

OLINDA VICTORIA | garden

Magnolia x 'Vulcan'
flowers at a young age;
the brilliant colour takes
a few years to develop.

EASTERN BEAUTY

AN ENGLISH-STYLE GARDEN IN VICTORIA DISPLAYS
A CASCADE OF ORIENTAL FLOWERING JEWELS.

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NORMA BERRY'S GARDEN, high in Victoria's Dandenong Ranges, is a living link to many of the great British gardens from the late 19th century. At that time, the influential horticultural writer and magazine editor William Robinson lauded the idea of 'wild' gardening — planting hardy trees and shrubs that would thrive in the English climate as opposed to hothouses and conservatories. The idea was that suitable plants should be distributed around a garden with maximum regard for how they would flourish.

William Robinson's passion for 'natural' gardening coincided with the great plant hunter expeditions to China. The magnolias, rhododendrons, and other superb shrubs that were brought back from that plant-rich region were well suited to the style of gardening that Robinson so loved — a natural look yet with beautiful flowers. Norma's property, Mernda Heights, is the epitome of this style.

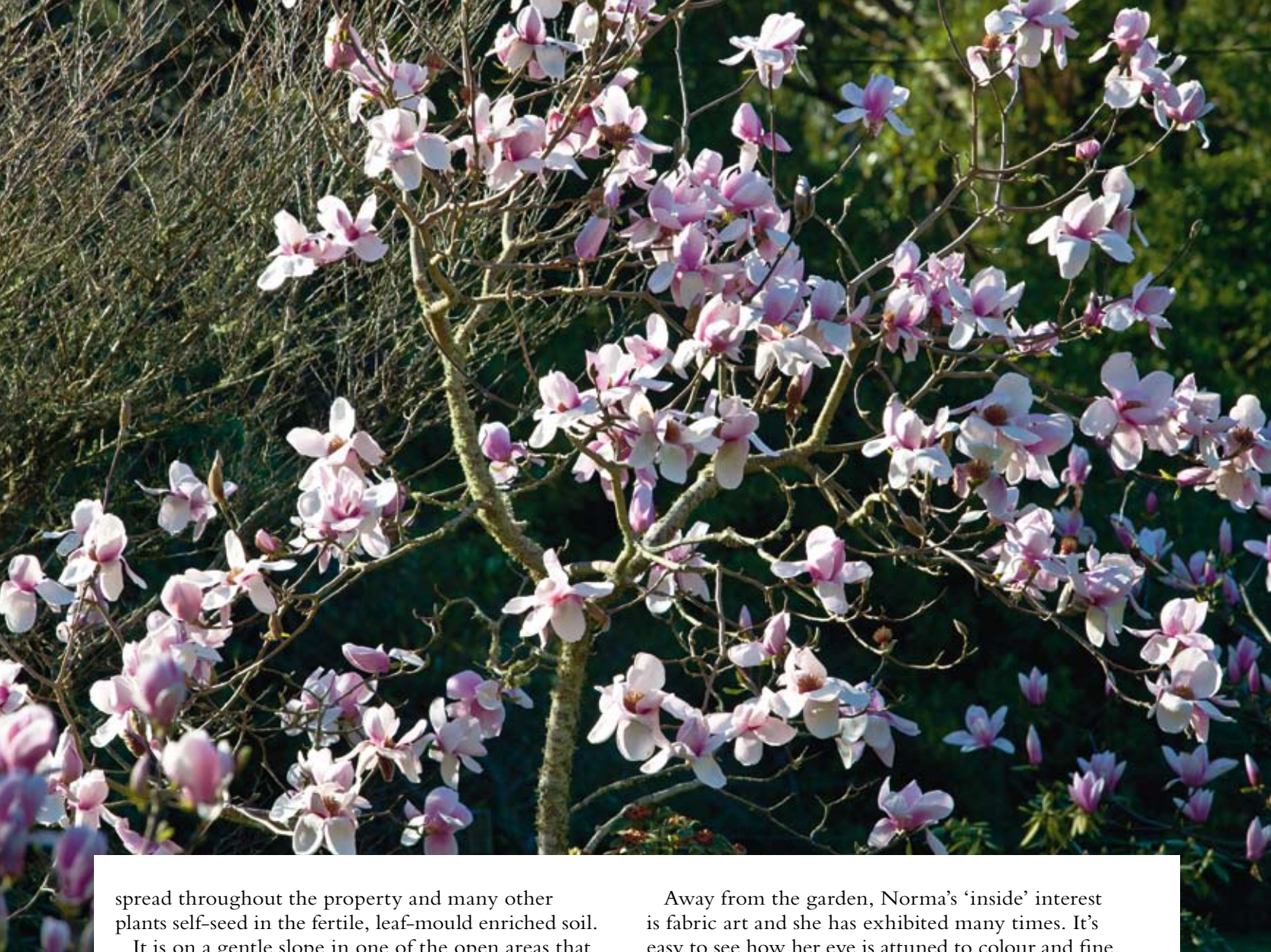
The garden was first planted in 1937 by Norma's father and it has continued to be nurtured by the family since then. By 1968, Mernda Heights was so well known that the magazine of the United Kingdom's Royal Horticultural Society featured its superb rhododendrons. The photographs, slightly faded, show a layout that could be easily mistaken for one of Robinson's gardens in the Home Counties.

