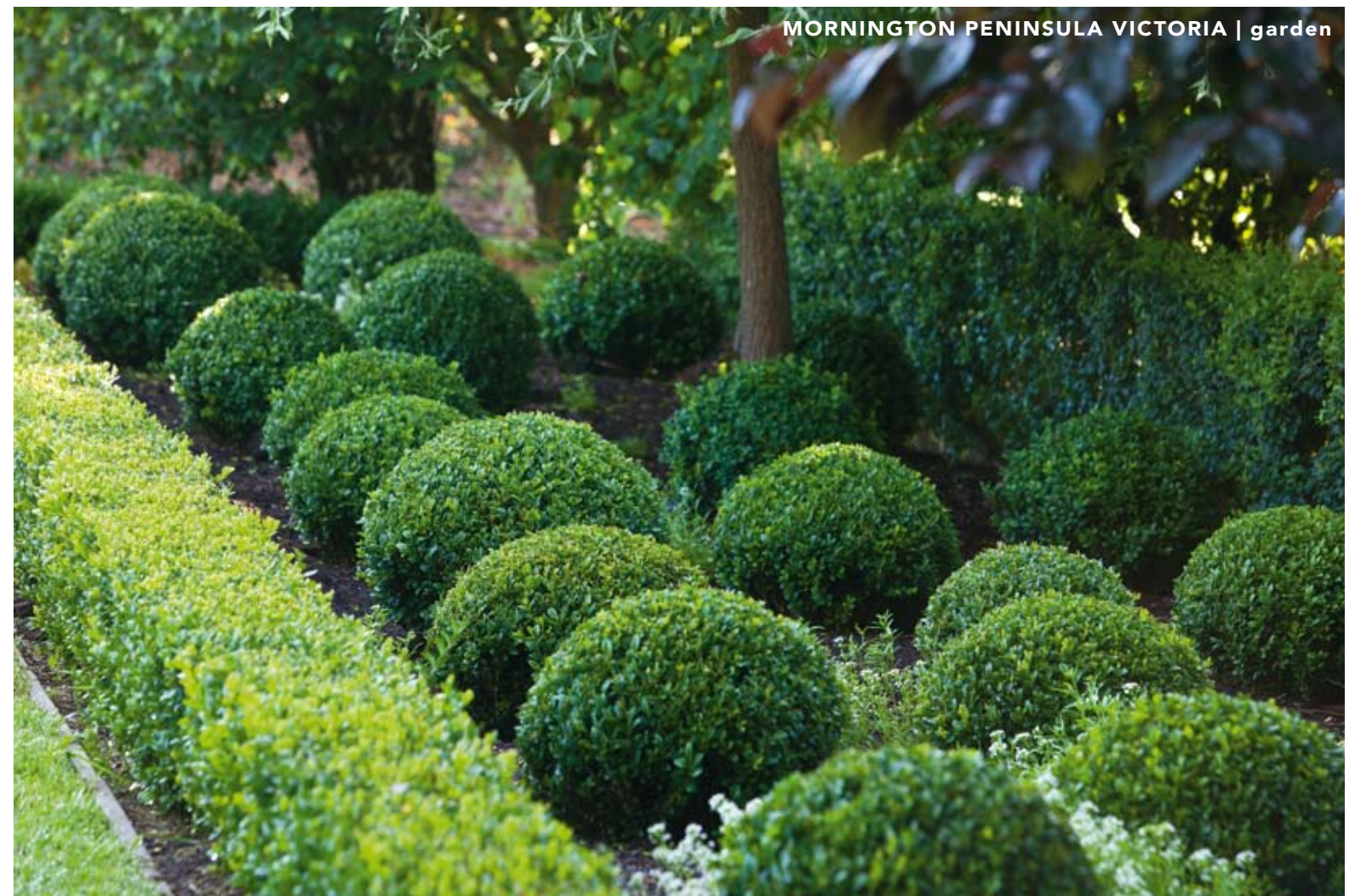


OPEN INVITATION

ROOMS LINKED BY WALKS LEAD THE VISITOR FROM ONE BEAUTIFUL VIEW TO ANOTHER ON THIS PENINSULA PROPERTY IN VICTORIA.

