



Kate's wild experiment



A garden designer prefers the natural look when she's at home

WILD and a little bit feral is how Kate Herd describes her large Alphington garden. The garden designer's creativity obviously runs free in the fascinating almost 2.5ha property next to the Yarra River, but this is also a design into which much time and planning have been invested.

"My home garden is the place where I'm free to experiment with colour and with combining flowers and foliage," she says. "I can test-drive plants and establish whether they are a whim on my part, or are garden-worthy and look good for longer than a week in spring." "While I appreciate very manicured gardens and I love strong design, for my own garden I like something that's a little bit softer. It's probably because I grew up in the bush out of Melbourne that I like that more natural look."

Kate says although eclectic, her garden is also zoned, with many of the beds planted in colour themes. A pink and purple bed combines fruiting trees, such as an olive and crab apple, and ornamental trees with varying shades of purple foliage including *Continus*, *Berberis* and *Dahlia Bishop* of Llandaff.

A purple and orange bed features a *Wigandia caracasaba* with huge evergreen leaves and mauve flowerheads, purple and blue salvias, and orange tiger lilies and day lilies.

There's also a quince bed, which includes medlar, persimmon, pomegranate and tulip trees.

The vegetable garden has oranges, lemons, limes and tamarillos, mixed with bright annuals such as nasturtiums, zinnias, cosmos and sunflowers. A dry bed, on the lower side of a Westringia hedge, is not watered and features drought-hardy natives such as *Eremophila glabra* and exotic plants including *plumbago Royal Cape*.

An amphitheatre, built at the bottom of the hill next to the dry bed, has hosted many community gatherings, music festivals and other events.

Kate, who is working on a book about productive gardens, says she is trying to replace thirsty and fussy plants with hardier species from Australia, California, South Africa and other dry regions.

Kate's garden, at 1 View St, Alphington, is open as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme from 10am-4.30pm on May 1 and 2. Entry is \$8 for adults and free for children.

WORDS KAMAHL COGDON

PICTURES BEN SWINNERTON



1 Echeveria semperviren
This perennial evergreen succulent was re-potted in spring. A quality potting mix with added hard sharp sand or grit is recommended to improve drainage. They are very hardy and like full sun.

2 Sedum autumn joy
Tough, drought-tolerant and sun-loving, the *sedum autumn joy* is a great plant to liven up the garden in autumn. It produces large cauliflower-shaped flower heads from mid-summer. The pale pink flowers gradually turn a deeper colour until they are a rich mahogany brown in autumn and then die down in winter. This perennial likes full sun and well-drained soil.

3 Rain gauge
Kate's gardener Jane Dennithorne says a rain gauge is essential in the garden. Jane empties the gauge every Thursday, recording how much rain has fallen on the garden over the previous week. Her inspections also tell her if there's been enough rain to shut off the sensor-controlled watering system, and if sheltered plants that did not receive the rainfall need a top-up.

