

Lined with Chinese elm trees, maple trees and crepe myrtles, the spectacular Dordogne Garden features an artistic maze of *Buxus microphylla*.

a sight to behold

AN ENCHANTING BOTANICAL SANCTUARY IN RURAL NSW PROVIDES A WONDROUS SETTING FOR VISITORS – AND ITS HUMBLE OWNERS.

WORDS JESSICA BELLEF PHOTOGRAPHY ABBIE MELLÉ



“PEOPLE ASK IF WE HAD A VISION for the property,” recalls Lucy Marshall about the rural weekender she bought with her husband, Richard, in 2000 by the banks of the Shoalhaven River in Numbaa, a two-hour drive south of Sydney. “All I knew was that I wanted to lie back on the grass amid a ‘van Goghian’ scene with cherry blossoms – no matter the season – an incredible picnic and a really nice bottle of something. Oh, and with maybe an orchard and one or two roses.”

Two decades ago, Lucy and Richard’s hectare of dairy farming land incorporated a series of dilapidated outbuildings and a simple timber workers’ cottage dating back to the area’s European settlement in the mid-1800s. The couple, who were running a high-intensity international executive recruitment firm, bought the property as a reprieve from the demands of their business and as a place to connect with family outside of their primary residence in Sydney.

“We really wanted to be able to go somewhere with our two children on the weekends, where we could grow some things and just be,” explains Lucy, 60. “It was a very fertile place with established trees and alluvial soil, with 150 years’ worth of cow manure through it.”

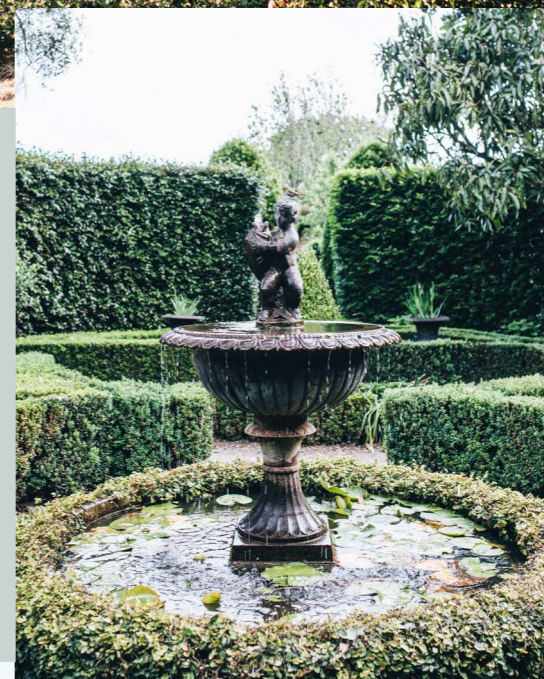
Today, Lucy’s ‘orchard and one or two roses’ has grown into a European-inspired botanical wonderland known as Merribee, encapsulating nearly three hectares of carefully carved garden rooms featuring magnificent displays of topiary, fields of flora, myriad secluded nooks and shady glades. Merribee is a popular wedding venue, a place for the visiting public to enjoy, and offers a variety of accommodation for guests to stay overnight.

“I completely forgot that I was married to someone who always needed to be busy with 79 projects on the go!” Lucy says, laughing. “We can’t help ourselves. Richard has to be busy, and I like growing businesses.” The duo’s entrepreneurial spirit was roused in 2004 when they received a request to hold a wedding on site. “At the time, we said, ‘Now someone is getting married here, we need a full-time gardener and, oh gosh, now we need more weddings to pay for the gardener!’” adds Lucy.

The Marshalls worked with horticulturalist James Thompson on a project-by-project basis from the early days of Merribee. He was instrumental in creating the structured layout and broad botanic mix. >



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT Lucy and Richard amid their handiwork; the dilapidated silo was renovated in 2009 and is now charming guest accommodation; when it comes to the roses, companion planting keeps aphids at bay. “At one point, we had a parsley hedge that was so big it could have fed the whole of Nowra with tabouli,” says Lucy; “We do experiments in weed management. We’ve had recent success using cornflour to reduce weeds,” Lucy says; path between the Apothecary and Vegetable Gardens and tennis court; *Salvia guaranitica*; time to rest; a tinkling fountain in the Parterre Garden.



GARDEN NUMBAA NSW

Richard says that due to the biodiversity of the gardens, insect infestations are rare. **FACING PAGE** "You might find an older man on a bench, crying, and he may say, 'I'm remembering my grandmother and the scent of her roses in her garden, and I am happy.' Merribee has provided a link back to that state of happiness for him... that is very satisfying to me," says Lucy.



Some parts of the garden are still in the process of being restored after the devastating floods of early 2022.

“One of our motivations is to create a place of beauty that everyone can enjoy.”





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Visitors enjoy relaxing in the various garden settings; vivid bougainvillea; *Cupressus sempervirens* offer shade and privacy in the Italian Garden; Richard and Lucy never tire of the views around them; guests are welcome to stop and rest among the gardens; artichokes thrive in the Vegetable Garden; a pioneering cottage from the 1830s forms the entrance to the gardens. It resides next to the lavender paddock; delicate roses are a perennial favourite; the timber doors lead from the Secret Garden through the Parterre Garden and into the White Garden.



“We learnt so much from James in observing how he did things, following the classical design principles. He trains well,” Richard, 61, says. Merribee is now maintained by Richard and five gardeners, with both Richard and Lucy driving the creative concepts and design. The couple made Merribee their permanent home in 2020 and reside in an updated 1850s timber cottage.

Historical research underpins many of the new developments at Merribee. “In all that we do here, we like to uncover something interesting that we’ve lost, that we can revive, and that people ought to know about,” says Lucy.

The Heritage Rose Garden, adjacent to the Lavender Paddock, is a living timeline of the rose species. From ancient gallicas and damasks to the albas of the Middle Ages, the plantings map the rose’s evolution and trace the paths of the plant-hunters of yore. “It’s a complex history, but it’s really important that we maintain it and pass it on,” Lucy says.

While Richard and Lucy’s design inspirations are grand and global – from the surreal topiary landscape of the Hanging Gardens of Marqueyssac in the Dordogne Valley of France to the Butchart Gardens on Canada’s Vancouver Island – their motivations are simple and humble. The desire to share and educate is the through line for the decisions made at Merribee. Workshops in rose history, propagation and distilling are offered throughout the year, with a lavender festival taking place in the height of summer.

“One of our motivations is to create a place of beauty that everyone can enjoy,” Lucy says.

On open days, patrons young and old sit under the avenue of pleached oaks and elms. You see them on the Viewing Pavilion overlooking the 10,000 buxus plants clipped into all manner of evergreen shapes, but you lose sight of them as they slip through ornate doors set into a thicket of glossy viburnum. Children play in the Edible Garden, where topiarised olive trees and hedges of kaffir lime create secret hollows, or you’ll find them running through fragrant fields of lavender.

Merribee has become the dreamy ‘van Goghian’ setting Lucy envisioned all those years ago; a fecund oasis of botany and spellbinding landscape artistry, with just a touch more than ‘a rose or two’.

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