



Lou's tips on how to create a sustainable and beautiful garden.

***Observe your natural surroundings.**

Go for walks in bushland close to where you live and take photos and notes about what plants are growing together. Pay attention to the way nature 'designs' spaces. Fallen logs, ground covers, shrubs and trees all harmonise in the natural environment.

***Experiment with native plants.**

If you like the look of a plant, take a photo or a sample and have it identified but be mindful of the soil type and conditions it is growing in. If it is a species' local to your area, you can feel confident that it will do well in your garden and be less reliant on water and maintenance.

Don't add manures to soil where you want to grow natives.

***When starting a new garden, prepare the surface by protecting it.**

Covering the earth with biodegradable mulch or gravel will prevent top-soil and moisture loss. It will also contribute to the creation of new soil, suppress dust and help to cool the atmosphere.

***Design the entire space.**

Even a rudimentary design can help you identify your boundaries, connections and opportunities. A design drawn to scale gives you a big picture idea of how pathways, open spaces and garden beds relate. It can help you decide where you will want large trees, seats, sculptures, paving and under cover areas. It can also save you a lot of time and money because it acts as a guide to stage your projects, knowing the pieces will all come together.

***Good earth for growing food.**

Australian soils are old, shallow and nutrient deficient so if you want to grow food you'll need to make some soil. An early project at the onset of building a garden should be the creation of a compost heap so that you can immediately start collecting organic matter. Keep ALL your compost and collect manure, leaves, lawn clippings and shredded newspaper. This can all be added to your vegie garden beds in perpetual rotation.

Isolate the vegie garden from the rest of the garden so that you limit the high maintenance and irrigated space to one area to keep it practical and achievable. You may need to make this area vermin-proof.

If you want chooks, keep the chook shed and run within this space so that you can develop a permacultural relationship between the chooks and the food garden. Vegies like chook poo, chooks like vegie scraps...

***Plant large trees first.**

These take the longest to grow and provide shelter for understory plants in summer as well as shade for you. Plant in late April/early May to get the best out of the winter/spring growing season.

***Don't be afraid to experiment.**

Remember it's your garden and you can do whatever you like with whatever you like. The best materials for construction are the free ones! You can make seats, retainer walls, paved areas, sculptures, chook runs and pergolas all out of recycled materials. There are no rules. Any material in great quantity and repetition has potential to make a statement.

***Provide habitat for animals, birds and insects.**

There is nothing more satisfying than creating a garden that can be shared by all creatures. A good layer of mulch will encourage skinks and insects which in turn, will bring ground foraging birds into your garden. You don't need to feed birds. Plenty of nectar-producing native plants will provide more than enough tucker for honey-eaters and spine-bills. Medium-sized dense shrubs, especially prickly ones, will create good nesting and protective habitat so that small bushland birds can flee from aggressors like noisy miners and cats. Woody debris (aka larger sticks and logs) will provide habitat for larger lizards. And a range of bird-baths, preferably one sitting under every garden tap for ease of re-filling, will astound you with the different variety of birds they attract.

If you want to see native wildlife thrive in the space you've created, keep your cat away from the garden. Even during the day, cats kill dozens of small reptiles and birds. They can't help it. It's their nature. Preferably create a cat enclosure to keep your cat safe and native wildlife safe from your cat.

***Nest boxes for arboreal animals.**

If you are lucky enough to have large trees, install a few nest boxes for parrots, kookaburras, sugar gliders, micro bats and other arboreal animals. The presence of tree hollows in the landscape is declining though the loss of large old trees so nest boxes provide much needed interim accommodation. It can take a eucalypt well over one hundred years to establish a small hollow and birds like owls, kookaburras and large parrots need big hollows.

Leave dead trees standing; they are havens for a myriad of native species and provide perches and nesting sites for larger birds.

***Remove barbed wire.**

Barbed wire is the cause of death for too many native animals each year. Gliders and bats are easily entangled in the sharp barbs and cannot escape. Consider replacing the barbed wire with plain wire.

***Spend time in the garden.**

Gardening is known to be one of the most rewarding and healing activities that a human can undertake with research showing that on average, gardeners live healthier and longer lives. So, the more time you spend in the garden, the happier you'll be. Observe the changes. Watch the animals and birds - perhaps record, draw or photograph them so that you have a record of the evolution of your space. The presence of a range of animal species is an indication that your garden is in a successful balance with nature. Experiment with different plants, materials and designs. Don't be afraid to change things, remove things, replace things.

And make sure you put seats all over the garden because eventually, when you've finished digging, mulching, raking and building, you're going to want to sit on one of them and just stare at the incredible place you've created.

Happy sustainable gardening!

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