The three-hectare site at Olinda, around 600 metres above sea level, was described by the magazine as 'commanding magnificent views of undulating country to the south and the Baw Baw Mountains and the Great Dividing Range to the east'. It has the near-perfect climate and rich soil to grow magnolias, widely known as 'the aristocrats of the plant world' — and many more exotic plants, including magnificent rhododendrons.

A wealth of deciduous trees, including a fine collection of maples, shrubberies and perennial borders open to grassed areas that allow the garden to be viewed from different aspects. Lily-of-the-valley has >

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE *Magnolia* x 'Verbanica'; *Magnolia* x 'Ballerina'; early bulbs appear before the mossy stonework and clipped box mounds; Norma Berry among the blooms of *Magnolia soulangeana* x 'Rustica Rubra'.

High in the Dandenong Ranges, Norma's magnolias continue to flower as the trees put out spring leaves.



Magnolia x 'Ballerina' blooms on bare branches. FACING PAGE *Magnolia* x 'Verbanica': "Part of the great appeal of magnolias is their early flowering," Rick says.

spread throughout the property and many other plants self-seed in the fertile, leaf-mould enriched soil.

It is on a gentle slope in one of the open areas that Norma and her son, Rick, have established their dazzling magnolias. "There have been magnolias in the garden from the early days — some of the originals still survive beside a large Canadian sugar maple but we realised we needed grassy open space when we decided to build a real collection," Norma says.

The impetus came from a book on magnolias bought by Rick's wife, Bettina. It featured a gorgeous photograph of a flowering bank in the National Arboretum in Washington, DC — "Ridiculous, really, as we've never even been there!" Norma comments. "But it encouraged us to group the magnolias together and make the lawn more dramatic with the slightly different colour and flower shapes."

"Part of the appeal of magnolias for us is their early flowering," Rick says. "They bloom on bare branches; they look so vulnerable yet they bloom in profusion in late winter and will take the most shocking weather."

The magnolia trees begin to flower just after July, the quietest month in the garden. The blooms of each cultivar appear in colourful procession, and last for several weeks; in total the display continues for around two months. The magnolias are followed by the early rhododendrons — that flower for six months — and by the many bulbs and a dazzling array of warm-hued mollis azaleas in spring.

Away from the garden, Norma's 'inside' interest is fabric art and she has exhibited many times. It's easy to see how her eye is attuned to colour and fine variations in tones in both pursuits. For example, she has planted daffodils around the magnolias.

"This is partly to stop me damaging the bark when mowing, but also to break down the overwhelming pink look," she says. The early blooming rhododendrons, like *Chrysozanicum rhododendron*, with their pale acidic yellow flowers, are lovely with the pink but I can't bear the harsh yellow of 'King Alfred' daffodils and I just pull them out."

Norma and Rick have been building their magnolia collection for a decade. Most of their plants come from nearby nurseries, like Jeremy Francis's famous Cloudehill which is just down the road. Among their favourites are some of the newer cultivars 'Vulcan' and 'Star Wars', though Norma still likes older ones such as 'Princess Margaret'.

They have also incorporated yellow-flowering magnolias, for example 'Yellow Bird', although Norma confides, "I'm not sure if I'm sold on them."

Magnolias are not for gardeners who want an instant fix. "They don't like being planted and don't like being moved," Rick says. "Generally they sulk for about four years and then they start to get on with it! One of our *Magnolia campbelli* took 10 years to flower." Patience is the key, advise Norma and Rick, as they tend their aristocrats from the East. *