

Desert beauties

AN AWARD-WINNING GARDEN CALLED DAISY PATCH FLOURISHES IN AN ARID CORNER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

STORY **GRETEL SNEATH** PHOTOS **EMMA STEENDAM**

A STROLL AROUND John and Julie Barrie's garden, Daisy Patch, feels like a guided bushwalk across the vast Australian outback. The dramatic landscapes of Kalbarri, Kalgoorlie, the Gawler Ranges and the Hay Plains have been brought to life in all their arid glory in South Australia's Upper South East, using more than 1500 species of native plants. Each has been specially selected for its drought pedigree. "I'm not really interested in anything from up the eastern coast above Melbourne or across the top from Cairns to Broome; trying to grow plants that need summer moisture is not very sustainable in these parts," John says.

The Barries' 2.5-hectare property at Coonalpyn sits on the edge of an area once known as the Ninety Mile Desert. Average rainfall is 425 millimetres, and the summers seem endless; last year, the hot dry spell lasted almost eight months. "It's during that long, dry period when you just cannot justify adding water to keep plants from more tropical areas alive," John says.

The former Adelaide couple went bush in the early 1980s with their four daughters to set up a housing-construction business, but have since taken different career paths; Julie works in IT at the local area school, while John divides his time between his environmental consultancy, the garden and the couple's native-plant nursery. In the beginning, their property contained a single tree and some patchy scrub, so they trucked in 195 loads of sand to try to create a desert habitat echoing the wider landscape, with its dunes and swales. "Drift sand has great infiltration when it rains, and excellent moisture retention – feel three inches [7.5 centimetres] down and it's often still moist," John says.

While many of the plants in the garden have been found during the couple's travels, they source most from the Australian Native Plant Society. "To join a society with botanical connections really opens the door; they have study groups that collect and share specimens, which gives us a lot of access to rare material," John says.

Turning one small seed into a thriving plant growing thousands of kilometres from home takes much trial and error. "Not everything is perfectly happy; no matter how well you plan a garden, some things grow better than others, or a key element may die and ruin the effect. We are still learning, but we are becoming much more discerning about plant selection because we can now see the patterns."

The garden is heavily reliant on natural rainfall, with a complex drainage system collecting and redirecting most of the run-off. "Annuals need surface moisture in winter, but if you wet the topsoil in summer, you're creating a serious weed load that you then need to deal with," John says. "Much better to get the water down deep. My watering sins are with my new plantings

and the veggie garden, but I think everyone would excuse that."

Sturt's desert pea is another rare exception to the watering rule. Out in the wild, its distinctive blood-red flowers appear during spring, but in Coonalpyn it's too cold then. "They challenge so many people, but we have finally worked out how to succeed," Julie says. Potted Sturt's desert pea seedlings are soaked in liquid fertiliser before being planted in a new sand mound in late spring. Plastic tubing, such as old downpipe, is inserted about 40 centimetres into the ground close to the roots, and each plant is given at least a litre of water each day in the height of summer. "We will also pour double-strength fertiliser into the pipe at 2–3 day intervals; they are very hungry plants," John says. "It does go against our ethos and is a lot of work, but we are well rewarded."

The only other plant to garner such special attention is Julie's favourite – the desert-loving emu bush. "It comes from very dry conditions, and in the middle of winter we will go out at night and cover the poor baby up as it doesn't like frost," Julie says. "I just think it's the most fascinating plant – it has big leaves, it's very slow growing and has amazing pendulous flowers that look almost like an orchid."

John loves the "princess of Australian plants" – the brilliant pink feather flower found along Western Australia's Murchison River – but the swathes of paper daisies that appear in their thousands in spring are his pick of the bunch. "Daisies are such a smiley sort of a thing, and the fact that they come out in such a mass is incredible – they bring your whole garden together and look absolutely spectacular. What's missing in traditional gardens is the beauty that the Australian bush can provide, and I think paper daisies epitomise that." September is their big month to shine, and the brevity of the bloom only adds to their appeal. "It's nice for things to change and reflect the emotions of the seasons, and they come back again and again in an absolute blaze of colour, which is worth waiting for," John says.

Self-seeding of all species is aided by the minimal use of organic mulch, which can work like a weed mat to prevent new growth, and there is a real sense of discovery as John and Julie point out various tiny seedlings that have spontaneously taken root.

"The layout evolved like topsy," he says. "We have lots of plants regenerating from seed and often we will realign a garden bed to incorporate those that pop up on the edges. The garden has right of way."

DAISY PATCH GARDEN AND NATIVE PLANT NURSERY

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Paper daisies arrive in their thousands each September; the daisies die off once the temperatures rise; pink feather flowers; the rare *Verticordia cooloomia*, from the Murchison District of WA; garden owners John and Julie Barrie.

