

TIPS FOR OUR NORTHERN RIVERS REGION

A Presentation by
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Members were asked to provide “pearls of wisdom gleaned from their experience gardening in the Northern Rivers Region of NSW.



Be careful what you plant in the ground because here you could end up with a garden full of triffids, e.g pothos, syngonium, Nephrolepis cordifolia (fishbone fern) Hypoestes phyllostachya (freckle Face plant), Ctenanthe (Prayer Plant).

Our Krasnozem soil - a lovely deep red clay soil is very old, weathered and acidic. On slopes it leeches minerals very quickly so compost, compost, compost and regularly use plenty of organic fertiliser e.g. worm wee to open up the soil....most important during dry periods when uncovered soil becomes like concrete.

Palms can be a pain. Fronds drop all the time damaging plants beneath. Be careful where you plant them and what you use underneath.

Fungal diseases thrive with our high rainfall. Cordylines, frangipanis, roses, paw paws, zucchini & eggplant are affected. Use organic fungicide or fungal protection.

Be warned! Wallabies love eating gardenias, possums eat roses to the ground.

Choose plants to suit your microclimate – we are in the sub-tropics.

There are so many lovely sub-tropical flowering shrubs to use instead – medinilla, vireya, strobilanthes (various), barleria and more.

Hardy and no care plants include the various Dwarf Indian Hawthorn – Snow Maiden and Oriental Pearl, Carissa 'Desert Star'.

Buy seed grown Grass Trees rather than ex-ground. The ex-ground Grass Trees which come with a hefty price tag have suffered this year

Choose plants that are not pest and disease prone. Why grow hibiscus, azaleas, roses et al when you have to treat pests and diseases so frequently.

Think about integrated pest management (developed for cotton growers). A certain number of pests are acceptable on a plant. Just because you see a bug or caterpillar - doesn't mean you have to blitz it.

In our climate many plants considered to be "indoor plants" will grow and thrive in the garden under a tree canopy

OLD FAVOURITES

Farmer's Friends also known as Cobblers Peg or Bidens Pilosa

Whenever you see a Farmers Friend – rip it out whether you're in your PJ's or a Ball gown! If you don't it will quickly turn to seed – hubby will mow over it and a whole new colony is born. One year's seeding is 7 years weeding.

Don't pull cuttings from the soil to check if it's rooted – if it is living - leave it alone.

Putting sugar in the water encourages flowers in Christmas cactus or zygocactus.

Camellias respond well to a sprinkle of Epsom salts around the tree.

If you're having troubles with snails, spread a layer of loose sawdust around the plant.

When striking cuttings, plant a few radish seeds in the pot. Their root growth will help the plants to strike. After the radishes grow, cut the leaves off underground, but leave the roots in place.

Always rinse milk containers and throw the liquid onto the garden.

GARDENING WITH CHILDREN

Be very specific in telling children what to do (especially city kids).

An educator in the Edible Garden program for 5-10year olds asked a couple of young girls to take tuckshop food scraps to the garden. They duly obliged and kneeled down, gently lifted the dirt and planted the slices of bread in neat rows with the salad bits on top in a single layer and then covered it all with soil. They spent the next half hour digging up sandwiches and placing them in the conveniently located, obviously large compost bins!

All kids will eat or try something they have nurtured and harvested. It is amazing how it gives them confidence to grow more.

Exposing children to the garden from a young age encourages them to be in the garden daily. Parents are always so pleased to see their children engaged in a healthy activity.

No matter what era we live in, or where we live, children will always enjoy pushing a wheelbarrow or put their friend/sibling in it and push them around! A handy hint for new grandparents.

HERE'S COUPLE OF BLOOPERS BY CAROLE GAMBLE BEFORE SHE BECAME A PROFICIENT GARDENER!

1. Holidaying in Melbourne from Perth with her aunt and uncle who had a wonderful cool climate garden with a few empty spots, Carole decided to help out and fill the spots with Lily of the Valley she found growing wild near a creek.

Carole dug them up and proudly added them to the herbaceous border where, when the aunt saw her efforts, shrieked in horror and pulled them out because they were onion weed!!

2. Invited to help in her mother in law's beautiful garden in Melbourne for some weeding, and whilst said mother in law was inside preparing afternoon tea, Carole ripped out dozens of shasta daisies as she thought that they were weeds, especially after the disaster at her aunts' home!!