WORDS CHRISTINE REID PHOTOGRAPHY CLAIRE TAKACS

Cloud-pruned box hedges are a sculptured backdrop for a lily pond with a French Anduze vase as its centrepiece.



TOP ROW, FROM LEFT The tidy vegetable garden; Rex and Dani Swindel-Hurst; lavender thrives in the seaside air of Flinders. MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT An Iceberg rose; the pavilion, a favourite spot for morning coffee, overlooks the olive grove to the south of the garden. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT The dam at sunset; an errant poppy growing in the vegetable garden; there are four statues in the garden representing each season. Here, the figure for summer is surrounded by arthropodiums. FACING PAGE Clipped balls of box are orderly underplanting for trees such as birch, poplar and weeping pear.



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NINE YEARS AGO Rex Swindel-Hurst suggested to his wife, Dani, that he would like a bigger garden. She agreed but with the proviso she did not want to work all hours. “Now look what’s happened!” Dani says with a laugh.

These days, with an abundance of fresh produce on her doorstep, Dani runs a farmhouse-style kitchen. Jar after jar of jams, chutneys and sauces line up with delicious home-baked cakes and scones, all shared with the many visitors to their 1.2-hectare garden, The Croft, near Flinders, on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula.

Rex is the passionate gardener, an interest nurtured from an early age in New Zealand where he helped his grandfather pot orchids in a greenhouse. “I can remember him showing me how to trim the plants’ roots while we listened to the BBC program *My Music* on the radio,” Rex says.

Rex and Dani’s ‘larger’ garden could be called a pleasure ground, an 18th-century term for an area filled with lawns, ornamental plantings and architecture. And the pleasures are many: a series of garden rooms and walks integrate native and exotic plantings, and there’s a fine balance between the productive and the ornamental.

At the entrance, an open lawn and smartly-cut hedges overlook Musk Creek as it winds to Westernport Bay. Following numbered posts around the garden, there’s

a series of garden rooms, all with their own plants and atmosphere. A conifer walk gives way to a sitting area surrounded by espaliered pears; a robinia walk leads to the potager and picking garden.

“The rhubarb is rampant and the garlic has crept in by stealth,” Rex admits. Most seasonal produce, such as a glut of tomatoes and roaming zucchini, ends up in the kitchen.

The rose garden, sheltered by hedges of cypress, is traditional in its concept. “We’ve found that our dam water is too saline and burns the rose leaves. So we rely on our rainwater for this area,” Rex says. “It’s just another difficulty we’ve faced — along with rabbits, possums and lorikeets eating the rose shoots, cows in the garden. And, of course, sometimes we’ve chosen unsuitable plants that haven’t survived.”

One of the garden’s most impressive areas is a water feature that uses a French Anduze pot as a centrepiece, surrounded by box hedging sculptured in the style known as cloud pruning. “We were inspired to try this after we visited the Jardins de Marqueyssac in the Dordogne region of France,” Rex says. “The box plants there are lightly sculpted, then tightly pruned and the clipping is all done by hand.”

One of the most difficult projects has been keeping the dam filled; the liner has been a perennial problem. >





Nevertheless, the timber deck overlooking the dam is a peaceful place to sit and watch the frogs and ducks. “We have also started to plant unusual and endangered trees around the area,” Rex says. Seats have been positioned around the garden so strolling visitors can take their time taking in the view.

The Croft certainly brings great pleasure to Rex and Dani, as they lovingly tend it and plan improvements. It brings much pleasure to visitors, too, who are welcome throughout the year. And money raised through such visits and open days supports families who enjoy respite accommodation at the Presentation Family Centre at nearby Balnarring Beach.

Rex and Dani agree that maintaining the garden over the years has been a labour of love. “But our fitness is maintained, too!” Rex says. *

The Croft is at 289 Musk Creek Road, Flinders, Victoria. It is open to small groups by appointment. 0407 047 117; thecroftatflinders.com.au

Italian cypresses, box hedging, and lavender give the entrance path a Mediterranean air.