

IN BRIEF

WHAT The Garden Vineyard, a 'boutique winery', wedding venue and gardens.

WHERE Victoria, southern Australia.

SOIL Poor, thin silty loam over shale and heavy, acidic clay; improved with manure and lime.

CONDITIONS The area's climate tends to be wetter and milder than other parts of Australia, but has been affected by drought since 1995.

SIZE Two acres of garden, three of vines.

HIGHLIGHTS Drought-tolerant, Mediterranean-type plants and Australian natives, in a variety of different gardens.

GARDEN PLAN See page 37.

Through the grapevine

In 1994 Di Johnson began planting a garden among the vineyards around her home in southern Australia. Soon its fame spread – and now it has gained a reputation as one of the finest gardens in the land. Words Christine Reid, photographs Claire Takacs

White *Agapanthus* 'Perpetual Peace' and clipped lilly-pilly trees (*Syzygium australe*) line the pathways of the Wedding Garden, where open-air marriage ceremonies take place.

As the road to Di Johnson's home dips and sweeps past the Devil Bend reservoir, there's no hint of the scale, size and magnificence of the gardens that lie just over the brow of the hill. Over the past few years, The Garden Vineyard, on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, has become widely recognised as one of Australia's most exciting gardens – for its excellent design features and an exceptional variety of beautifully grown plants. International publicity came with its inclusion on Monty Don's BBC TV series *Around the World in 80 Gardens* last year.

In fact it's not one garden but an ensemble of beautiful individual spaces surrounded by three acres of vineyards (see plan on page 37). There's a memorable silver garden, an intimate walled garden, native plants and stunning perennial borders filled with plants in inspiring combinations, the whole skilfully linked with steps and well-directed paths.

A lifetime ambition

As a child, Di Johnson – who owns The Garden Vineyard with her husband Doug – loved collecting wildflowers near her Essex home. She attributes much of her gardening know-how to her mother's influence in these early years. "She was a great gardener. She never stopped work on her pocket handkerchief of outdoor space. She took us to so many beautiful gardens, and was so excited by it all, that I began to dream of having a garden other people could walk around."

Later, Di studied medicine at Durham University, where she met Doug; the pair lived in New Guinea for many years before moving to Doug's native Victoria, and began to create The Garden Vineyard in 1994. Di focused on the planting and design; Doug does all the compost heaps and lots of digging and lopping. "He gave me a little tractor when we first arrived here," smiles Di, "but guess who mostly uses it?"

The first area to be completed was the walled garden, just outside the back door. Inspiration, says Di, came from designer David Stevens' book *The Outdoor Room*. "We had a fabulous brickie who built the wall and then I planted up the borders." So rich and pleasing were these lush borders that they became the cover image of the 2002/3 guide book to Australia's Open Garden Scheme. The tones of mellow brick walls were echoed in hybrid alstroemerias and *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude'. In summer perennials, roses and shrubs ▶



Lemon-scented eucalyptus trees (*E. citriodora*) stand among domes of thorny saltbush (*Rhagodia spinescens*), Australian rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) and cotton lavender (*Santolina chamaecyparissus*) in the Silver Borders.

“The Garden Vineyard has become widely recognised as one of Australia's most exciting gardens”



Seen from the Wedding Garden, a pair of *Acacia podalyriifolia* trees flank a bench at the end of the Silver Borders.



The Circular Dry Garden marks the edge of the gardens; on the rolling land beyond lie acres of grapevines.



Native plants such as *Eucalyptus scoparia* trees thrive in the experimental Australian Garden.



Clipped plants look good all year round in the small walled garden, including box and various hebes.



"I have been given a wonderful opportunity to fulfil some dreams," says Di Johnson of her garden.



A bowl planted with water lilies occupies a courtyard between the walled garden and the double borders.

“I just started feeling guilty about using too much water; I couldn’t sleep for thinking about it”

▷ were all imaginatively displayed in borders. Di used the strappy leaves of iris and *Sisyrinchium striatum* as accents and wide and shallow steps were framed by satisfying mounds of *Teucrium betonicum*. All this colour was enhanced by a lush carpet of brilliant green lawn.

Coping with drought

Circumstances soon forced Di to reconsider her planting style, though. The prolonged drought in Victoria – now in its tenth year – has changed her thinking about the kind of garden it’s possible to have in Australia. “I just started feeling guilty about using too much water; I couldn’t sleep for thinking about it. Now all our water is collected into our own dam and tanks and all household water is recycled.”

Lawns are notoriously thirsty, so Di replaced part of hers with gravel. Then she improved the silt and clay soil in the rest of the garden, allowing her to plant drought-tolerant species from Australia and Mediterranean-type areas, which tend to crave good drainage. “I brought in tonnes of sand and that seems to have done the trick.” But she admits to spoiling some plants. “I cheat with a sprinkler hidden in a clump of *Eupatorium maculatum* ‘Gateway’, because it looks too good to allow a mere drought to stop it. But I suppose that eventually it will have to go.”

