

The Witches Garden

It was 1983, just days before our wedding, when I realised that after next Saturday, I would be living in a caravan travelling from farm to farm as the wife of a laser leveller doing irrigation layouts in the Upper Murray. I was just out of Art School and wanted a studio to paint in, a place to set up my easel, spread out my paints and get to work on my ambition to become a famous landscape artist. A mobile life in a caravan would not do.

The only house for sale in the area was way up the top end of the Mitta Valley and it was not an exciting looking place. Early 1950's double front farmhouse which sat alone in the middle of an empty paddock. There was no garden, no trees, and the chain mesh fence was so close, we joked it would cut down house work as the cows could lick the windows clean. But I was not interested in gardens, only in a house that did not have wheels. I was full of optimism looking forward to life with my wonderful man, raising babies with one hand, paintbrush in the other.

Now of course, my mother warned me not to mix children with a career, "You just won't have the time." But what did she know, I was 23 and nothing could stop my plans and so, one by one, the babies began to arrive

One day we were visiting Aunty Lily who lived beside an orchard near Shepparton. Aunty Lily's garden sprawled around her old farm house, a crazy mixture of fruit trees, roses and hardy geraniums.

"Tell me about the plants in your garden," she asked over tea.

A baby on my lap I replied, "There's not much, a row of poplars out the back and an old crepe myrtle."

No fruit trees?

Nope.

Aunty Lily smiled "Then this will be a welcome gift." and she handed me a lemon tree in a pot.

"But I don't know anything about gardening," I protested.

"Gardening is just like landscape painting, but in 3D," she smiled

I shook my head, “I’m not interested in gardening. I want to paint and there’s barely enough time for that.”

“Then plant it for other people, plant it for the future,” and she sipped her tea with a wise twinkle in her eyes.

Duly chastised, I took the lemon tree home, popped it in the ground and gave it no more thought. I was 26 and wanted to be painting not planting!

However, at 29 there were 3 children and sadly I began to realise there was truth in my mother’s words. These precious ones who gave so much joy did not understand I needed to paint. I became frustrated, there were never enough hours in the day. Then the catalyst came when a knock at the door and a hairy faced fellow handed me one of my children who he’d found wandering the road. The child was covered in red paint and I checked my studio and found the source, an empty tube lay on the floor; its contents spread on every surface. My little boy knew he’d done something wrong so he’d run away. I realised my ambition would be at the expense of my children. With a heavy heart I packed away the paints and went out with the children to play under the lemon tree.

The hurt of failed ambition is a bitter thing but I knew if I persisted then I risked growing to resent my children and since I had chosen to bring them into the world, I had to make the best job of it I could. The paints could wait. I was only 30.

Now, the soil of the Mitta Valley is so good Auntie Lily’s lemon tree thrived in spite of my lack of care. Over the years we’d accumulated a few plants and everything grew with vigour, which is not surprising as, according to the locals, “the soil is so good you can plant a feather and grow a chook.”

With the painting career on hold I needed to channel my creative energy into something that included my children. But it had to be outside as being in the house reminded me of my lonely paints on top of the wardrobe. One sunny day, while playing with the children, I remembered the beautiful garden created by Monet. He had started with a bare paddock and that realisation sowed a vigorous seed.

What if I created a garden like Monet? A beautiful garden that one day I could sit in and paint. It would take years, but that was ok, my children were tiny, the garden and my dreams could all grow together. So, at 31 I drew up plans then mowed the calf paddock and laid out hose and imagined the flowing curves of garden beds. At present it was flat and bare but in my head I could see established trees, lush green lawns, flower beds alive with colour and a water lily covered lake with a Monet bridge. But I had barriers to overcome, one was the chain mesh fence that surrounded the house, the other, I needed assistance. I needed to talk to Lew.

Now I have not spoken much about Lew, the fear being if I start I may not stop. He is the most wonderful man in the world. He is kind and clever and best of all has large earth moving equipment including an excavator. I needed him on board and lucky for me he is a man who knows it saves time to say 'yes' the first time.

Easter 1991 was wet, not ideal for earthworks but it was now or never. It took three days to complete. The sunken garden was as wide as the turning circle of the tractor, the excavated earth was brought up to make the hill that would one day have a waterfall and would double as screen between the house and road. The lake was broad and shallow, perfect for water-lillies and at the far end it narrowed to where one day, Monet's bridge would span. The entire paddock was remodelled in different levels and the neighbours drove past wondering what we were doing. "Making a BMX track" according to one and "ruining a good calf paddock" said another. But I wasn't bothered, I was too busy raking smooth the tracks in the mud from the heavy equipment.

Of course, I had no budget for my garden so all labour was my own and plants came from cuttings from other people's gardens. I also took pieces from anything interesting growing on the roadside, but this caused problems. I knew nothing about what my cuttings would grow into. Ignorance is blissfully kind when embarking on a new venture. If we knew the trials to come would we ever take the first step? I remember planting wandering jew and periwinkle and ivy as ground covers because I was eager

to see garden beds filled. My stupidity knew no bounds and I even planted tube stock of trees one meter apart, they were so small and I was so eager to see progress.

Back in those days I understood design and composition but knew nothing about actual gardening so my mistakes were many. On the plus side I had time, I now had 4 kids to keep amused and I was only 34.

