



*A Yarra Valley
marvel with
deeply nostalgic
roots*

GARDENS

FLOWERING INDOOR PLANTS / GREEN THUMB / CLIPPINGS

EARTH MOTHER

A powerful connection to the local landscape and memories of his late mother led Mark Fenech to build a veritable garden of wonders in Victoria's Yarra Valley.

STORY ELIZABETH WILSON / PHOTOGRAPHY ANNETTE O'BRIEN

The timber pathways, made from planks of river red gum, have significant meaning for Mark. "My mother was disabled so I made the paths flat and wide to make the garden accessible. The paths also look a little like train tracks, which is a nod to the fact that my mum was a trainspotter. As kids, we were always hopping in the car and racing the train to the end." The windmill is used to pump the pond water to prevent it from stagnating. "I'm a bit nostalgic about windmills because I grew up climbing all over them as a child," he says.



For passionate gardeners, creating a garden is an affair of the heart. It's about building a place that thrums with meaning and memories. It's where you can connect with nature; where your spirits are lifted as you watch plants bloom, blush and grow throughout the seasons.

This has been the case for Mark Fenech, who began planting this patch in Victoria's picturesque Yarra Valley as a novice gardener and quickly found it to be a nourishing project that connected him to people past and present.

As soon as he purchased his unique home in 2011 (see the story on page 110), it was clear that this property deserved a special garden.

All the space immediately surrounding the old Masonic Hall had been used as a car park; cleared and covered with gravel. It was a clean slate. Mark wanted to create a garden of intriguing textures and forms, one that would offer interesting vistas when viewed from the house.

From the outset, he envisaged a garden of native plants. "The garden is dedicated to my late mother, Suzanne," he says. "She loved natives and was an extraordinary illustrator. Her botanical drawings were what led me to my fascination with plants. I felt as though I reconnected with her by creating this garden."

The 0.2ha property, nestled at the base of surrounding hills, extends over two levels. The lower level, bordered by Four Mile Creek, is largely natural bush including mountain ash and tree ferns. It's the upper level, pictured on these pages, where the greatest transformation has occurred. Mark began by planting trees selected for their beautiful shapes: dwarf snow gums (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*), dwarf lemon-scented gums (*Corymbia citriodora*), flowering gums, firewheel trees (*Stenocarpus sinuatus*), silky oak (*Grevillea robusta*) and an Illawarra flame tree (*Brachychiton acerifolius*). They are planted in pivotal positions to create height and colour throughout the garden. ►

'I felt as though I reconnected with my mother by creating this garden.' Mark Fenech

ABOVE / PupPup, an Irish wolfhound-bull arab cross, noses into a bungalow Mark has transformed into guest accommodation. Run-off from the roof is captured in the rainwater tanks, which feed the ponds.
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT / Meandering timber paths. *Leucadendron* 'Sundance'. A grass tree in flower. Native wisteria (*Hardenbergia violacea*).





‘When the grass trees are in flower, their stems are covered in thousands of little ochre eyelashes and during the day hundreds of butterflies and bees hang around.’ Mark

◀ For Mark, a former illustrator, graphic artist and photographer, it was important to place the solid forms first, followed by the grass trees. “Their gnarly, charcoal bodies look stunning next to the white trunks of the snow gums,” he says. Contrasting foliage was important, too, and he has achieved this by including *Acacia cognata* ‘Lime Magik’ with its pendulous foliage in lime-green, *Gymea* lilies with their majestic spikes and spires and *Leucadendron* ‘Sundance’, a South African native. Groundcovers include kangaroo paw, dwarf banksias, tufts of native grasses and moss-like clumps of *Scleranthus biflorus*. “Different plants come to the fore at different times of the year,” says Mark. “When the grass trees are in flower, their stems are covered in thousands of little ochre eyelashes and during the day hundreds of butterflies and bees hang around them. It’s quite a celebration.”

To complement the bush palette of silvery greens, Mark used earthy weathered timbers, river pebbles and bluestone boulders. Reclaimed railway sleepers have been used to create a chunky picket fence around the perimeter.

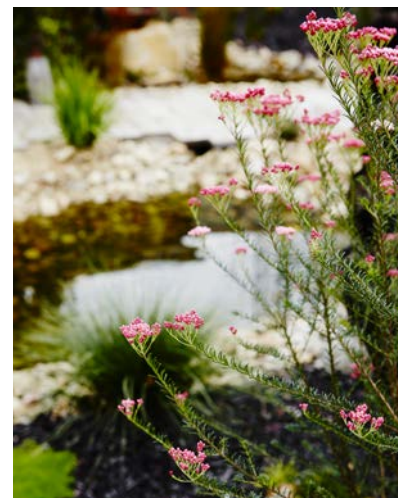
There is a series of three ponds in the gently sloping garden, fed by a water tank. A windmill is used to pump water from the bottom pond.

Mark planted his garden in the aftermath of the 2009 bushfires and he took inspiration from the experience. “I felt inspired by the colours of the recovering bush – the burnt charcoals and the bright greens of new growth.”

Now, as he stands back and surveys the results, he sees a garden full of visual, textural and figurative meaning. “A garden is an exceptional place to recover and get grounded again and appreciate the little details,” he says.

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ABOVE, FROM LEFT / PupPup stands on one of the bluestone boulders. A circular LED light by Christopher Boots hangs on the boundary fence. At night, the twisted snow gums take on a theatrical presence. **BELOW** / The delicate form of a rice flower.



GARDEN PARTY

This garden will be open for the Upper Yarra Valley Garden Club’s open weekend October 3–4; (03) 5966 2828.

“I wanted to create the look of almost-dry river beds,” says Mark. Artist Christopher Boots made the ring light that hangs at the back of the house.

