

# *something* **BORROWED**

The owners of Toora West have made full use of their mountain views, working them into the borders of their beautiful garden, writes CHRISTINE REID.



Photo Claire Takacs

Forty years ago, the house was surrounded by bare paddocks and tough grass. Today, the garden reflects the owners' dedication and intelligent sensitivity to the landscape.



For centuries, creators of gardens have considered how to conceal or blur a garden's boundary. It may be to give the impression of a garden stretching to the far horizon; or the goal may be to bring the natural surrounds to the front door.

Many contemporary garden and landscape designers – Kim Wilkie, James van Sweden, Wolfgang Oehme and Fernando Caruncho among them – have developed this tradition. Using contemporary techniques and modern machinery, they design gardens that extend into a real or imagined distance.

In these 'borrowed landscapes', often what is visible beyond the confines of the walls or fences can contribute greatly to the garden's atmosphere. To open up a view of something lovely or spectacular – whether it's a church spire, cliffs or an extinct volcano – in itself extends the perimeters and scope of a property.

### The bare bones

At Toora West, a garden in Glenthompson in Victoria's west, the majestic Grampians are taken on as part of the garden, and their rugged beauty forms the ultimate boundary on the horizon. Beyond the house, the cultivated garden and intimate spaces merge seamlessly into paddocks of quietly grazing cattle, only to end at the buttresses of rocky crags.

When Charles and Cass Kimpton arrived at Toora West 40 years ago, there was no garden – just bare paddocks, covered with phalarus (*Phalarus aquatica*), a tough, persistent grass, and two radiata pines (*Pinus radiata*) in the garden area.

Out in the paddocks proper, they planted protective windbreaks of pines. "The ubiquitous radiata pine of Victoria's Western District may not be everybody's taste," says Charles, "but they soften the harsh winds on the treeless plains at Toora West, and that can't be overstated."

He continues, "In those early days, we also planted some natives to create shelter belts that would grow quickly. Much as I love gums, I now know they are messy water bandits in the garden."

He says the acacias proved to be chainsaw wreckers, with the additional drawback of a short life span. "But we still count some 20 species of eucalypts in and around the garden," he says.

Establishing the garden on the open plains proved challenging over the years in the presence of those extremes of drought and flooding rain. The Kimptons arrived at the end of 1969; the preceding years had all been in drought.

In another year, during a severe frost, a temperature of  $-8^{\circ}\text{C}$  was recorded a metre above the ground. And earlier this year, a mighty hailstorm hit the property, flooding the house, damaging the garden and ruining many of the tender plants.

The entrance driveway at Toora West opens out to a large, gravelled courtyard that is both spacious and uncluttered, with views to paddocks and mountains on every side. By contrast, on the west side

Of the original 40, there are now eight substantial trees, randomly placed. They form the structural backbone to a garden of fabulous seasonal highlights with all the nuances of changing colour.

In late winter and early spring, a garden of pale creams and yellows emerges with bulbs, including jonquils and daffodils. Beneath an oak's bare branches, a show stopper of snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.) forms a white sheet dazzling in the sun.

As the spring warms up, the colours deepen and move more to pinks, blues and mauves. Cass says, "It's the time to enjoy the wisteria, foxgloves, tulips, pansies, bluebells, Dutch iris ... the list goes on. I especially love the little pink valerian; it self-seeds everywhere and fills the gaps, while the echiums and artichokes add their silvery accents."

In high summer, away from the deep shade of the deciduous trees and the

*Beyond the house, the cultivated garden and intimate spaces merge seamlessly into paddocks.*

of the house is an extensive informal garden with a green, spreading lawn, a swimming pool that seems part of the natural landscape and beds overflowing with a diversity of plants. "It's never been planned," says Cass. "It just happened, between babies, horses and cattle!"

### Acorns and apples

Planned or not, one of the steps Cass took early on was planting groups of juvenile oaks nurtured from acorns.

Charles describes her vision back then: "Who can fathom the mind of the young bride who, more than 40 years ago, sowed acorns? Did she see the seed germinate and push through the soil the following spring? Did she see the trees unfurl their serrated leaves and grow incrementally year by year? No way! She 'saw' mature trees, metres high, a vision projecting far into the future."

always verdant lawn – kept watered as a protective barrier against fire – the colour palette deepens again. At centre stage are the dark-blue agapanthus 'Guilfoyle' and roses such as the climber 'Altissimo' and the wild rose 'Geranium'. In autumn, groups of ornamental pears (*Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer') and numerous *Malus* species make a vivid contrast as their leaves change colour.

"I've learnt it's best to plant thickly beneath the deciduous trees to catch the fallen leaves, then let them turn to mulch. It's been a great way to build up the soil," says Cass. "Otherwise, in a strong wind the leaves would end up kilometres away!"

Apart from a small slice of box hedge over near the terrace, the major formal highlight of the garden is an espaliered apple on the west end of the guests' house. Nearly 16 years in the training, it's a textbook example of this type of ➡



**Clockwise from top left** One of several roses in the garden, 'Rosendorf Sparrieshoop' has long, arching canes with blooms clustered on the end; the Grampians are the garden's borrowed landscape; Charles and Cass Kimpton take time out in the garden; snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*) is one of the pretty self-seeders; the espaliered apple began as two branches and now fills an entire wall; the pool and lawn are not only beautiful, they also form a firebreak between the house and paddock.





## GREAT GARDENS



**Clockwise from top left** Bearded iris thrive at Toora West; beds of succulents offer a colour contrast in the driveway; catmint (*Nepeta* spp.) blooms beautifully; Sweet Pea, one of the working dogs, rests on the back of a quad bike; 'Altissimo' roses run along the fence and, beyond, the Grampians rise above the mist.



garden art. The apple, a Red Delicious, began as only two branches, and stood less than a metre high. It now fills the wall in a perfect sculptural symmetry.

"Cass had the idea for years before we planted it," says Charles. "She just didn't fancy the drilling, wiring, pruning and tying, and thought I was the appropriate person to do it! We think it has thrived because it has no competition and we keep the ground very clean around it. It doesn't get much water, but it would have a cool root run under the house."

At the far end of the garden, a couple of surprises remain. One is Charles's cacti – some horribly damaged by the

hailstorm – many of them from Roraima Nursery at Lara, near Geelong and a group of Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*), planted to echo the magnificent 19th-century planting of these trees in the Hamilton Botanic Gardens not far away.

Driving away from the garden, I realise again how fortunate the Kimptons are in their garden setting. Not everyone has the massive bulk of Mount William on their left and the silhouettes of Mount Sturgeon and Mount Abrupt on their right as they head out the front gate. However, the Kimptons have acknowledged their debt to the Australian landscape in the understated elegance of their garden. 