

GARDENING



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Seeding the wild in the city

Nothing has been left to chance in the design and planting of new meadows.

“The plant selection process was critical to maximise the chances of success.”

Ian Shears (left), Leanne Hanrahan, Audrey Gerber and John Rayner at the meadow at Birrarung Marr.
PHOTO: PAT SCALA

Just because the “woody meadows” planted in Melbourne last week are going to look as random and relaxed as something you might stumble upon in the wild, don’t for a minute imagine they have sprung up of their own accord.

The meadows – on the Lower Terrace in Birrarung Marr and the Poplar Oval Car park in Royal Park – were two years in the designing, and nothing has been left to chance. Experts from the University of Sheffield and the University of Melbourne have combed every detail to ensure these fields of Australian natives come over as casual as you like.

Funded by the City of Melbourne, their inspiration was the crowd-pleasing naturalistic landscapes that have been spilling over parks, gardens and former brownfield sites in Britain in recent years. But this Australian version has had a Mediterranean-climate makeover.

By replacing the annuals and perennials with tough Australian shrubs the idea is to create a multi-layered, high-density, eye-catching expanse that can fare well in this land of hot, dry summers.

Audrey Gerber, from the University of Sheffield, describes it as a “pioneering Mediterranean landscape” for use in urban green spaces.

The University of Melbourne’s John Rayner says there is no other research anywhere that

explores shrubs “in such a novel designed plant community as this”.

Rather than the mass-plantings of shrubs and grasses surrounded in woodchip mulch commonly sported in parks at present, the “woody meadow” involves a complex and densely packed spread of native plants growing across three layers. Rayner hopes it will provide a “more visually interesting and sustainable” planting option in the future.

The plant selection process was critical to maximise the chances of success and Gerber and her university colleague, meadow supremo James Hitchmough, examined scientific literature, books, popular articles and online databases to develop a long list of 1200 Australian plants for potential inclusion. After input from a string of Australian designers and horticulturalists, this was whittled down to 21.

There are species that form a base layer with a height below one metre, others that grow to between one and two metres and others reaching more than two metres.

Hitchmough, one of the key people behind the meadows established for the London Olympics, has said he deliberately goes out to “psychologically push people’s buttons”.

The plants originate from Western Australia and the eastern states and are all commercially available in Victoria with many of the species (Callistemon ‘Little John’, Acacia acinacea, *Eucalyptus caesia*, for example) being widely grown already. The plants were selected on their ornamental capacity, resilience, contribution to biodiversity and ability to regrow after severe pruning. Most of the plants are to be maintained by being periodically coppiced, or cut back to ground level.

Rayner says the trial meadows are “speculative” but “strongly based on good science”. They are in raised scoria beds with excellent drainage and will be in place and closely monitored for several years.

Being an experimental project rather than a final one, there are variations in planting densities and diversities at both sites, while a trial of different coppicing regimes will also be conducted. The beds will be irrigated for the first 12 months only.

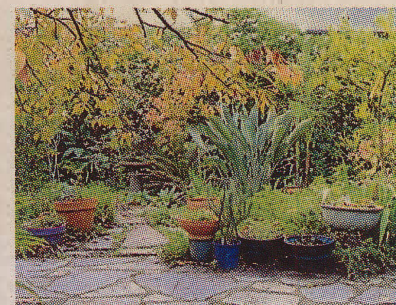
Rayner says the aim is to create a landscape that has high visual impact but relatively low maintenance. These drought-tolerant meadows are expected to be resilient in the face of future dryer, hotter conditions.

Gerber says aesthetics are critical. The flowering time, colour, foliage interest and growth habit of each species has been taken into account to ensure that together they pack a strong punch.

The regular coppicing will mean even the smallest species should retain their place in the whole rather than being crowded out.

The idea is to show passers-by the wonders of nature and to make them feel they have chanced upon a wild, species-rich heathland in central Melbourne. With 1000 tubestock seedlings planted at each of the two sites, it’s now a case of waiting and watching.

PLOT LINES



OPEN GARDENS

A mother and daughter open their neighbouring gardens (pictured) in Ringwood on September 17 and 18, both with very different spaces joined by a connecting gate. On the mother’s side (known as Stoke) there are a series of “rooms” that include natives, exotics and vegetables and, on the daughter’s (called Woodlands) there are old camellias, a 100-year-old oak, hornbeams and many other trees. The gardens are at 150 and 152 Warrandyte Road, North Ringwood, open 10am to 4.30pm, \$8 each or \$12 for the two.

opengardensvictoria.org.au

FLOWER SHOW

Solid winter rains have worked wonders for the wildflowers of Anglesea, which will be celebrated at the ANGAIR Wildflower and Art Weekend. The event includes an indoor display of wildflowers, indigenous plant sales and guided walks and bus tours. It is based at the Anglesea Hall in MacMillan Street and runs from 10am to 4pm on September 17 and 18.

TALK

Perry Lethlean from TCL (Taylor Cullity Lethlean) will next week discuss some of the firm’s most high-profile landscapes and the ways in which they have been designed to reflect the site’s history and cultural stories. Lethlean’s illustrated talk is at 6pm for 6.30pm on September 22 at Mueller Hall, National Herbarium, Birdwood Avenue, Melbourne. Tickets cost \$25/\$20 for Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne; bookings at rbgfriendsmelbourne.org.

AUCTION

The Plant Trust is holding an auction, including of many rare species, on September 22 at Domain House, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra. Viewing is from 6.30pm and the auction, with Stephen Ryan as auctioneer, starts at 8pm. Details: 9650 5639 or 0439 034 194.