

THE GENIUS OF THE INDIGENOUS

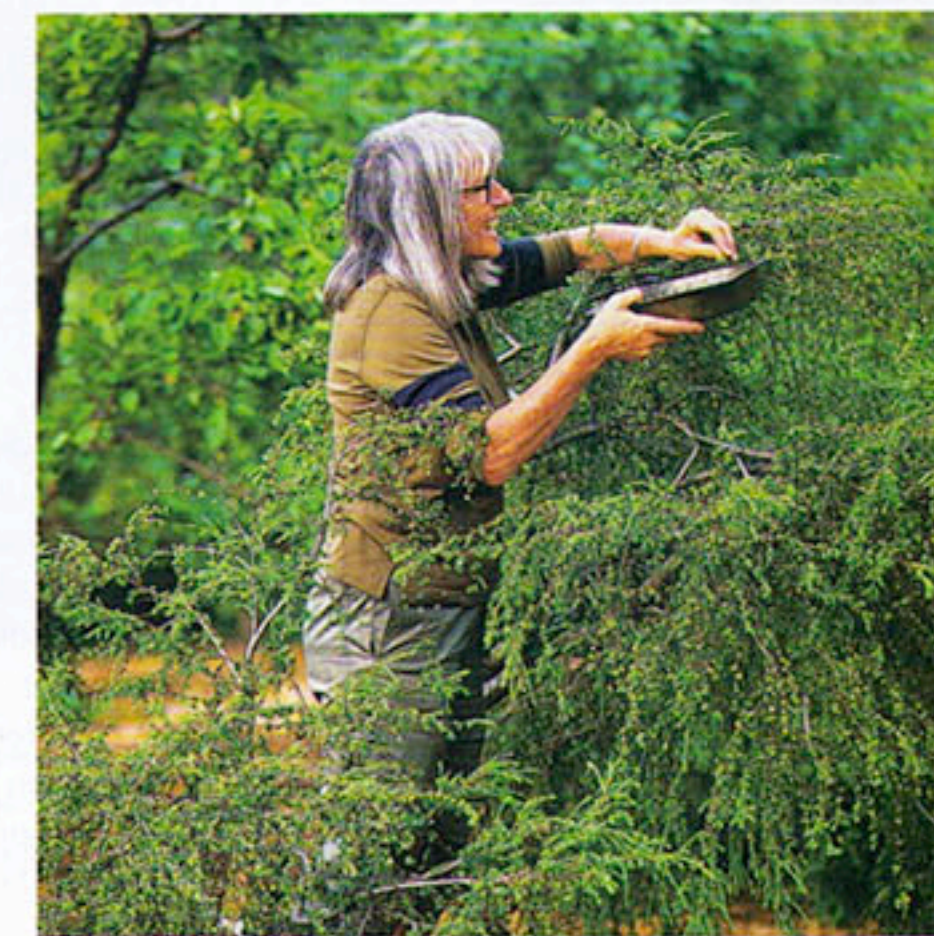
CREATING A UNIQUE GARDEN ON THE COASTAL EDGES OF AUSTRALIA'S SOUTHERN LIMITS CALLED FOR AN UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY WITH THE IMMEDIATE ENVIRONS. PAUL URQUHART VISITS OFFSHORE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE OWNER'S APPROACH. PICTURES BY LORNA ROSE.

A PATH OF RECYCLED PIER TIMBERS IS EDGED WITH *FICINIA*, *TETRAGONIA* AND *LEUCOPHYTA*. OPPOSITE: JANE COLLECTS THE SEED OF THE THYME RICE FLOWER, *PIMELEA SERPYLLIFOLIA* FOR USE BY LOCAL BUSH REGENERATORS.

Designing in a wild environment where natural topography and endemic vegetation still owe something to the original wilderness can be difficult. There are dilemmas to solve. How much to change and how much to keep are at the head of the issues that a sensitive gardener faces. Nowhere is this more apparent than in coastal gardens.

Perhaps our ultimate judgement comes down to how lightly the human footprint alters the sense of place. How much do we cater to the needs of nature? And just how much to compromise to accommodate the human inhabitants? Good design in such locations, and indeed in areas long touched by the hand of man, enhances nature but still retains a sense of place.

On Victoria's Mornington Peninsula sits a garden where these dilemmas have been both faced head on and resolved. Offshore is a naturalistic garden where the owner, Jane Burke and her husband, Peter – in conjunction with designer and landscape architect Fiona Brockhoff and David Swann – have made a conscious decision not to overwhelm or impose a design style. Instead, the naturalness of the setting has been allowed to set the parameters and look of the garden, and the five-acre site merges into the surrounding coastal dunes and national park. The garden has grown organically, almost like a pared-down, idealised Japanese landscape. But this is Australia and located on one





of the southern limits of continental Australia at that. South of this point, save Tasmania, there is little between the land and Antarctica.

The landform has a natural windswept appeal. Its colour comes from the juxtaposition of steely greens of the foliage with the changing blue-sky vistas scudded by varying cloud forms. It is a dramatic landscape that changes through the seasons from storm to still, from bleaching sunlight to forbidding leaden skies. Here, plant forms brush your senses lightly, like a wisp of wind.