FLOWER ARRANGING

When arranging flowers in a vase or vessel always put the foliage in first, then place the flowers accordingly and leave some visual space for the 'butterflies to dance'

Hollow stemmed flowers – fill the stem with water then plug it with a cotton wool ball.

Don't mix daffodils with other flowers in a vase. The daffodils slime after cutting causing harm to the other flowers.

Easy secateur sharpener – fold over a piece of alfoil 8 times, then cut the foil with your secateur. The friction sharpens the tool.

GARDEN ADVICE

Cuttings - even though some cuttings will take by simply sticking them in the ground (providing the rain is regular), you will dramatically increase their chances by potting them up in either propagating or potting mix and placing them in a shaded position and watering daily until they strike roots - then plant them out.

Don't put gravel/broken terracotta in the bottom of pots to help drainage. It doesn't work – quite the reverse. The water is held by pressure in the finer particles of the potting mix and can't move down, so in effect raises the level of the water in the pot and can lead to root rot.

Pinching out growing tips on many plants may set their flowering back slightly, but will lead to a much bushier growth habit and ultimately more flowers.

Pruning – 'chop and drop' may not look very tidy, but you are ultimately returning the nutrients the plant needed to grow back into the soil - for the plant to use again.

Even experienced gardeners who appear to be very successful in their horticultural ventures have losses. Treat a dead plant as an opportunity to try something new!

PEARLS FROM LESLEY

This is something that I have done several times and it really works.

Improving the soil before you plant a new tree or shrub is always helpful and means the plant will get off to a good start. An easy way to do this is to dig the hole several weeks to a month in advance and then empty the contents of your kitchen compost bin every few days over the next week into the hole. Cover up with the soil you removed and tamp down lightly.

If you've got any animal manure handy then chuck a spadeful of that on top but it is not mandatory. Leave the site for a few weeks, watering if the weather is dry. After a month dig out the hole to plant and you will be amazed how rich and worm filled the soil is. It doesn't matter if there is the odd piece of unrotten vegetable in there as it will rot down in time and continue to feed your new planting.

Lavender can be hard to grow in our humid environment. A healthy lavender in winter can start to turn up its toes as the humidity rises. I have found that by cutting the plant back hard it will often reemerge as a healthier plant. Having said that my brother in law once killed his lavender by pruning back really hard so be warned, it doesn't work in every case.

CAROL LEA'S PASSION FOR SNAILS & SLUGS!

Carol's pearls of wisdom are not the sort anyone is going to hang around their neck real soon.

These molluscs have driven her crazy and must have had a huge impact on her son James so he decided his year 7 science project was 'Snail Control'

He set up 4 large juice containers as terrariums, with mondo grass for shelter, petunia for food- then equal numbers of snails in each container.

1. Was the control – only snails
2. Had a ring of broken egg shells circling the petunia
3. Had coffee sprayed on the petunia
4. Had commercial snail & slug pellets

The results were very clear...

Container 1 – (only snails) Petunia decimated and snails were happy & fat

Container 2 – (Eggshells) most of the Petunia was eaten

Container 3 – (Coffee) about half the Petunia was eaten and a couple of dead snails

Container 4 – (Pellets) relatively intact Petunia & mostly dead snails

Obvious evidence on how to control snails, but Carol was more concerned about poisoning birds and pets, so she continued with her own preferred method which was – patrolling the garden head torch beaming and clip lock plastic bag in hand filled with the slimy creatures – looking like a mad woman!

Things got worse when Carol was asked to cater for a friend's wedding, including decorating the cake & venue and growing the wedding flowers. She would wake at 3am, worried she had bitten off more than she could chew – so she donned the said head torch and got rid of those blessed snails.

LANDSCAPING TIPS

Be wary of fashion fads – in 2019 a lot of people jumped on the drought tolerant plants and succulent bandwagon because it had been so dry. Some of these plants are suffering during this current wet season.

Group plants together with similar watering requirements

Plant for leaf size, texture, and colour and treat flowers as a bonus

Half the species and double the quantities

If using a large number of different species in a garden – select one to three species that are repeated through the garden to visually link the garden spaces

Divide large open areas into garden rooms. More interesting than one large open space.

Consider views out from the home.

Level changes in the garden are more pleasant if done with a couple of low retaining walls rather than one high wall.

Steps in the garden – ensure each riser and tread are the same. Your eye can't cope easily with variations. A very pleasant riser: tread ratio is 160mm riser and 350mm tread – like the steps at the Sydney Opera House - which you glide up.

