

# MY CORNER OF PARADISE

In the rolling hills of the Dandenong Ranges, energetic horticulturalist Phillip Johnson built his house and sustainable garden from nothing. Now he wants to inspire others to follow his lead and embrace native plants, he tells **Juliet Rieden**

**BE PREPARED:** "Our whole house becomes a curtain of water in a bushfire situation. All the ponds and all the rainwater tanks are connected to a fire pump in a bunker. We go into a separate bunker and turn it on remotely," says Phillip.



“The vertical garden is irrigated from the top, with plants at the top requiring least water and those at the bottom requiring more,” says Phillip.

**P**HILLIP JOHNSON’S friends call him “the Crocodile Dundee of gardening” and, when you meet him, it’s clear where the moniker comes from. Phillip is not just *into* gardens, he’s enthralled by them. Mother Nature energises him: he loves to walk barefoot through his gardens, listen to the tumbling waterfalls in his natural billabongs and watch the rain fuel his creations.

“My grandparents were passionate, enthusiastic gardeners and they got me into gardening from a really young age. I guess it just sparked something,” he says. “At the age of four, I was planting, and, by eight, I had a little 3m by 3m plot in my parents’ garden in Glen Waverley in the suburbs of Melbourne.”

Now 37, Phillip runs a sustainable landscapes company and is a presenter on Nine Network’s *Garden Gurus*. Over the years he has developed his own unique, free-flowing garden style and there’s no better example of it than Olinda, the house and garden he created for himself from untamed bush in Victoria’s Dandenong Ranges.

**“I CHOSE PLANTS TO SUIT EACH LOCATION.”**

“I purchased the land about 10 years ago and there was nothing on the property, just the existing vegetation. I wanted to design and build something that would inspire people and that connected with the environment.

“There was no mains water on the property, so I thought we could capture all this water that comes off the driveway and run it down into these beautiful natural pools and billabongs,” explains Phillip.

“I built the house first and then the garden, so everything – the rocks, boulders and plants – had to come underneath the elevated driveway. We built

on two levels, with a natural swimming pool at the top and a billabong beneath, with bream in it. I chose native plants to suit each location and built a gravel path through the landscape, because gravel helps the water percolate the soil.”

While Phillip built Olinda as a bachelor, he now shares the property with his wife Sarah and can’t wait to have kids and see them running around.

“My goal is to inspire everyone to have a sustainable Australian garden, to make the most of this country.” ■

## HOW TO CREATE A VERTICAL GARDEN

### WHAT YOU NEED

- Back board: 1cm-thick recycled HDPE plastic sheet
- Growing medium of three layers – weed mat, felt, second layer of felt, all cut to fit the plastic sheet
- Drip line/soaker hose
- Staple gun
- Stanley knife
- Plants

### WHAT TO DO

- 1 Use the staple gun to attach the first layer of weed matting to the plastic board, and then staple the first layer of felt.
- 2 Run the soaker hose along the felt.
- 3 Staple another layer of felt over the top to cover the soaker hose.
- 4 Think about the planting design you want to create before choosing your plants. Select plants that are water-wise, and will work with the area you have chosen for your vertical garden. It’s best to have your plants fairly close together to cover the felt/board.
- 5 Create slices in the top layer of felt – about 10cm long – for inserting your plants.
- 6 Shake off excess soil before inserting your plants (one plant per slice).
- 7 Staple the plants into position, making sure they’re held firmly.
- 8 Move your new vertical garden into position.

### WHAT TO CONSIDER

- A vertical garden doesn’t need a large site – or investment. You can even create one in a space as compact as an apartment balcony.
- Use lightweight materials and check on engineering requirements before attaching to walls or fences.
- Look to combine the vertical garden with a grey water recycling system or other sustainable water source.
- Consult your local nursery for advice on plants that will grow well in the area you live in.
- Carefully select plants to suit the “microclimate” of the site.



“We try to source everything for the garden within 100km of the site.”



## GO NATURAL

“I want to inspire people to see how a sustainable garden can be so beautiful. Having that environment to bring children up in is quite amazing.”



Entertaining in the evenings focuses around the firepit, which can be moved around the property.

## PHILLIP’S TOP SIX AUSTRALIAN NATIVES



**Purple loosestrife** (*Lythrum salicaria*) is a showy aquatic plant that fills your pond with colour. Attracts nectar-eating insects to pollinate the garden.



**Knawel** (*Scleranthus biflorus*) is popular with kids. It has a carpeting effect and is great to touch. Enjoys ample water, but also needs free drainage.



**Small grass tree** (*Xanthorrhoea minor*) is a quintessentially Australian plant. Tiny cream flowers cluster in a dense spike to one metre.



**Billy buttons** (*Pycnosorus globosus*) performs best in full sun. Pick the flowers as soon as the heads turn yellow and they will last for months.



**Heart-leaf flame pea** (*Chorizema cordatum*) is a small shrub with beautifully bright red, orange and pink pea-flowers.



**Water ribbons** (*Triglochin procera*) is an aquatic plant with erect leaves. It grows in still or flowing water and provides a habitat for our native frogs.