

NATIVES in a cottage garden

Many Australian plants work well in a cottage garden. DERYN THORPE explains how to mix your gauras and grevilleas into a beautiful, informal tapestry of colour

PHOTO LEIGH CLAPP

Nearly everyone loves cottage gardens – romantic outdoor spaces with a confection of flowers and foliage that provide interest year-round. It's undoubtedly my favourite garden style, as I love the abundance and expectation of new colour each season. However, while I grow roses and exotic perennials, I also find space for many of the Australian plants that suit this floriferous style.

The creation of a native cottage garden follows the same principles as the European model – mixing a profusion of flowered shrubs, annuals and textured foliage, to create seasonal interest throughout the year.

Australian plants attract native wildlife and, by using plants native to your area, you will find they need little supplementary water or fertiliser, once established. Best of all, native gardens provide a 'sense of place', linking us to our natural environment.

To get the right 'look', the aim is to create a relaxed layout. Choose plants that flower in different seasons, using several plants of the same variety, so the garden has an informal patchwork effect but is not 'bitty'. While the occasional brightly hued or structural plant adds interest, use mostly soft shapes, with colours and foliage that harmonise with the design.

"Beneath the trees, in dappled light, is my favourite native shrub"

Gardens also don't need to be purely Australian, as plants from low-rainfall Mediterranean climates have similar growing conditions to much of Australia. Rosemary, lavender and wormwood (*Artemisia vulgaris*) blend beautifully with our indigenous species.

what to plant

In my exotic rose and salvia garden, I've incorporated groundcovers such as native daisies (*Brachyscome* spp.) and fan flower (*Scaevola* spp.), which bloom all year round. Clumps of native purple flag iris (*Orthrosanthus multiflorus*) add a grassy texture to the design, and produce beautiful blue flowers in spring.

Beneath the trees, in dappled light, my favourite native shrub, *Thomasia purpurea*, grows to less than a metre, with bright green, soft leaves and clusters ▶

native gardens



"Australian annuals make spectacular floral drifts, or ribbons of colour between shrubs in spring"

of bell-like purple flowers with dark centres, in autumn to early summer. It's lush and pretty, and grows in sun or dry shade. If I had more space, I'd mix it with other *Thomasia* species or *Guichenotia macrantha*, which has grey-green linear foliage and pendulous, papery, pink-purple bell flowers in winter to early spring.

Another favourite is the spectacular heart-leaf flame pea (*Chorizema cordatum*), an adaptable scrambling shrub with a riot of hot pink and orange pea flowers. It grows well in the shade, but copes with full sun if there is additional water in summer.

The lush foliage of cat's claw creeper (*Hibbertia scandens*) climbs on the fence, creating privacy from our neighbour. Since I live in Perth, most of my native plants come from south-west Western Australia, but this east-coast plant earns its place by putting on a prolific show of yellow blooms in spring and summer.

Correas, another east-coast darling, are useful in cottage gardens, with varieties flowering throughout the year. For coastal gardens, none are better than *Correa alba*, which tolerates salt spray and grows 1-1.5m tall. Most have pendulous, bell-shaped flowers but this has white, star-shaped blooms from mid-autumn to early winter.

It thrives in shade, but flowers best in the sun. Correas are dense from the ground up.

They can sprawl, but a light pruning keeps them compact. Favourites include the chef's cap correa (*C. baeuerlenii*), *C. pulchella* and its hybrids.

Small trees are essential for shade, height and bird habitat. Seating, arches and ornaments are all part of the cottage style, so position a bench in the shade, but don't expect to spend all your free time sitting there – the 'natural' cottage garden style takes a lot of work.

I love the fuzzy flowers of bottlebrushes, especially sterile cultivars, which don't get unsightly seed heads. Check out the fast-growing, red-flowering 'Kings Park Special' and 'Harkness', which reach 5m tall.

Nectar-eating birds adore the pincushion-like blooms of *Hakea laurina* and pink flower spears of *H. francisiana*, which are shrubs 3-4m tall, so they are perfect as small trees. For a pastel flower scheme, and flowers for most of the year, the spidery-like blooms of tropical grevilleas, such as 'Misty Pink' (3m) and creamy-yellow 'Moonlight' (to 5m), add a touch of romance and height.

bulbs, annuals & pots

When choosing bulbs, check out rare plant catalogues for the native daffodil (*Calostemma luteum*) and vanilla lily (*Arthropodium strictum*). For shady spots, consider the better-known Brisbane lily (*Proiphys cunninghamii*).

Seeds of Australian annuals, such as our beautiful paper daisies (*Rhodanthe* spp., *Schoenia* spp. and *Bracteantha* spp., and *Brachyscome iberidifolia*), are sown in autumn. They make spectacular floral drifts, or ribbons of colour between shrubs in spring.

Native plants are also good for pots, which are best thought of as 'movable colour'. Outstanding specimens include the gloriously scented brown boronia (best in a self-watering pot), short-lived *Leschenaultia* spp. and *Banksia* 'Cherry Candles', which flowers in summer and winter and looks spectacular in a wide bowl.



REAL BEAUTY
From top left *Leschenaultia* spp. is a lovely blue; the heart-leaf flame pea; an informal mix of plantings. Below left The native daffodil.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK, HELENA H. LEIGH CLAPP, MELBOURNIAN, PMA, ALAMY

planting & care

Before planting natives, all soils need to have some compost added. Sandy soil should also be improved with the addition of clay, and clay breakers must be worked into heavy clay, as most native plants prefer free-draining soil. Mulch garden beds after planting.

Plants in the Proteaceae family are sensitive to fertilisers high in phosphorus, so most gardeners use low-phosphorus native fertiliser for all their native plants, or group phosphorus-sensitive plants such as hakea, grevillea and banksia together.

Regular tip-pruning helps to keep all native plants looking good, and some flower best if they're cut back each year by one-third after flowering. GA



TRUE COLOURS
Above *Hakea laurina* attracts native birds to the garden. Left *Thomasia* adds interest with its striking blooms. Previous page Repeating the same variety in different spots creates a relaxed feel.

other plants to try

- *Pimelea* 'White Solitaire' (rice flower)
- *Hardenbergia violacea* 'Happy Wanderer' (native wisteria)
- *Grevillea* 'Hills Jubilee'
- *Conostylis candicans* (grey cotton heads)
- *Eremophila nivea* 'Spring Mist'
- *Alyogyne huegelii* 'West Coast Gem' (native hibiscus)
- *Dampiera diversifolia* (kangaroo lobelia)
- *Verticordia plumosa* (plumed feather flower)
- *Chamaelucium* 'Purple Pride' (Geraldton wax)
- *Isopogon dubius* (rose coneflower)
- *Leptospermum* 'Pink Cascade'
- *Pandorea pandorana* 'Snowbells'
- *Boronia* 'Purple Jared'