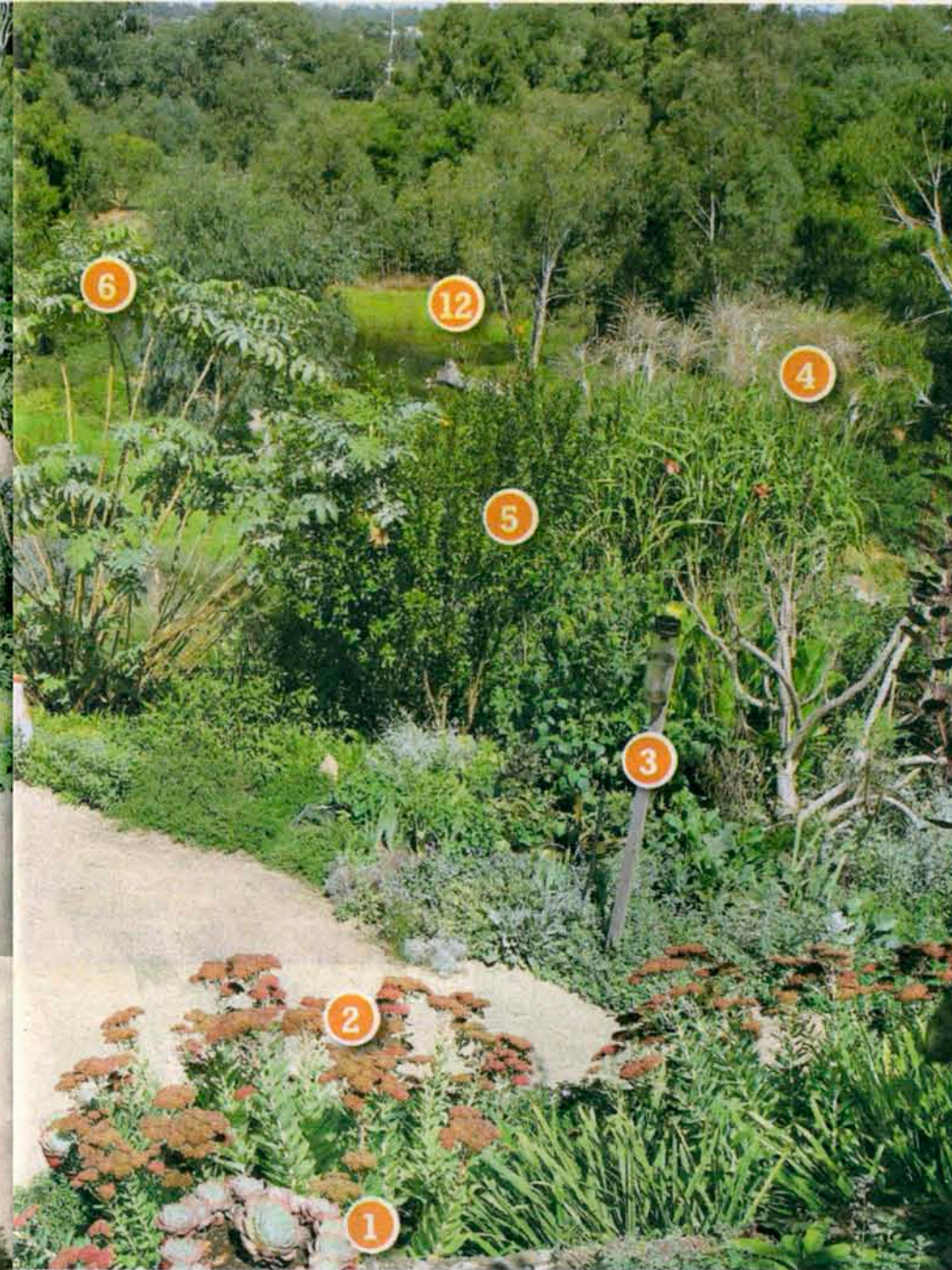
4 Miscanthus giganteus
This graceful grass adds height and movement to the purple and orange bed. It's hardy and fairly easy to grow



in a sunny spot. Jane cuts it back in winter and says new growth starts coming through straight away.

5 Pomegranate
The deciduous pomegranate, or *Punica*, grows upright, usually with quite a few trunks from ground level. In summer it has orange-red flowers. In autumn its light green leaves turn yellow and fall. The tennis ball-sized fruit is orange and splits when ripe to reveal crimson pulp packed with seeds. This tree is one of three pomegranates in Kate's garden.

6 Melianthus major
Also known as the giant honey flower, this striking African shrub has several thick stalks with long flower spikes growing out the top in spring. The flowers are an unusual rusty red colour. The shrub does most of its growing during winter and likes a warm, sunny spot with good drainage.



7 CANNA WYOMING
Cannas, also known as Indian shot plants, have dramatic large leaves of purplish-brown to green. The showy yellow-orange flowers of the Wyoming appear in pairs from summer to autumn. Jane says the plant is hardy, but does require some care to keep it looking its best. She recommends removing dead flower heads to encourage more flowers and cutting the stems back after flowering.

8 Cussonia paniculata
At only three to four years old, the South African cabbage tree or *Cussonia paniculata* has plenty of growing to do. It will eventually reach about 4m high. Its large, lacy, fan-shaped foliage is found mostly at the top of this drought-tolerant tree.

9 Scaevola albida
Jane says this small-leaved native ground cover, also known as fairy fan flower, is much hardier than the bigger and fancier fan-shaped *Scaevolias*. The plant forms a dense mat that spreads about 90cm-150cm with its fleshy leaves. Its lightly fragrant, lavender-blue flowers bloom almost all year. The plant does best in sun or light shade.



10 Rosa Crepuscule
This rose usually produces an endless display of golden yellow flowers, but has recently had a heavy cut back to keep it neat and tidy. It is almost thornless and can be grown as a large shrub, tall hedge of about 2m high or trained as a climber.

11 Plumbago Royal Cape
This fast-growing shrub is actually part of the dry garden, but its deep blue flowers can be seen through the plants of the purple and orange bed on the terrace above. It needs little maintenance and is drought tolerant, making it a perfect addition to the dry garden, which gets no additional water other than rainfall.



12 Billabong
Kate had the billabong drained, excavated and deepened about five years ago. It is used to water much of the garden with water collected from a stormwater drain and off the hill. Birdlife includes white-faced herons, ibis, wood ducks and pardalotes. Common brown tree frogs, eels, blue tongue lizards and tiger snakes also call this area home.