Paved outdoor living areas tend to be too small. It is surprising how much space a dining setting and lounge setting take up. Best to use the largest area available for comfort and accessibility

Small urban gardens – stick to simple rectilinear/geometric shapes. Curves (must be gentle and smooth)

Intricate curves work well in large gardens.

Frame views with trees. Much more interesting than large open views

Have areas of lawn around the house so you can see the snakes approaching.

When looking at garden images for inspiration best to look for gardens in northern NSW. SE Queensland and not from tablelands, Melbourne, Mornington Peninsula etc.

When buying gardening books look for Australian writers and publications.

ENCOURAGING NATIVE WILDLIFE

The average Australian backyard contains more species of lizards than the whole of the UK!

All around us, there are many different species of totally harmless lizards that will take up residence in a well-managed native garden. Soft-bodied geckos will come out at night and gobble up mozzies and moths.

Larger lizards like the blue-tongued skinks or Water Dragons are totally harmless.

Give them some space and let them eat your snails and slugs.

Scattering a few rocks, fallen bark and thick branches throughout your garden provides the kinds of crevices and crannies lizards need. This provide spaces for them to keep warm in winter, cool in summer and safe from predators like ravens.

The best way to encourage native wildlife into your garden is to choose local plants. Species that are native to your area are best. This way, the birds, butterflies and other animals found naturally will be most likely to reside in your garden.

There's a bewildering array of native plants with beautiful flower colours and foliage textures to choose from.

If you've created a garden for nature, you can let it feed the birds through its flowers, seeds and insects.

THIS MONTH IN THE GARDEN

We need colour at this time of year so plant marigolds, lupins, pansies, violas, phlox & verbenas. Popping these in around your veggies will give some colour and interest to the patch, and act as beneficial insect attractors.

Water smarter. Water first thing in the morning, and instead of quickie irrigation, a nice, deep drink a couple of times a week is far more beneficial.

Always check soil moisture before wateringdon't waste your precious drinking water if Mother Nature has already done all the hard work for you

Top up mulch on your veggie patches, herb gardens and ornamental beds, especially important for weed suppression.

Mulch after watering, to a depth of about 7cm. Keep mulch clear of plant stems, especially young seedlings. Choose sustainable, low environmental impact mulch, one that will enrich your soil as it breaks down. Also look for one that has done the least amount of travel to get to you.

Weeding is still needed at this time of year. Try and remove as many competitors as possible before the weather starts warming up again

GARDEN TECHNOLOGY

Smart gardening technology is transforming traditional horticulture practices, making it more efficient, accessible, and even more enjoyable for gardeners of all skill levels. The integration of technology into gardening is fostering a new age of green thumbs

Take advantage of this technology with Smart gardening apps that provide planting calendars, weather alerts, and maintenance reminders, ensuring your garden stays in top shape.

HOME MADE REMEDIES

Growing food without the use of chemicals will ensure we keep nature's balance in check. Nature has a way of helping out in times of need, so waging chemical warfare that takes out everything will leave your veggie patch more susceptible to future attacks

Garlic & Chilli Spray

A great all-rounder for treating aphids, whitefly, thrip, some possums, snails and slugs.

Combine 6 garlic cloves (crushed and roughly chopped), 10-12 chillies thinly sliced and 1 tablespoon of biodegradable dishwashing liquid into 1 litre of boiling water.

Soak for 24 hours and then strain into a spray bottle. Spray the foliage of affected plants and repeat the dosage after 3 days. Use within 2 weeks.

Soapy Spray

Another for aphids, whitefly, thrip and caterpillars.

Mix 1 tablespoon of biodegradable dishwashing liquid with 1 teaspoon of cooking oil in 1 litre of water. Spray over foliage particularly on the underside of leaves where the pests often live. Spray will keep for 1 month.

Yearlong Orchid Bloom with Garlic Water

Orchids will bloom for a year with this simple, cost-effective, organic supplement, promising good results. Garlic water protects orchid soil, enhances growth, and restores leaf density, safeguarding against pests and diseases.

Recipe:

- Peel 4 cloves of garlic and place in a long-necked bottle.

- Pour 1.5 litres of water into the bottle and soak the garlic for 24hours.
- Strain the solution into a suitable container.
- Apply this natural fertilizer every three weeks.

For brilliant orchid leaves:

Combine 2 glasses of water & 1 tablespoon of milk in a container
Immerse a cotton pad in the solution to clean the leaves. Milk proteins shield the orchid from pests and fungi, providing leaves with a brilliant shine.

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