Di also sought the advice of Melbourne garden designer Robert Boyle, who began his career designing Australian bush gardens but whose work has evolved after visiting many French and Italian gardens, especially those with a carefully orchestrated assemblage of clipped foliage forms and neat stonework. He cites the renowned and much-admired garden of Nicole de Vesian, at Bonnieux in Provence, as his moment of enlightenment.

At The Garden Vineyard gardener and designer have created a clever and thoughtful interpretation of this Mediterranean style in the context of Australia. Clipped and pruned plants are integral to the look, with an emphasis on foliage texture and form. Rosemary, sage, santolina and lavender are mixed with some Australian plants such as *Westringia*. The simplicity of clipped lavender and box against the lawn comes together as a ▷



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Australian garden



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Di Johnson’s favourites

- 1 *Darwinia nieldiana* I love it because of the subtlety of its form and colour – a delicate-looking little plant, but tough enough to cope with drought.
- 2 *Agonis flexuosa* ‘Nana’ has leaves that are unfailingly glossy, graceful and beautifully tinted with red and green.
- 3 *Lomandra confertifolia* subsp. *rubiginosa* has grey-green leaves and delicately scented flowers, and needs little attention, except admiration, from me.
- 4 *Grevillea* ‘Bronze Rambler’ is a fabulous ground cover plant, easy to cut back and almost always with reddish purple flowers – the tail end of one shown here.
- 5 *Geum* ‘Tangerine’ flowers generously and has fabulously felty leaves, which are themselves a delight.
- 6 *Melaleuca hypericifolia* has a gently weeping habit and attracts birds – honey eaters and spinebills love it.
- 7 *Grevillea* ‘Moonlight’ has the most delicately luminous, fragrant, creamy yellow flowers, followed by these handsome seedheads. Bees and birds love it.
- 8 *Diplolaena grandiflora* is a dense low-growing shrub with grey leaves and, in season, one of the most beautiful flowers in the garden – a soft tangerine colour.



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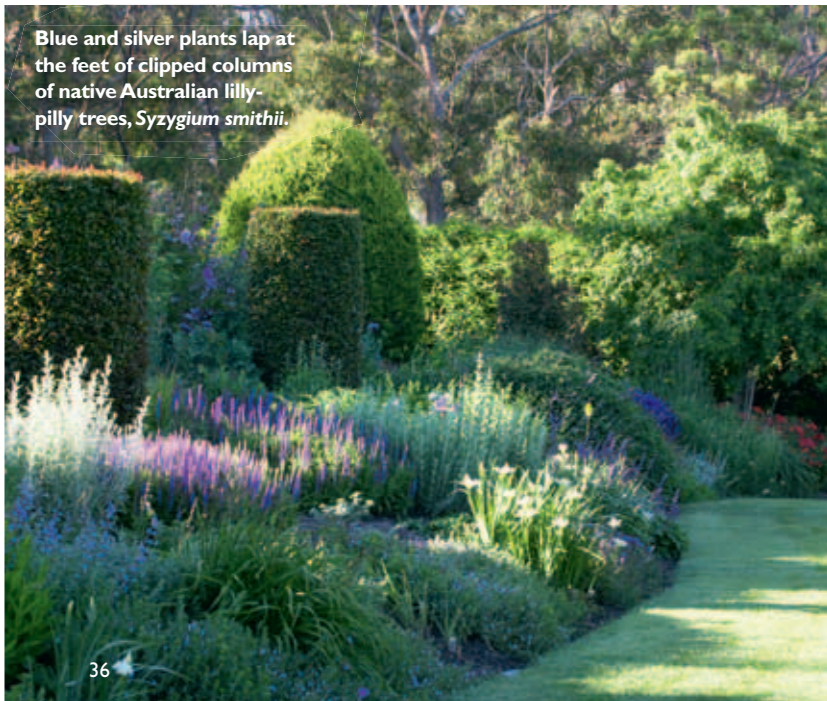
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“In the Double Borders, I like to temper the colour with quite a bit of silver-grey,” says Di.



A dreamy planting includes *Artemisia ludoviciana* ‘Silver Queen’ and golden daylilies, *Hemerocallis* ‘Stella de Oro’.



Blue and silver plants lap at the feet of clipped columns of native Australian lillypilly trees, *Syzygium smithii*.

“The overall effect is a garden that is inviting, restful and inspiring”

▷ complete ensemble. Water features such as a delightful shallow bowl as a punctuation point where paths cross, pictured on page 34, add to the calm, restful ambience.

Everywhere, Di’s use of muted colour stands out. The soft silver, blue and green tones of the foliage harmonise perfectly with the surrounding bushland. Only in the double perennial borders, divided with a wide grassy path, do more vivid colours appear alongside the greys and blues.

The overall effect is a garden that is inviting, restful and inspiring, and which fully achieves the Johnsons’ aim to protect and enhance the natural beauty of the area.

