



A jacaranda tree provides shade above a rustic garden chair on the lawn. Left: Vegetables such as artichokes and spinach flourish alongside flowers and herbs.

Our healing garden

After a bushfire destroyed their home, Mim and Neville Burkett moved into the Yellow House and created a country garden from scratch, with flowers, trees and organic fruit and vegetables, writes **Catherine Shields**.

IT'S ALMOST impossible to believe this colourful, organic cottage garden in Nowra, on the South Coast of New South Wales, is only two years old. The Yellow House's owners, Mim, a natural therapies practitioner, and Neville Burkett, an architect, moved to the old coastal dairy town in 2009. They were seeking a new place to call home after years of not being able to settle after their home of many decades in Glenorie, on Sydney's rural outskirts, was burnt to the ground in a freak bush firestorm.

Though they rebuilt on the acreage that had been in Mim's family since 1942, it held too many distressing memories of the day they lost everything they owned.

"We finally decided to leave and start over. The Yellow House has become our sanctuary, our healing place," Mim says. "We painted it yellow as we wanted something cheerful."

The house, a 1930s Californian-style weatherboard cottage on a quarter-acre block, had plenty of charm and potential, but also held plenty of surprises for Mim and Neville when they started work on the garden. "The house had been let as office space for a variety of different businesses over the years and, as we started digging, we found that under most of the garden was a layer of thick concrete!" They ended up having to call in excavators, who removed more than 73 tonnes of concrete.

"There was no topsoil left and the soil underneath was in very poor condition," Mim recalls. "So we really had to start from scratch and build up the garden beds with organic matter."

The concept behind the garden reflects Mim's philosophy of food for the mind, body and spirit, with all in harmony and balance. Everything is grown using organic principles and they have used recycled materials for garden structures.

Rustic, reclaimed garden gates announce the transition from one garden room to another and vintage garden chairs and benches, collected from garage sales and local tip recycling centres, add another layer of interest in the garden. ➤



Despite being a normal town block Mim Burkett's (left) garden seems much bigger with the use of distinct areas or "garden rooms" and is a cornucopia of organic life, from roses to chooks



Mim next to one of the garden's many fig trees. The couple propagated almost every plant in their garden themselves.

DIVERSE PLANTING

Mim and Neville have incorporated inspiration from the Parc Monceau in Paris, an urban oasis surrounded by apartment buildings where vegetables such as spinach and artichokes and all kinds of herbs grow happily alongside roses and shrubs, and provide food for the surrounding apartment dwellers.

"There is no reason why vegetables can't be attractive," Mim says. "And the mix of flowers, shrubs, fruit trees and vegetables in our 'orchard' is very exotic – a feast for the eyes, the soul and the table. If you plant lots of the same plant, they all compete for the same nutrients and are more of a target for pests."

"We propagated just about everything we have planted," Mim explains. "When word spread about us making the new garden, people from all over NSW and Victoria sent us fig cuttings so we now have over 14 fig trees."

Mim planted the herb garden just outside the kitchen so when she is cooking, any herb she requires is just a few steps away. "We often sit here on the step at night with a glass of wine and take in all the delicious herb smells."

Despite being a normal town block, Mim and Neville have successfully created the illusion of a garden that is much bigger with the use of distinct areas or garden "rooms". The back section, next to the chickens, is the kitchen garden, the east side is the orchard and the herb garden is off the kitchen on the west side.

"We love to eat from the garden so it is always planted with plenty of salad greens and vegetables," Mim says. "At the moment, we have broad beans, spinach, rainbow chard and snow peas."

"The garden is all about being sustainable and we grow enough food here to keep us going," Mim says laughing. The orchard boasts a large variety of well-established citrus trees, as well as stone fruit trees, such as peach, nectarine, damson plums and figs, a testament to the Burkett's green thumbs.

In among the blueberries and cherry guava are unexpected plantings of roses, a patch of lettuces, asparagus, cavolo nero and dill, fennel and sweet potato.

No organic garden would be complete without chickens and the Burkett's all have names – there's Sister Louisa, Pearly Gates, Truffle, Licorice and Thelma. The black Croad Langshan chickens are an endangered species Mim is trying to save.



Neville ensures there is a continuous supply of home-made compost for the garden.

Despite the garden's transformation so far, the Burkett's insist it is still a work in progress. "As the garden is less than two years old, there is constant change as we learn what works or needs to be moved to a more sympathetic position," Mim says. "We've found our sanctuary again." ■

COMPOST - THE RECIPE TO GARDEN SUCCESS

After 73 tonnes of concrete had been removed from their garden, Mim and Neville realised they would have to build up the topsoil from scratch.

"We didn't introduce imported topsoil as we didn't want to bring in any more weeds than we had already," says Neville. "Compost is living soil, with millions of microbes which are essential to plant growth, and our garden needed lots of it!"

The Burkett's used organically certified pelleted chicken manure on the garden, but also needed lots of compost to keep the garden fertile and to improve the soil. They have tried various methods of making compost, but find the traditional method of three open bays is hard to beat.

Neville constructed a row of three compost bins, each containing about

1 cubic metre. "This allows me to have composting at various stages – one bin starting off, one composting and one ready to use," Neville explains. "I then have a continuous supply of compost."

He uses the 1 cubic metre bins, which he built from used pallets, because a volume of 1 cubic metre is required to generate the heat inside the compost heap – necessary for fast composting and to stop weeds germinating.

Composting needs a continuous supply of air to produce the right microbes. Neville turns the heaps from time to time, especially when he has emptied one bin and can fork in the contents of the next bin.

The proportions of dried to green vegetation in the compost is important. The green material provides nitrogen for the composting process and the dried material provides carbon. Neville uses a mix of one

part green to at least four parts dry. For green waste, he uses tree prunings, grass clippings and left-over plants and vegies.

For brown compost, he uses straw, partly decomposed scraps from the chook-pen and dried lawn clippings. Also essential to the recipe is the addition of a little garden soil to provide a nucleus of microbes to begin the composting process.

Neville fills the compost heap in the "lasagne" method – a layer of green, a layer of brown, some chicken manure, cow or horse manure and then waters it to keep it damp – until the bin is full.

"Don't put in too much green stuff as the good bacteria will not thrive and the heap will smell," Neville advises. "And, of course, no animal products and not too much citrus."

Depending on the season and the heat inside the heap, compost should be ready in six to eight weeks.