

A passion for roses

SUE AND JOHN ZWAR'S GARDEN IN THE COONAWARRA WINE COUNTRY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA STARTED AS A SIMPLE AFFAIR UNTIL SUE FELL IN LOVE WITH HERITAGE ROSES.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS JO FINCHAM

THE PLAN was to keep things simple in the garden on "Camawald" in South Australia's Coonawarra wine country. After all, what could possibly compete with the majestic 500-year-old red gums that had captivated owners Sue and John Zwar from the moment they first saw them?

In the late 1970s, the couple fenced off a two-hectare block now fringed with vineyards and paddocks, planting a few trees and shrubs around their new home. The grevilleas and hakeas were doing well thanks to truckloads of sand brought in to improve drainage in the limestone and clay-rich soils, and a golden elm, liquidambars and a favourite deciduous swamp cypress added new lushness to the landscape. The Zwars spent around a decade revelling in this simplicity while John also worked as a deputy principal at nearby Penola High School. Sue gave up her own teaching career to run the farm and raise daughters Carolyn and Joanna, but a visit to a neighbouring property made things a little more complicated; she fell in love with its old heritage roses and began to plant some of her own. Today, more than 1000 can be found across four hectares of garden.

"She's just a fanatic!" John says. Sue has joined the Rose Society of South Australia and the Heritage Roses New Zealand, and she and John organised the 2012 national conference for Heritage Roses in Australia (held in Mount Gambier in November). "I could list 100 favourites – they are just exquisite; the fragrance, the colour, and the old gallicas like Cardinal de Richelieu and the rich and decadent Charles de Mills are just lovely," she says. "But then there are beautiful roses such as *Rosa brunonii* and *R. dupontii*, which have delicate single white blooms. And, of course, there's the repeat-flowering Japanese and Chinese rugosas with their lovely autumn foliage – I'm besotted with them all."

Sue says the appeal of some of the old varieties lies in their simplicity; single, spring-flowering blooms that don't need pruning or spraying. It also helps that the local bird life isn't overly keen on them. "Parrots eat modern hybrid teas and floribundas but they don't seem to like eating old roses, which is another reason to grow heritage varieties," Sue says. Rabbits and possums are a problem, and a potent mix of wasabi paste and water sprayed on the rose bushes helps a little.

Sue avoids selecting her plants from pictures, preferring to see them up close and fall in love that way. She is also lured by historical significance and, of course, perfume. The real gems can be found in her prized arboretum, where species have been planted according to their country of origin. The sheer size of the garden also accommodates rambler varieties such as *Rosa longicuspis* and *Rosa gigantea*, and they create a stunning screen for the extensive shedding and fencing that comes with a working farm. The property is about 100ha and, with John

now approaching 70, the couple has chosen to wind back on stock. "We used to breed our own ewes and prime lambs, but we are now down to having some crossbred ewes and we buy in store lambs and grow them out to sell as prime lambs," John says. "Similarly with our cows, we no longer breed vealers and instead buy in weaner steers and grow them out. We currently run around 100 crossbred ewes, 200 store lambs and 50 weaners."

Sue has a strong preference for multiple groupings rather than individual plants "just dotted around on lawns". The larger the garden bed, the better the turning circle on the ride-on mower, and any 'gaps' are filled in with hardy, rabbit-proof perennials such as snow in summer, salvias and her grandmother's favourite, perennial silene. "I've spread it right throughout my garden, and I don't know why everyone doesn't grow it – it's so hardy, it flowers three to four times a year and the rabbits don't eat it," Sue says.

Over the years, there has been a lot of trial and error; ginkgos and oak trees prefer acid soil, while the picturesque lake designed to attract birds to the garden rarely receives visitors. "I made the mistake of planting lots of trees and shrubs around the perimeter, and the ducks and swans seem to prefer the open paddocks next door," Sue says.

The sudden collapse of one of the ageing gums was another disappointment. "It came crashing to the ground without warning and for a while it was heartbreaking, but once the tragedy of it had worn off we started to see the possibilities – it now makes a lovely sculptural border, and there was room for more roses!"

Tucked down a narrow dirt road off the main highway, "Camawald" isn't on the regular tourist route, but that hasn't stopped busloads of gardening enthusiasts from seeking the property out. "I love having other gardeners come here, as there's not much point in making a garden for myself," Sue says. "To have like-minded people wandering around is really enjoyable."

The Zwars have also opened the garden for charity fundraisers, and play an active role in the community through the Coonawarra Social Club and local Lutheran church. John is also heavily involved in the local Lions Club. "There's a real sense of community in Coonawarra, and it's close-knit and caring – we'd never shift from here," Sue says.

Instead, the couple is putting down more roots. In addition to regular visits from their three grandchildren (their daughters are now based in the Barossa Valley and Mount Gambier), they host visitors from around the globe in bed-and-breakfast accommodation recently built on the property. Guests can wander the grounds as much as they please, following winding pathways where fallen leaves crunch invitingly underfoot. "Most of them are visiting the local wineries, and aren't really aware of the garden until they arrive, so it ends up being a wonderful surprise," Sue says.

For more information: www.camawaldcottage.com.au



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A view across the garden; spent Echium blooms framed by red gums; poppies and gallica roses; free-flowering pink floribunda rose 'Bohica'; John and Sue in the paddock where John has been baling hay.

