

Glenmore's journey

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS L. JONES

It wasn't an easy job, but hard work and unwavering dreams of old country gardens plus fond memories of nursery rhymes turned a vision of Glenmore House into a reality writes Robin Powell.



Peruvian peppercorn (*Schinus molle*) was a common plant in country gardens of the 1850s, loved for its tough reliability and the graceful green serenity it offered as contrast to the parched landscape beyond the homestead.

Opposite: The porch, with its steamer chairs and simple decor, is a place of repose mixed with the drama of agaves and the elegant expanse of quartz gravel.



Lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina*)



Rosehip



Autumn plumes of
miscanthus grasses.



Curry bush
(*Helichrysum italicum*)

Mickey Robertson traces her dream of a country house life filled with flower gardens, orchards and a vegetable patch to childhood bedtime stories. “Blame it on Beatrix Potter and those nursery rhymes,” she laughs, “Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary”. But when she and husband Larry found Glenmore House in the rural hills south-west of Sydney in 1989, there were no pretty maids all in a row. On the contrary; the house was derelict, the garden overrun. Yet Mickey’s childhood dream began to take shape.

The house, a rough-hewn sandstone cottage, Georgian in style and dating from the 1830s, had been alternately rented and vacant for some 35 years. “When we would come from the city on a Saturday morning and put the key in the lock, we would hear the scuttling behind the door,” remembers Mickey. The couple worked weekends for 18 months before they could spend a night in the cottage and wake to the view over hills and a winding creek towards the Razorback Ranges.

Blackberry and lantana, the usual suspects, had swallowed the garden and its outbuildings, though persimmons and peppercorns were visible through the mess. “I started planning and making little drawings on pieces of paper,” explains Mickey, whose career as an interior designer is apparent in the garden as well as the house. She didn’t want the curved organic shapes of a typical country garden, but something more room-like. “I like straight lines, compartments, a certain amount of orderliness.”

She also likes structures and one of the charms of the garden is the use of the original outbuildings – a hayshed, barn, dairy and stables. These formerly run-down constructions have been restored and given fresh purpose. They also offer points with which to frame the axes of the garden.

Opposite page

From top: Garden outbuildings now serve a new purpose. This is now the pool house. The pool is secluded by a fenced garden in autumn garb.

The old barn is now a meeting place and workshop with bench space for potting up and taking cuttings.

The old cowsheds are the classroom for workshops.

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From top: Rugosa roses will soon enclose the house garden but here are beginning their autumn show of golden foliage.

Newly constructed dry stone walls surround the gardens and separate it from driveways and paths. Hardy French lavender (*Lavandula dentata*) covers the walls and pops up informally in the crevices.



History revision

Mickey's early planting ideas were heavily influenced by English country gardens but, ensconced at Glenmore House, she gradually developed a sense of history about its garden. "I was hugely influenced by what Leo Schofield did at Bronte House," she explains. "That garden is just such a thrill! And about the same time I was working at Brownlow Hill, an early 19th-century property close by, and saw the agaves, aloes, yuccas, and the Chinese elms and bamboo forests there. That was when the wisteria and the roses I'd planted out the front came out and I became really interested in garden history."

The front of the symmetrical stone cottage – grey dormer windows like eyebrows, a bullnose verandah shading the lower rooms – now has a garden that suits its no-nonsense lines: a forecourt of pale grey gravel, a round pond and two great clumps of silver-blue agave.

Now, says Mickey, nothing is planted purely for its good looks. "There has to be some historical or romantic reason for planting it." As an example she points out the olive and almond trees, both early sentimental plantings that link her to memories of times spent in the south of Spain with her late parents-in-law.

Into the borders

The almond and olives form part of an orchard planting that includes citrus, black and white figs, apples and crabapples. The adjacent garden of perennial borders gives Mickey the opportunity to practise her talent for developing horticultural pictures.

The two facing borders are wide enough and long enough for the development and repetition of tone and texture. The structure is supported by plantings of bronze flax (*Phormium tenax*), and through the seasons different plants take starring roles. In autumn apricot cannas, burgundy heads of *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy', bright red hips of the rugosa rose 'Frau Dagmar Hastrup' and bleached blonde, fairy-floss heads of *Miscanthus sinensis* draw the eye.

The borders are let go all through winter, the dried heads of the flowers and grasses hanging on against the frost. And then, in mid-August, everything but the flax is cut down, the whole lot covered with compost and manure, so that it springs into lush new growth.

Above right: Garden owner Mickey Robertson has gradually converted old plantings to edible landscapes. Here, citrus are used as ornamentals as well as productive plants. Herbs, such as rosemary and lavender become hedges and fragrant fillers. **Right:** A highly productive location around the service area combines the food factory of compost bins, water storage and growing frames with edible rhubarb, garlic and oranges. Mickey used biodynamic principles and organic gardening techniques to produce her healthy produce at Glenmore.



The vegetable garden

Torn between two conflicting theories on the best way to grow vegetables, Mickey is conducting an experiment in her vegetable garden. On the left side of an archway of espaliered apples are four square raised beds planted according to permaculture principles. Each bed is a mix of flowers, herbs and vegetables, designed that way to confuse any pests.

On the right, the four matching beds follow crop rotation principles. One bed is devoted to leafy greens, another to fruiting plants, another to legumes and the fourth to root vegetables. Twice a year, February to March and September to October, everything is harvested and the beds rotate. Leafy greens follow legumes; legumes follow fruits; fruiting vegies follow leafy greens. Mickey finds advantages in both systems. Aesthetically, the straight lines of crop rotation appeals, but the absence of produce during the rotation periods means that if she wasn't also running the permaculture guild system, there'd be nothing for dinner!

Black gold

The key to the health of the garden is the compost system. Mickey doesn't strictly follow the principles of biodynamic compost making, but does her best to get efficient layering in the mix. A pile of manure and a pile of chipped dry material are kept close at hand so that they can be layered when green waste is added to the pile. To the compost she adds a handful of blood and bone one week and a handful of dynamic lifter the next. All the kitchen scraps go into an Aerobin to keep the pile free from rodents.

The composing regime is boosted by weekly doses of comfrey tea. A bucket is half-filled with chopped comfrey leaves and filled with water. The leaves are weighed down with a brick to keep them submerged and the bucket is covered. Three weeks later the "tea" is ready for use, diluted one part tea to 10 parts water.

Mickey's visual sense, and the care and attention that goes into building the organic health of the garden, result in a space that generates an inspiring combination of serenity and excitement. Mickey is living her dream; and the rest of us get to share in it each month, when she and Linda Ross run a day on edible growing. Participants lunch on produce from the garden and leave keen to introduce a little country life at home, no matter how urban home might be.

For details on the Kitchen Garden Days at Glenmore House, go to www.glenmorehouse.com.au

Top: The compost bins run on a three-stage system with each compartment rotated from one bin to the other to ensure maximum heat and aeration.

Centre: Mickey grows a range of lettuce for generous and tasty salads.

Below: Rich, organic compost is used throughout the garden.

