

FIONA BROCKHOFF'S

journey to become one of Australia's pre-eminent landscape designers began with a strong antipathy to the garden at the family beach house at Portsea and what she saw as the boringly standard set-piece plantings around the Mornington Peninsula.

"It was agapanthus, cypress, buffalo lawn and the odd fruit tree," she says over coffee at Market Lane café in Prahran Market.

"It was never very interesting. I don't think it challenged you visually, and it seemed to be the norm; and I think it was the norm because it grew easily. It became what people did because agapanthus flowered over summer when you were down (at the beach) and during winter it looked after itself."

Brockhoff's love for and ideas about gardening were developing even as a small child at Portsea and at the family home in inner Melbourne.

"I came from a gardening family," she says. "My mum was very interested in design and architecture and plants. Dad's interest was lawn, which was immaculately mown and kept."

"We lived in a late-'50s house that had a very modernist-style garden, lots of spiky architectural plants and a lot of emphasis on foliage and plant shape, rather than flower, colour and razzle dazzle."

"I always got involved in the upkeep of the garden. I think I just liked the connection with the earth so I used to fiddle with seedlings and bulbs. Not so much clipping things. That was more left to the men in the family."

"I enjoyed nurturing plants and potting things up and having little collections and fiddling. Maybe that came from being almost an only child. It was something I could do at home and I loved being outside. I had much older brothers and a sister. By the time they were teenagers I was eight or nine. I was at home a lot with an ageing father."

Brockhoff didn't begin challenging the thinking behind the gardens that surrounded her until she started at Burnley Agricultural College in 1983, where she studied landscape design and horticulture. It was here that she began developing what would become a famous signature: garden designs working strictly in sync with the environment and in their appropriate context.

"I had strong feelings about people's approach to gardening," she says. "A lot of people seemed to change a site to accommodate the plants they wanted. So rather than looking at existing conditions – (say) it's a sandy soil and it's windy and we haven't got a lot of water or money to spend or time to look after it – (they should be saying) how can we approach gardening in a more sensible manner? What are the plants we can use that will grow easily?"

"That (may) involve using local indigenous plants or exotic plants from similar climatic conditions, maybe from the Mediterranean or South Africa or other more arid parts of the world."

Brockhoff is well known for championing the use of indigenous or exotic plants in their correct context. "I

didn't necessarily differentiate between exotic versus native. And I've often been careful to do that, because natives got such a bad reputation in the '70s when they were planted with gay abandon around blocks of new flats and then left and five years later could look like something the dog dragged in."

"People had this idea that you could plant natives and leave them and a gorgeous native garden grew, but that didn't often happen."

The trend in the 1970s for "native gardens" on small suburban blocks wasn't just often poorly conceived but sometimes destructive.

"A lot of potentially big trees were planted too close to the foundations of buildings, which posed a risk and a maintenance nightmare and would possibly disturb the foundation of next door's house," she says.

"No one realised the gum tree they bought in a 14-centimetre pot was going to grow into a 30-metre Tasmanian monster."

"I wanted to address that because I thought native plants had many merits but they had never been explored in a true garden sense. People established some really beautiful native gardens in outer areas of Melbourne like Eltham, but no one had played with manipulating or clipping them to see what they were really capable of."

Brockhoff also works with local materials where possible. "It might be the use of local limestone in Sorrento or some recycled pier timbers. It's about not importing things from the other side of the world, which can cost a lot of money and is wasteful of resources. I also think those imported materials can look terribly out of place ... It's a bit like using limestone in Melbourne – you wouldn't do that, but bluestone looks fine in Melbourne. It's about context."

To describe her methods, Brockhoff sent me this: "These gardens are site-driven. Factors such as topography, soil type, prevailing winds and rainfall are integral to the decision-making process. The resulting landscapes have a strong sense of place and use fewer resources in their making and maintenance." She adds: "A sea of fine gravel often takes the place of a resource-hungry lawn."

In 1994 Brockhoff and her partner, David Swann, moved to Sorrento where they developed a superb garden, which has been part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme (now called Open Gardens Australia) for 10 years. The property is called Karkalla, an Aboriginal word for pigface, an edible indigenous plant.

"We developed a garden in old tertiary dunes

where the soil was really poor, there was a lot of wind and I didn't want to use a lot of water," she says. "I wanted to make a garden that was beautiful but not resource-hungry, so I started to look at the local indigenous flora."

