

H&G

gardens

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

There are many types of gardeners and we all benefit from expert advice in times of need. This month, we tell the tales of two gardens – one grand, one small – and how their design dilemmas were solved.

Salt of the earth

When a city couple put down roots in NSW's Hunter region, they awakened a passion for planting and discovered that it's the simplest pleasures that bring the most joy.

STORY ELISABETH KNOWLES | PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT

Two types of box hedge (*Buxus microphylla* 'Japonica' and 'Faulkner') were pruned into low-lying sculptural shapes for a formal touch at the front of the house. Bay laurel trees (*Laurus nobilis*) bring fragrance and form to the area's perimeter. A totem sculpture by Michael Nicholls and a caged sculpture in copper and wood by Denese Oates are playful inclusions, while landscape designer Michael Cooke created the cement pond onsite. **PREVIOUS PAGE** White cedars (*Melia azedarach*) line the driveway at Valleyfield. In winter, king parrots flock to the trees to relieve them of their nuts, creating a cacophonous, colourful welcome.

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When Sydney restaurateur Armando Percuoco and his wife Gemma Cunningham found their ideal place in the country thirteen years ago, it was more untouched beauty than postcard-perfect rural idyll. Set on 93 hectares in the Hunter region, the bushland property called Valleyfield was undeniably beautiful, but wildlife ruled the roost. Cattle trampled the paddocks, while the 1820s cottage was entirely over-run.

"Wombats, birds and cows wandered in and out of the house – it was a complete disaster!" says Armando.

A couple of years later, with the renovated farmhouse fit for human habitation, the couple looked to the land. What to do with their vast terrain? First they planted two large olive groves to fulfil their dream of pressing oil for Armando's Paddington restaurant, Buon Ricordo. Then they planted a veggie patch.

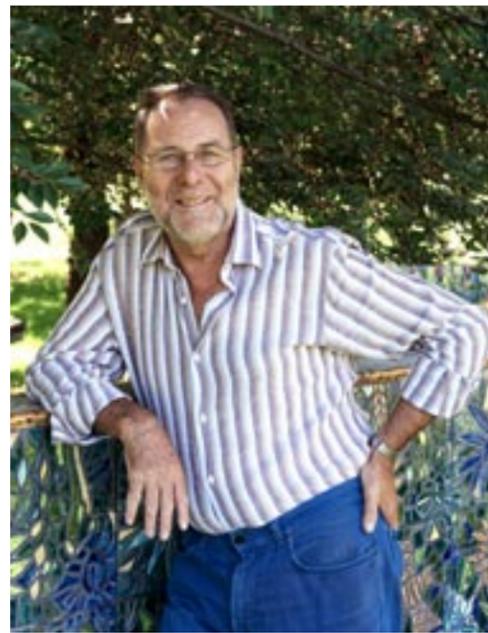
"I didn't take anybody's advice," says Armando. "I knew nothing about gardening so I put one thing here and another there. Four years later, I said to Gemma, 'Do you like our garden?' and she said, 'No, it's a mish-mash,' and I said, 'I know, it's horrible!'"

The couple fell about laughing, and soon after they called in professional help from local landscape designer Michael Cooke.

"It was a healthy garden, but Armando and Gemma were getting a bit lost," says Michael. "They'd created a fantastic vegetable garden, and they are hard workers, but they needed a bit of direction."

The biggest problem nouveau countryfolk face, according to Michael, is coming to terms with the sheer size of their property.

"People are often quite happy working in an urban setting, but when the scale gets big they are outside their comfort zone," he says. "Views are important, but there's no point walking through a property if you can see it all already. By creating 'rooms', you not only provide practical solutions such as shade and wind buffers, but different parts of the garden take on different moods." >



Sculpture by the trees

Armando Percuoco has been a patron of Sculpture by the Sea, Bondi, a public art event held annually at Bondi Beach, since its inception in 1997. His love of art extends to buying sculptural works by Australian artists, which are now an integral part of the Valleyfield landscape. Garden designer Michael Cooke's brief was to create outdoor rooms in which to display the pieces so they come as a surprise to guests during walks around the property.



An oversized glazed pot is a surprise feature amid a stand of prickly-leaved paperbark trees (*Melaleuca styphelioides*). OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Armando leans against a wall clad in ceramic tiles handcrafted by Robert Walker and painted by Gemma's sister, Catherine. The olive grove, as viewed through a Christopher Hodges sculpture. A painted steel sculpture by local artist Paul Selwood tones in well with Mexican sage flowers (*Salvia leucantha*). The Valleyfield entrance sign is the work of blacksmith Francesco Petrolo.

< A formal air was achieved by placing a sculpted hedge garden at the entrance to the house, where the rounded shapes reflect in miniature the curvature of the distant hills. Some views were opened up, while others were closed to create intimate spaces. And because Armando is a chef, Michael often chose productive, fragrant plants to add a sensory dimension – bay trees for hedging, and garlic and herbs such as fennel to evoke atmosphere.

The end result certainly inspired Armando. “I used to buy cooking books because of my profession, but I buy gardening books now,” he says, “and I watch every gardening show on TV. I’ve been bitten by the bug and I love it.”

The couple has come a long way. They now make their own compost, grow comfrey for fertiliser, propagate plants from the property rather than buying seeds or saplings from a nursery, and Armando has even learned how to sculpt the hedges himself.

Of course, animals still run the place, but they’ve learned to tolerate their benefactors. “I’ll spend the weekend working in the garden, then come back to find it all broken up because kangaroos have jumped through it,” says Armando. “But that’s what happens in the country. Wombats make a house in your flower bed and king parrots eat your fruit. Who cares? I’d rather buy fruit from the grocer than get rid of the animals. They are so beautiful.”

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Michael Cooke Garden Design, Central Mangrove, NSW;
(02) 4373 1212 or www.michaelcooke.com.au. To find out more about the Valleyfield property, see our travel story on page 158.



1&9 Olive groves featuring Tuscan varieties **2** Lake **3** Mature trees, including stone pines, pistachios, pin oaks and English oaks
4 Sculpted hedge garden **5** Rose garden **6** Main house **7** Herb and vegetable garden **8** Bed & breakfast cottage **10** Loose gravel driveway

‘I’ll spend the weekend working in the garden, then come back to find it all broken up because kangaroos have jumped through it!’ ARMANDO PERCUOCO



Illustration by Alison Lawton



Winter sunlight dapples the foliage in the olive grove, which includes four Tuscan cultivars: Correggiola, Leccino, Frantoio and Pendolino. **OPPOSITE FROM TOP** Tomatoes thrive in the vegie patch. Pomegranates also seem to love the growing conditions at Valleyfield.