Simon Griffiths, and text by Annemarie Kiely. It is published by Lantern, \$39.99.



WORKSHOP

Plant and insect relationships come under the microscope at an all-day workshop at Cranbourne's Australian Garden next Sunday. A diverse lineup of presenters will discuss issues of mutual need, mimicry and the propagation and cultivation of insect-reliant plants. The event is organised by the Friends of the Royal Botanic Garden Cranbourne. For more information or a booking form, email rgelliot@optusnet.com.au or phone 8774 2483. Bookings close on Monday.

OPEN GARDENS

Though grass-fed, free-range egg production is the central feature of Wild Hen Farm in the Myrree Valley in north-east Victoria, the property is also home to a large garden that seamlessly blends into its rural setting. As well as an assortment of trees and shrubs, there are stone-wall-surrounded vegetable beds and a Gothic-inspired cage to keep the birds off espaliered fruit trees, berries and tropical species. It is open from 10am to 5.30pm today and tomorrow, at 165 Redcamp Lane, Myrree. There will be talks on egg production at 11am and 2.30pm each day. Gardens in Mount Martha, Narbethong, Malmsbury and Camperdown are also open this weekend. opengarden.org.au