Jane and Peter came to the property 36 years ago, when it was little more than bush with an old beach shack set on land that was once excavated for its limestone. Jane is a botanist working as a land care and bush regeneration consultant and her garden is in many ways a botanist's interpretation of the landscape. Her approach to garden-making comes from her scientific training and sensibilities. Hearing this you might think her garden would be a dry argument, concise and scientific but there is more here than a fusty academic collection.

Jane's garden is a poetic landscape – simple, straightforward and supremely stylish. Jane's planting philosophy is to use endemic plants that create the character of the area and reinvent them in a garden setting. The result is a sublimely peaceful garden brought to life by exercising a scientist's discipline. She has largely restricted herself to local species so that the garden is neither flashy nor blowsy with imported bloomers but has a quiet and rarely seen elegance. Most gardeners might react negatively to the suggestion of using only local plants but Jane's is an example of what a garden ought to be in fragile coastal areas.

Offshore has colour but it gains strength from texture and plant form. Its design presents an open visage to the

SPECIES DEBATE

The indigenous versus native is a burning debate within Australian plant circles. Australia is a vast land spanning a vast collection of topographies and climates from tropical rainforest to desert; from alpine heaths to wooded forests and open savannah. The rich flora of the west has proved rich picking for horticulturists but to call western plants 'native' in this far south-eastern corner is almost like comparing the flora of John O'Groats with that of the Western Caucasus.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: THE COASTAL TEA TREE *LEPTOSPERMUM LAEVIGATUM* COVERS MUCH OF THE AREA SURROUNDING THE GARDEN. ROUNDED CLUMPS OF *LEUCOPHYTA BROWNII* ECHO THE SHAPE OF DISCARDED LOBSTER POTS. LILAC HIBISCUS, *ALYOGYNE HUEGELII*, OFFERS A SPLASH OF COLOUR. ABOVE: THE TERRACE JUTS INTO THE SOFT SWATHES OF THE WALLABY GRASS LAWN.



ABOVE: IN PLACES THE LAWN IS EDGED BY A LOW CORREA HEDGE. BELOW: AUSTRODANTHONIA RACEMOSA MERGES INTO A GROVE OF ALLOCASUARINA VERTICILLATA. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: TUFTY PLANTS SUCH AS FICINIA NODOSA THRIVE IN SALT SPRAY, POOR NUTRIENT LEVELS AND SANDY SOIL. THE STEELY GREYS OF THE GUEST HOUSE WITH ITS SHINGLE ROOF ARE ECHOED IN THE PLANTING SCHEME. CUSHION BUSH, LEUCOPHYTA BROWNII IS FOUND LOCALLY ON SAND DUNES AND HELPS TO GIVE OFFSHORE ITS EFFORTLESSLY NATURAL APPEARANCE.



viewer. The lines of site are unfettered giving a clear view of sweeping paths with undulating masses of foliage balancing and adding texture to the open planes. This is an open-plan garden rather than a series of rooms. It rejoices in its spaciousness with the walking tracks intersecting the wilder sections. The garden's understated appeal stems from a benign manipulation of the real coastal landscape with idealised nature.

A lawn, more like a sea or a sweeping drift of wallaby grass (*Austrodanthonia racemosa*) enhances this openness. The mass of grass sways in the sea breeze and catches the late afternoon light creating entrancing patterns of light. In winter, when rains are reasonably plentiful and well into late spring, the grass is green, shiny and mobile. As summer progresses and the skies adopt their southern-ocean blueness and the seeds set, the annual transformation takes place with first the grasses drying slowly to a burnished green then speeding up to a straw-like gold. A willow-leaved peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*), a Western Australian addition, dates from Jane's earliest attempts at gardening movement. Mature now, it stays but Jane admits she would not plant it today.

The paths are wide and generous, and made with recycled pier timbers interspersed with decomposed granitic gravel, rich in minerals from a local quarry. Tufty plants are scattered throughout and include *Finicia nodosa* often found in degraded pasture, spear grass (*Stipa stipoides*), *Tetragonia* species and *Leucophyta brownii*, all found on local dunes.

Jane collects seed of local provenance since the rationale for her garden is biodiversity with a botanical, rather than a horticultural, approach. Jane demonstrates this by means of a local native, the moonah, (*Melaleuca lanceolata*). She has specimens of Western Australian provenance and local plants side by side. The local form is tolerant of the soil's high lime content while those from Western Australian, not adapted to the local calcareous sands, are stunted and chlorotic.

Most of the surrounding land is covered by coastal tea tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum*) but many plants are dying, a combination of age and previous land use. While dying trees are usually seen as a disaster, Jane explains that this is a short-lived opportunistic plant. It spread rapidly after the land was cleared last century for the limestone workings. Jane is gradually removing old and dead plants in order to restore the land's diversity as it was before clearing. The early results are pleasing with species previously unknown in the district returning. For Jane, that makes it well worth the effort. ■

