The native garden: reconnecting home and place

Planting a native garden has resulted in more than environmental benefits for one gardening enthusiast; it has nurtured his spirit as well.

by Paul Gioia

I live in an old, inner-city suburb of Perth. Of the 163 front yards in my street, only my house and one other have a predominantly native garden. About a quarter have a tended garden of some kind, while the rest have either no garden or just lawn (largely buffalo). You have to be careful what to read into this, but clearly gardening is not a priority in my street, and certainly not native gardens.

I feel a little conspicuous, even eccentric, though somewhat comforted that at least one other resident has a similarly eccentric vision for how to present their home to the street. In comparison to the few lush lawns, bright green foliage and vibrant annuals of neighbouring gardens, mine has a dull khaki green typical of dry sclerophyll bushland. My wife reminds me of this regularly and asks why we can't have a 'proper' garden like everyone else. But, in spring, it explodes with colour and the others don't hold a candle to it. Of course I would say that. On my verge I have majestic wandoo (*Eucalyptus wandoo*), salmon gum (*E. salmonophloia*), and a pink-flowering marri (*Corymbia calophylla*) that kills my lawnmower with its large honkey nuts; and in the garden *Banksia, Kunzea, Conostylis, Jacksonia, Daviesia, Acacia, Hakea, Xanthorrhoea, Melaleuca, Allocasuarina,* a bunch of native sedges and grasses and things I don't remember planting. And *Phytophthora cinnamomi*.

The beginnings

It was over 25 years ago I pulled the roses out with restrained excitement and started learning about and memorising the names of local Western Australian plants. With the help of books by Charles Gardner, Rica Ericson and Robert Powell, I'd march off to one of the few native plant nurseries around at the time, only to find very few of the plants on their catalogue.

Neighbours would look askance at those poor seedlings struggling for life in a heady mix of water-repellent

Above Paul Gioia's home garden.
Photo – Paul Gioia/DEC

Bassendean sand and builder's rubble hiding under a layer of mulch. "Don't mollycoddle," the books said—WA species are adapted to nutrient-poor soils in a harsh, dry environment. In my purist phase I took this to mean don't water, don't fertilise. I had a lot to learn.

And one of the first things I learnt, surprisingly, was that I loved my garden. "To cultivate a garden is to walk with God," said Christian Bovee. I believe him. Early in the morning I would wander through the garden, reconnecting across the taxonomic divide, species with species. In some small, infinitesimal way it was a kind of restitution for the act of clearing that made way for the house in which I lived.

Not all easy

I also learnt that planting a native garden is not as easy as you might have heard. If you want an authentic garden you have to be there for the long haul. For a start, plants die. Take a look under a banksia or jarrah tree in spring after the rains or a fire. There are thousands of seedlings, yet few survive the first summer. It is nature's way—a necessary extravagance in an unforgiving environment. Think about that when buying from a nursery. At $2 a tube, how many individuals of a single species will you have to buy before you get that tough, hardy individual with the genetic resilience to survive? It's just a fact of life.

A native garden is more than a couple of lonely Kings Park specials. When I visit a local patch of bushland I see old plants, young plants, dead plants, new growth and woody stems; senescing shrubs and trees keeled over, sheltering myriad fauna, fungi and

Left A red wattlebird feeding on kunzea flowers.
Photo – Sallyanne Cousans

Below left A mix of native species including southern plains banksia (*Banksia media*), honey bush (*Hakea lissocarpha*), illyarrie (*Eucalyptus erythrocorys*) and grasstree (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*).
Photo – Paul Gioia/DEC

germinating seeds. But I also see small things: annuals, grasses, creepers, sedges, small shrubs. It is often the small things that contribute the largest component of biodiversity. If you want your garden to look authentic, you need to plant the little things, and not pull out the old woody things (despite what your partner says).

My local council has an active garden competition, and an even more active catchment group. After winning the Waterwise category a couple of years in a row (second, then first), I spent the prize money on as many kinds of small plants as I could find. For four or five years I'd buy a hundred or so plants at a time. You can fit a lot of small plants in a typical suburban patch.

Enter *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, a virulent pathogen commonly known as dieback that kills many native and exotic species (see 'More about dieback' opposite). Many gardens in Perth are now infected with this pathogen (anecdotally up to two-thirds of my suburb). Somewhere, somehow, it came into my garden. My best guess is it came from one of the nurseries. After many unexpected deaths I had a soil sample analysed at the Department of Environment and Conservation's (DEC's) Vegetation Health Service. It confirmed I had *Phythophthora cinnamomi*. Over the past year or so I've been choosing resistant species, but it is still heartbreaking to accept this pathogen will prevent my garden from containing many plants that naturally belong to the area.

