

# Gardening down under

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In November 2009 my husband and I spent 6 weeks with our son and wife and new grand-daughter in New South Wales, Australia. Apart from re-wiring the house and painting soffits I spent most of my time in the garden weeding and re-vamping.

They live in a small fishing village called Brooklyn on the edge of the Hawkesbury River, so the soil was pure sand. The back garden had been laid out and some plants such as tree ferns and ferns had been planted, as well as the golden cane palm *Dyopsis lutescens*, *Liriope muscari* and a the Swiss cheese plant grown indoors here. There was an area set aside for vegetables but little soil in it.

My first task was to move the wood pile to uncover the rich soil underneath, taking care not to encounter the red back spiders and red belly black snake. (Buster the dog had killed one just before we arrived). We then moved the soil across the garden to make a vegetable patch where I sowed French beans, sweet corn and courgettes - zucchini as they are known there. I also bought some herbs from the local market, a good hour away but that's nothing in Australia.

Five years later I returned to visit, this time for 3 months, sadly without my husband. The garden hadn't improved much - there was a new raised bed down the side for vegetables, but apart from a chilli plant and some strawberries not a lot going on. The back garden bed was full with a beautiful ginger (*Hedychium coronarium*) in full flower, a ponytail palm and the monster Swiss cheese plant as well as ground cover fern-like plants which seemed to have taken over. The grass trees had died but there was a walking iris (*Neomanca gracilis*).

Once more I set to work with a vengeance, despite the hot sun and spectacular rainstorms. I flattened the area which had once housed the wood pile, aided by the chickens who loved the fat grubs and many insects. Then my son and I built the retaining wall with railway sleepers and, aided by my daughter-in-law, we filled the area with shredded eucalyptus (bought in). I built a raised bed at the side and planted lettuce, raspberry bushes, carrots and with a little help from the children (5 and 3) scattered flower seeds. All had to be protected by netting from the chickens and their friends the bush turkeys. I also planted purple-podded

runner beans, climbing spinach, a goji berry plant, a hot chilli and various herbs in the side raised bed.

The grass was a real challenge as there were several citrus fruit trees which were covered in large orange-coloured shield beetles that sprayed an awful smell if you went past. There were also large spiders' webs between the trees, so not for the faint-hearted. The family rarely attempted to go down to the bottom of the garden! After much negotiation the trees came down (luckily I had bought them a shredder for Christmas) and I tackled the very back of the garden, putting in another bed and planting a banana plant, bougainvillea, a blue ginger and butterfly ginger, a ponytail palm, a saba nut tree, an heliconia and another golden cane palm.

My son and I divided - well, sliced off - a part of the gigantic bird of paradise and transferred it to the front where it still survives. I also planted a dwarf buddleia, rosemary plants, and a dwarf slow growing bamboo, and attempted some pinks, but the dryness and chickens saw them off. There were already two camellias, a peach tree, a papaya tree and a vicious palm tree with long spikes. My granddaughter, son and I all fell victim to its spikes.

I ran out of time, but the joy of seeing my grandchildren's delight at the new grass and the seeds that came up and their fun playing with scooters and bikes on the pile of soil dumped on the front drive made it all worthwhile. It was looking good when I left in February, but I await photos of the results. I think the saba nut tree has gone, despite the reassurances that it had survived the most inhospitable conditions. Maybe I should have gone for the peanut butter tree after all...

*Anne gardens in Surrey - and Australia!*