I got myself back in shape after childbirth by using a push mower, four acres to be mowed, just do a bit at a time each day, knees aching, sweat rolling across my brow but the children were happy, they rode bikes around the garden as if it really was a BMX track and when it rained they made mud forts and threw muddy clods at each other in the bottom of what would one day be Monet's beautiful water lily pond.

One day while down beside the Mitta river which runs through the bottom of the garden I picked a bunch of pretty wild flowers and put them in a vase on the kitchen table. A neighbour called in and scolded me for being such a dill. "Those are hemlock flowers and there's enough there to kill your whole family."

Surely they were exaggerating? So I got a book from the mobile library and discovered, to my horror there were some very dangerous plants out there. Did you know hemlock was the official form of execution in ancient Greece? That was how Socrates was put to death, drinking poisoned wine. I was hooked, this was fascinating stuff!

I began researching every plant in the garden to see how they were used in history. I wanted to know if they were food, medicine or poison. I went to bed reading books by ancient physicians. I learned aspirin comes from *salix alba*, the white willow, the juice of mashed stinging nettles staunches blood flow, the leaves of *datura stramonium*, the plant farmers wrongly call castor oil plant were once sold in chemist shops to treat asthma, the root of hellebore was used to treat depression but it's ingestion can be fatal. I thought of drawing the plants in our garden and creating a book but there just was never enough hours in the day, there was so much to learn and so much to do and I was loving every minute!

The years passed so happily, soon I was 40 and the garden and kids were growing, as were the weeds. Life was great but Lew had begun to get migraines and taking days off work when you are self-employed is not a good thing. I knew the leaves of feverfew daisies were said to stop migraines so I convinced him to give it a go. After three weeks of eating a leaf per day the migraines were gone and never returned.

Lew now loved the garden as much as me and started building structures such as Monet's bridge which he welded in place using a borrowed generator for power. Then came the day when the Open Garden Scheme called in. "Would you consider opening your garden to the public?"

Wow! Such a thrill to find other people also loved our garden but we had to come up with a name and we felt it had to be something that spoke of the wonderful history of plants.

The word 'witch' means wise woman and while I certainly can't claim that mantle you could fill a medicine bag after a quick stroll through the flower beds. Thus, The Witches Garden was born. To complete the look, Lew built a life-sized medieval witch's cottage and we fitted it out so the inside looked as though a witch actually lived there. Our kids loved it and so did visitors. All were impressed by Lew's structures, so much so that one dear old lady asked Lew, "Are you responsible for all the erections in your garden?" In good form he replied, "I'd like to think so."

At 41, I think I must have been out of my mind because I decided to plant a hedge maze. I thought it would be fun for the kids to play in and it was, but twice a year it needs clipping and there's half a kilometre of the dam thing. Like everything else it grew fabulously and by the time our eldest turned 21 the middle of the maze was chosen as base for a massive game of capture the flag. Guests divided into two teams Red team owned the maze and Blue tried to keep Monet's bridge, it was summer and everyone was armed with water pistols.

By the time I turned 44 my father, a retired farmer would visit and help with weeding by chopping into the earth with his shovel, slicing bulbs and digging out plants he thought were weeds. Horror struck, I would wait till he wasn't looking then pull them from his pile and replant with tender care. One day

mum called to say dad had been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He had to return in three weeks for another scan because at 84 they needed to see how quickly it was growing to decide how to treat him, if at all. I searched my books and found reference to violets being beneficial for mouth, throat and stomach cancer. I raced down to Euroa and coaxed him to drink violet leaf tea. He went back to the oncologist and his second scan showed the tumour was gone. Who can say if a simple tea worked, but both of us loved violets from that day forwards.

Then came the delightful day our daughter was married in the garden. I was 53 and so proud of my beautiful girl. I think of her growing up, playing mud forts in the empty lake, making potions in the witch's cottage and sitting for hours in the trees with sunflower seeds in her hand hoping to tame the brilliantly coloured king parrots; so many wonderful memories, I am so lucky.

One by one the children left home, bedrooms emptied, the house echoed and I turned to the garden and the beauty of its seasons to console me.

I turned 56 and realised I had time to paint but I also had a massive garden which, like a child needed constant care. Visitors would call on weekends to see the garden, word had spread, we even had bookings for weddings. My dad was gone, passed away peacefully at 91. Who would help me?

Then I discovered Helpx, an online site that put back-packers in touch with hosts. This scheme was ideal. They work 5 hours per day, in exchange we give meals and accommodation.

Laughter returned to the house, meal times are a jolly mix of every nationality's food. The house is alive again and the weeds are under control, I can finally paint.

I am up in my studio and below floats sounds of laughter and happy chatter in many different accents, someone has picked up a guitar and is strumming gently. I think to myself that being famous is not as important as I thought it was, being happy in the moment is what matters.

I am nearly 60 and it's a beautiful night in The Witches Garden. Silvery moonlight casts shadows all around. The osmanthus is flowering, I know because scented clouds of daphne-sweet citrus waft through the garden. I stand amidst the forest of magnificent trees each of which I know by name, they

are also my children, I planted each one. I look up and see their branches reaching for the stars. I have in my hands a Lemon tree, tomorrow I will give it to my daughter. If she complains she has no time, I will remind her to plant it for others, plant it for the future.