A sense of place

So why bother? If it's so hard to source the right plants, so hard to get them to survive, why plant a native garden? At a practical level, if you're not going to opt for a brick and tile yard, one compelling reason is

Above Fuchsia grevillea (*Grevillea bipinnatifida*).

Right Pink-flowering marri.

Below right Dwarf sheoak (*Allocasuarina humilis*).
Photos – Paul Gioia/DEC

water use. With WA's warming and drying climate, increasing restrictions are inevitable. Local plants are much better adapted to harsh conditions than many exotics. Also, some nurseries now have a much greater range of local plants.

But there are other less tangible, equally important, reasons. There is something special and unique about our natural bushland, though so many of us take it for granted. Perth is coincidentally sited in a highly biodiverse area. As city dwellers we need to live somewhere, and clearing is unavoidable; nevertheless, we are losing species and ecosystems as a consequence. If we can reconnect our home with a sense of place by planting a little bushland in our own front yard, it might make us a little more protective of our remaining bushland, at least recognise how hard it is to replace. A native garden can also become a signpost for the community, reminding neighbours we are all part of a broader ecosystem. So if you're lucky enough to still have original native vegetation on your block, keep it! Once it's gone, it's damn hard, if not impossible, to put back.

Sometimes I think my garden has become a folly, if not a noble obsession. But it helps keep me human and connected, and reminds me we have to protect the environment for our kids too. The rewards are deep and sustaining.

More about dieback

Phytophthora (which means 'plant killer' in Greek) is a water mould that attacks the roots of susceptible plants, limiting their uptake of water and nutrients and eventually killing them. *Phytophthora* dieback affects a large number of wildflower species, common garden plant species and horticultural crops, including roses, azaleas, fruit trees, and many Australian native plant species (for example banksias, grasstrees, jarrah and zamia palms). It strikes in natural areas such as national parks but can also occur in your own backyard.

Once the pathogen has been introduced into your garden it cannot be eradicated and can become a major headache for enthusiastic home gardeners. To prevent the disease from entering your own backyard there are number of simple steps you can take, including:

- Don't put plants in your garden from local bushland areas.
- Don't re-pot your plants using unsterilised soil. Always use a high quality potting mix.
- Don't use green (raw) mulch.
- Do buy your plants from nurseries accredited under the Nursery Industry Accreditation Scheme Australia (NIASA) or those that use hygienic practices to prevent *Phytophthora* dieback. For a complete list of accredited nurseries in your area go to www.ngia.com.au and look for the NIASA business directory under the Business Improvement menu.

If dieback is in your garden, avoid inadvertently transferring it back into the bush by using appropriate hygiene.

Also, if you already have dieback in your garden, perhaps the best way to control it is through the use of the chemical phosphite. While not a permanent cure, phosphite is a biodegradable fungicide that protects plants against the pathogen by boosting the plant's own natural defences and thereby allowing susceptible plants to survive within infected areas. Phosphite is available at most large nurseries and rural supply stores. Treating plants with phosphite is inexpensive; for example, a medium-sized jarrah tree requires less than 50 cents worth of the chemical.

Injecting a tree with phosphite provides three to five years' protection from *Phytophthora* dieback. In contrast, spraying with phosphite provides protection for only one or two years. Because it provides only temporary protection, treatment needs to be ongoing. You therefore need to decide whether you want to try and maintain your garden with all your favourite trees and shrubs, or whether it might be easier to choose only dieback-resistant species.

For further extensive information about how to detect and manage dieback, and a list of common garden plants resistant to the disease, you can visit both www.cpsm.murdoch.edu.au and www.dec.wa.gov.au. You can also contact the Dieback Working Group (0438 044 488/www.dwg.org.au).

Contributed by Chris Dunne

Paul Gioia is a principal research scientist in the Department of Environment and Conservation's Science Division. He can be contacted on (08) 9219 9067 or by email (paul.gioia@dec.wa.gov.au).

Regulars

Publishing credits
Executive editor Madeleine Clews.
Editors Joanna Moore, Samille Mitchell.
Scientific/technical advice Kevin Thiele, Lachie McCaw, Keith Morris, Chris Simpson.
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Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.
Cartography Promaco Geodraft.
Marketing Cathy Birch.
Phone (08) 9334 0296 or *fax* (08) 9334 0432.
Subscription enquiries
Phone (08) 9219 8000.
Prepress and printing GEON, Western Australia.

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September 2011

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ISSN 0815-4465

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation, 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

Visit DEC online at www.dec.wa.gov.au to search the *LANDSCOPE* catalogue.

Department of
Environment and Conservation