So what does Di make of the fact that her garden has been named as one of the best in the world? “Obviously it’s a compliment and an honour, and I was amazed,” she says; but she adds that the real reward is the satisfaction of having made a beautiful landscape. After all, no one enjoys the garden more than Di and Doug themselves. “We do like a glass of wine on the terrace in the evening,” says Di. “And in the morning I enjoy wandering round with a cup of tea, thinking. My husband, Doug, is forever collecting empty mugs from wherever I have left them. He calls them ‘cup plants.’”

The Johnsons have been happy here, but plan to sell this property in the next couple of years. Di says she’ll miss it – but she’s philosophical. “I think I have been given a wonderful opportunity to fulfil some dreams.” □

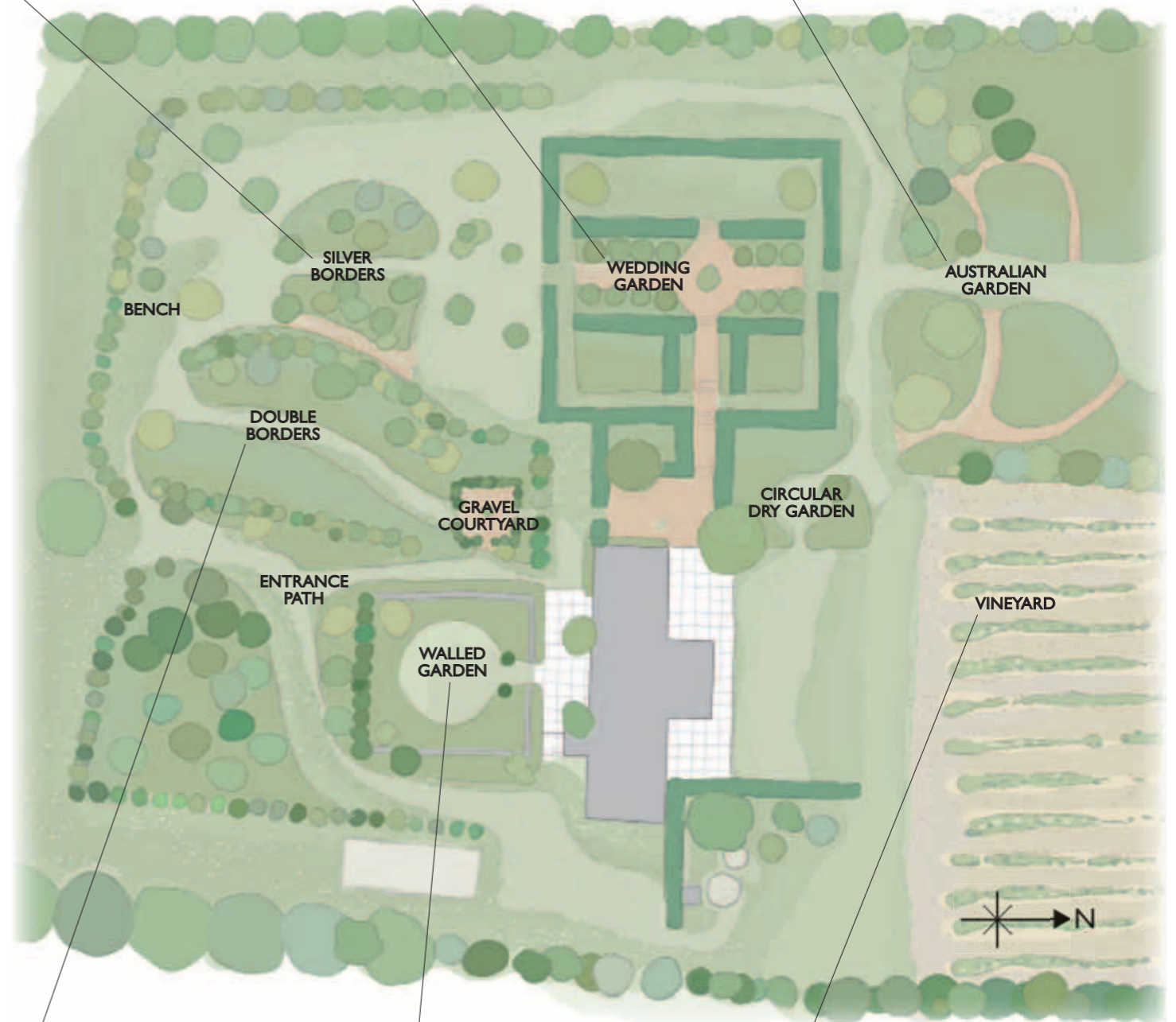
USEFUL INFORMATION

The Garden Vineyard, 174 Graydens Road, Moorooduc, Victoria, 3933, Australia. Tel +61 3 5978 8336. www.gardenvineyard.websyte.com.au

BBC The Garden Vineyard featured in the recent Monty Don TV series *Around the World in 80 Gardens*, now available on DVD. **Save £4.99** by ordering a copy for just £20, including postage and packing*, from the BBC Shop – call 0844 848 9799 (charged at the national rate) or visit www.bbcshop.com

* Overseas P&P rates vary.
• See page 94 for our review of Monty Don’s new book *Extraordinary Gardens of the World*.

GARDEN PLAN



PLAN BY SCOTT WOTHERSPOON