

productive partners

Husband and wife, landscaper Paul and horticulturist Mim, have all the skills needed to create a dream garden, complete with vegies, chooks, dogs and lots of rare and beautiful plants.

words meredith kirton photos sue stubbs



BEAUTY & BOUNTY: Mim and Paul's backyard combines flowers, foliage, chooks and organic home-grown crops.

For Mim and Paul Downes, who are young, newly married and with no children yet, their dream has always been to create a beautiful garden. Both live, work and eat gardening, but they both wanted something more for their own garden – a productive, healthy and sustainable place in which to live.

Here at their home in Heidelberg, Vic they were quick to develop their yard into a garden, equipped with vegetables, chooks, al fresco dining area and even a pizza oven. "The pizza oven was Paul's idea," says Mim, "I wasn't happy about sacrificing garden space, but I really love it now we have it."

perfect match

Paul is a landscaper who works with Phil Stray at Crafted Landscapes in Melbourne (www.craftedlandscapes.com.au) and Mim is a horticulture teacher at Swinburne Department of Horticulture and Environment. With that kind of backyard teamwork, it's no surprise that their garden has evolved into a growing masterpiece, with rare and unusual plants like *Sonchus arboreus* growing alongside more commonplace subjects such as *Gaura* and *Euphorbia* in beautiful harmony.

Part of the key to this successful blend has been the 'zoning' of areas into distinct uses. The patio is a designated

outdoor entertaining space, the vegie patch of raised galvanised planters is the food garden, and the upper level, which has a lawn and garden beds and access to the shed and chicken house, is a quiet area for contemplation. (And for chook lovers, the chooks here are Rhode Island Red x New Hampshire Red crosses, named Ricky Bobby and Vivian.)

The change in site levels, with the backyard getting progressively higher as it goes back to the boundary, is achieved through terracing and steps.

DELICIOUS: these raised galvanised steel planters for the vegies are amazingly productive for their size.





ENTERTAINERS: the outdoor pizza oven (above) is a big hit with all who enjoy Mim and Paul's hospitality.



Each of the materials used here has a story to tell.



ANCIENT Paul's paving includes stones impregnated with ancient *Selaginella* fossils.



brains & brawn

Mim is responsible for the design and the planting schemes, whilst Paul is the brawn that makes it all happen. This designation of skills has no doubt saved many a domestic dispute!

Paul really does love landscaping and personalising the materials, all of which have their own story to tell. The stone wall is from local stone left over from an extension to an historic homestead in Lower Plenty, and the paving in the front is hand-picked Indian stone with fossils impregnated through it, with some particularly lovely fossils

of *Selaginella*, an ancient fern, featuring on the front steps.

Mim has chosen a diverse range of plants, but the plantings have changed over the years. At first, she grew pretty cottagey plants, but as Mim's own style developed more and more unusual and rare plants, often devoid of flowers but with interesting forms or foliage, played a major role. Her favourites include *Banksia blechnifolia* and the succulent *Aeonium arboreum* var. *atropurpureum* 'Schwarzkopf', both of which look wonderful year-round, thanks to their fascinating foliage.

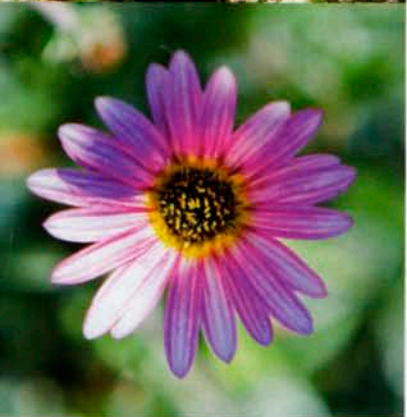
BEST OF FRIENDS Not all dogs get on well with chooks, but here Ume the cross-bred pooch gets on fine with chooks Ricky Bobby and Vivian.



GARDENS MIM & PAUL'S



Mim's garden design has three areas: entertaining; vegies and fruits; chooks, lawn and shed.



organic principles

"When we first built the garden it was all about creating a nice space with interesting plantings – really, it was all about the aesthetics of it. Now I think we are a little more enlightened," says Mim. "We try to be as sustainable as possible. The garden is entirely irrigated by tank water and grey water, and fed with home-made compost and worm farm liquid and poo. It's totally organic. I also try to use edible or native plants if I can, but then I'm just really keen to maximise the diversity in the garden and don't really mind if that means planting exotic plants if they're right for the spot. I do try to avoid weeds though."

raised planters

Nowadays Mim's favourite part of the whole garden is the vegie patch. "Until recently the vegie patch was made from timber sleepers," explains Mim, "but the rats and chooks got in too easily and we lost quite a few crops at times."

So far the rats haven't yet discovered how to climb up the new corrugated galvanised steel raised beds, and the 1m depth of soil has been great for the plants and easy on Mim's back.

With ripe cherry tomatoes harvested each day for the evening salad, and a constant supply of fresh greens for the kitchen (and the leftovers as scraps for the chooks), life for this green couple really has become a colourful mix. **BBY**

mim and paul

Mim Downes aged 30, a Horticulture teacher at Swinburne Department of Horticulture and Environment in Victoria.

Paul Downes aged 32, landscaper working with Phil Stray at Crafted Landscapes; www.craftedlandscapes.com.au

Regrets? Says Mim: "I regret not directing stormwater into a storage area for re-use."