

## COTTAGE GARDENS

One of the great things about being a Western Australian is that we can really live in our gardens for most of the year. Pity the poor English who have a few short weeks to enjoy their soft lawns and roses before the rain or the snow comes along.

The idea of outdoor rooms has its genesis in English and Southern European gardens. The concept is to construct discrete areas within the garden that are treated in much the same way as indoor living and recreation rooms. In other words you live in them perhaps one season at a time depending on the aspect, warmth or shade that each room features. "Cottage gardening" usually springs to mind when you talk about this concept. As we live in a dry state, in the driest continent, any concepts that are to succeed long term must take water conservation into account. Is it possible to create a cottage garden that is beautiful to look at, water efficient, requires a minimum of maintenance, provides cut flowers for the home as well as some perfume for that enchanting extra dimension?

Yes, it is and what's more it is easy, particularly if you are at the planning stage.

Enclosing areas of the garden so that you can work on a segment or 'outdoor room' at a time is a good way to start. Garden walls can be constructed from many materials but one relatively low cost alternative is wooden or fibro lattice.

While it has many creative possibilities, it is just right to match the feel of these new types of cottage gardens. Another way of creating a courtyard effect is to lower the soil level to make a sunken garden. Add a pond or water feature and you have a delightful spot to wind down after a stress filled day at work.

One of the oldest styles of outdoor room construction is the sanctuary garden. Basically it consists of a cross of paving to divide the space into four smaller and therefore more manageable beds. While large unbroken areas of paving reduce plant maintenance they tend to be very hot in summer. The sanctuary garden has a thin line of paving with lots of greenery overhanging the edges to avoid this heat build-up.

Try to cover the soil with living plants as this reduces weed growth and helps to keep the soil cool. Overplant to achieve a quick soil cover. Later on as the garden matures you remove some individuals. Early on you will need to deeply mulch the soil surface so as to conserve moisture and help the plants establish. Organic materials such as mushroom compost, home made compost, well matured animal manure, straw and local peat are all excellent materials to use. Even old carpet can be used and it is surprisingly effective and represents a form of recycling.

### **How can you reduce the water requirement of these gardens?**

Choose plants that need less water as a great start. While we are all tuned in to thinking "natives" there are an enormous number of plants from all over the world that can do the same job. One fertile field to look through are plants from other Mediterranean climates such as South Africa, California, the Middle East, Southern Europe and North Africa. Combine these with the dry area plants of Australia and you have an almost endless range of possibilities.

Soil preparation is central to water conservation in any garden. Mix one part of organic soil improvers such as compost, Waldecks Bio-ganic, peat moss or Waldecks Pure Peat to one part of your soil (be it sand or clay). This organic material holds moisture and plant foods close to the root system of the plant.

Colour theming is evident in many of these 'new style' gardens that are currently being planted. The white and silver theme garden has a special appeal particularly for couples that both work by day. The great joy of these gardens is that white flowers literally glow at night. You can enjoy this room right into the evening from spring through to autumn.

## Here is a selection of white flowering perennial plants to choose from:-

White nierembergia, seaside daisy (*Erigeron karvinskianus*), the new perennial petunia from Colourwave, African daisy (*Osteospermum eklonis*), African iris (*Diets vegeta*), Marguerite daisy "Frosty", Cuphea "Bianca", and Gaura "White Butterfly".

Some permanent shrubs to look at are:- Gardenia, Mexican orange blossom (*Choisya ternata*), white plumbago (*Plumbago capensis 'Alba'*), white Geraldton waxflower, Hebe, lauristinus (*Viburnum tinus*), European Elder (*Sambucus nigra*), roses including "Iceberg", Flower Carpet White and White Meidiland.

Creepers to cover walls or fences and fit this white theme could include the white potato vine (*Solanum jasminoides 'Album'*), Madagascan jasmine (*Stephanotis floribunda*), Star jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*), white wisteria, Cherokee rose (*Rosa laevigata*), Banksia rose (*Rosa banksia 'Alba Pleana'*) and the Brazillian jasmine (*Mandevilla laxa*).

Trees are also available that would coordinate with this colour selection and they include Irish Strawberry tree (*Arbutus uendo*), willow bottlebrush (*Callistemon salignus*), fiddlewood (*Citharexylum spinosum*), Bull Bay magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), Snow in Summer (*Melaleuca linarifolia*) and Frangipani.

(*Citharexylum spinosum*), Bull Bay magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), Snow in Summer (*Melaleuca linarifolia*) and Frangipani. Silver foliage is very commonly associated with drought tolerance and in addition many of these plants are able to 'farm water'. They absorb moisture from dew and make it available to adjacent plants. Look for these silver theme perennials at your local Waldeck Garden Centre :- Dusty Miller (*Cineraria maritima*), Snow in Summer (*Cerastium tormentosa*), Cotton Lavender (*Santolina Chamaecyparis*), silver spreader (*Artemisia*) wormwood (*Artemisia absinth*), globe artichoke, and Dianthus. Among the more permanent shrubs you could choose Lavender, Rosemary, Satin bush (*Podalyria calyptata*), Albany woolly bush (*Adenanthos*) & the stunning "Pride of Madeira (*Echium fastuosum*).

Pastel colours are very popular for decorating indoors today and demand for flowering plants in these same muted tones is evident in garden centres. In particular I've noticed pink and soft apricot flowers going into outdoor cottage garden rooms much more recently. Some examples include verbena "Peaches and Cream", Flower of the Year petunia "Flamingo", petunia "Raspberries N Cream" and Marguerite daisy "Peachy Cheeks".

A dramatic way to make a visual impact in the garden is to plant in what's called "bedding style". This means grouping say 5, 10 or 20 of the same plant in a drift or cluster. When they are all in flower the effect can be traffic stopping. Burswood Casino have planted carpet and landscape roses in this fashion and it's really eye-catching.

Small garden beds can be dressed up to look quite grand with a border hedge. We often see photos of English box hedges used this way. Unfortunately these plants are difficult to grow successfully through the heat of a West Australian summer. Also they are painfully slow taking up to 10 years to fully establish. I prefer to recommend the African box (*Myrsine africanus*) as its far tougher in the heat and it responds well to regular pruning. Another upright little winner for a low hedge is a new form of the "tough as old boots" herb rosemary. It is called "Tuscan Blue" and has a deep blue spring and summer blossom. The form of growth is tall and thin. If planted at 30 cm spacings it can fill in within a season.

How do you find plants that will fit into this new garden you are already planning?

There are a number of sources of information. You can call into your local Waldeck Garden Centre preferably on a weekday and ask for the assistance of trained staff to advise you. There are a few excellent books to guide you in your selections and they include:- "The Outdoor Room" by David Stevens and "The Renaissance of Italian Gardens" by Lorenza De'Medici.