"We also tend a large vegetable garden, orchard and vineyard. These are the areas where we spend time and use water. I always encourage clients to have a productive part in their garden where they grow food to eat. It is very rewarding and can reduce your grocery bills. I studied permaculture and, where possible, try to adopt these principles. This has to do with the placement of various elements of a garden and recycling within."

Brockhoff adheres to the philosophy championed by architect Glenn Murcutt of "treading on the earth lightly".

"I agree entirely with that," she says. "I respect the earth and I have an absolute love for nature, which I've had since I went to Timbertop (one of Geelong Grammar's campuses, near Mansfield). There's also an economic angle. If you tread lightly on the earth you don't have to spend a lot of money making a beautiful house or garden."

I ask Brockhoff about our apparently lingering adherence to English gardens and why people were still planting oak trees.

"Probably because we still love them and they hold a place in our hearts. But, like architecture and many other things, we've developed a sense of our own style and the confidence to display it ... In the last 10 to 15 years in Melbourne when water has been scarce a lot of things have had to be rethought."

She is not immune to the charms of the great gardens of the world, including Sissinghurst in England, which she enjoyed visiting. "It does appeal to me, and it's beautiful and it has a sense of place and a sense of fit, but to me it doesn't have the same enjoyment in an Australian environment. A garden like Sissinghurst is very resource-hungry, the plants require a lot of water."

Brockhoff and Swann (universally known as Swanny) have been life and professional partners since 1994 (they met while skiing at Mount Hotham). Swann is an engineer and constructs the gardens Brockhoff designs.

For 12 years from 1994 they lived at Sorrento, where most of their commissions were. Now, with their two daughters, they live in Melbourne.

Brockhoff says people should understand that gardening is a process, not a product.

"A garden continually evolves. It's a work in progress. It's really important that someone – hopefully the owner



– is involved in that ongoing process. You really need someone who's got their head around what's going on in the garden to help it develop. Conditions can change, and the garden needs to adapt."

"I try and remain involved in the maintenance of those gardens by going back and visiting regularly, sometimes replacing plants where necessary. I can help with the progression of the garden ... That's why it's so important to give people a garden that they love and can relate to because then they're more likely to be involved."

A way from landscape design, Brockhoff's passions are bushwalking, beachcombing, camping, fruit and vegie gardening and travelling.

"I'm not a big city person but there are some that really intrigue me. Paris is one of them," she says. She and Swann are passionate collectors of indigenous art. They often travel to the areas where the paintings were made, which led them last year to the Kimberley on a family camping holiday.

"We have been interested to see where many of the works we owned came from," she says. "The scale of some of the landscapes and their colours and textures are often mind-blowing. I gather a lot of inspiration from nature."

"It's so important to give people a garden that they love and can relate to ..."

Brockhoff and Swann have decided to re-open Karkalla in the summer of 2013 as part of Open Gardens Australia, where garden enthusiasts can see "naturalistic"-style gardening with indigenous plants, some of which have been given a helping hand.

While her work is characterised by a naturalistic approach, Brockhoff will often bend nature around, and there's a playful element to the designs.

"I experiment a lot with torture and manipulation," she says.

At Karkalla, their Sorrento garden abuts the national park. Brockhoff was inspired by the indigenous vegetation that had been pruned into certain shapes by the elements.

"A lot of plants were tightly formed because they'd been continuously sheared by the wind and salt, and I thought there's no reason I can't do that in my garden and create the sort of forms that I would like to see."

"As a result, the garden relies on the texture and form of plants rather than flower colour, which is fleeting."

"We have sheoaks in the shape of lollipops and 'correa' balls (made from a grey-leaved shrub called correa alba).

"That's been a lot of fun, playing around and seeing what their capabilities are. Swanny is the Edward Scissorhands of the household. Men with tools are very good, but they need to be supervised at all times." A

pwillmoth@theweeklyreview.com.au

» WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK @ www.theweeklyreview.com.au/interview

» A Fiona Brockhoff-designed, David Swann-built garden can be seen at The Moorings, 14a Bass Street, Flinders, on January 7-8, 10am-4.30pm, as part of Open Gardens Australia. Entry \$6. www.opengarden.org.au

THE NATURAL

Fiona Brockhoff's childhood passion for gardening meant she was destined to spend her professional life outdoors. PETER WILMOTH meets her.