

## THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH GARDEN

A natural bush garden can be anything which attempts to simulate a natural environment. For reduced maintenance it must aim to be an area where the created garden will inhibit the growth of unwanted weeds through close planting and mulching. For a wilderness or bush garden the design must be informal.

Consider the whole atmosphere including scents and sounds. The garden should be alive with chattering birds, fluttering butterflies and lizards lounging on warm rocks. Underfoot should be spongy with mulch smelling of earth and eucalyptus. A bush garden is more than just trees and shrubs. Try to include all of the low-growing herbs, grasses, lilies, and so on of the understory. Many of these, plus most of the other plants included, could produce edible crops.



An open Woodland garden at the Cranbourne Botanic Gardens



The Desert near Exmouth in Western Australia – This is the type of image which a designer may try to reproduce in a desertscape.

Many of the best bush gardens recreate a specific natural habitat, such as the following:

1. **Open woodland** - with groundcovers, climbers, grasses, shrubs and trees. This is the quintessential bush garden, and is suited to many areas of Australia. The plants typically withstand dry conditions and poor soils, although they will respond well to water and native plant fertilisers. One drawback is the plants are naturally adapted to bushfires – some contain volatile oils; others contain flammable bark or have other strategies that promote the spread of fire – so this must be considered if you live in an area that experiences bushfires.
2. **An indigenous habitat** - featuring only plants growing naturally in the local area.
3. **A heathland** - comprising mainly shrubs and groundcovers with showy flowers; many of these plants are from south-western Australia and require well-drained, infertile soils and low humidity. A heathland garden might include dryandras, isopogons, lambertias, epacris and grevilleas.
4. **A rainforest** - with ferns, palms, orchids, trees and climbers; a rainforest garden requires a protected position, effective irrigation and improved soils.
5. **An alpine habitat** - the higher peaks in Tasmania, Victoria and southern New South Wales contain many small-growing alpine gems. They need low humidity and cool to temperate conditions. Many need excellent drainage; others are adapted to wet, boggy soils. In gardens, they are best grown in rockeries, where they can be appreciated up close, and where their required conditions can be easily maintained.
6. **A desertscape** –with mostly low growing hardy plants, sparse taller plants, and exposed areas of stone or ground. This type of garden attempts to simulate the desert and may be the most appropriate landscape style for an arid area. It may also be created in a less arid area for the visual affect. If plants are being used that are indigenous to a more arid area, you may need to install extra drainage, use sandier soils and plant on mounds to keep the soil drier for those plants.



A man made desertscape garden created at the Novotel Resort in Exmouth Western Australia, where the climate is naturally arid.



When designing a native garden consider:

- How things fit together in the bush – trees, shrubs, grasses, rocks, leaf litter and natural water courses.
- What makes up a bush garden – not just the plants, but also the native birds and animals, soil, rocks, etc.
- How you will put it all together and maintain it over time.

Strictly speaking, a bush garden should use combinations of plants which occur together in the natural landscape. In other areas of the world, the term 'wild garden' will reflect the same concepts.

For example, in Australia eucalypts which occur naturally close to Sydney should not be planted alongside Banksias which are exclusively native to Western Australia.

Naturalistic or bush style gardens were given a bad name in the past because little was understood about their care. This meant that most people

thought that native plants required no care or pruning! The native gardens of the 1970's are testament to this approach, with many becoming woody, overgrown and ugly. These days though, we know that you should treat most Australian natives in a similar way to any exotic plant - give them the right soil conditions, feed those that need it, and prune them to shape or tip prune to extend juvenility. Using that approach your garden can look as good as any well-cared for exotic garden.

Many people also do not realise that not all Australian plants are appropriate for a dry (bush) garden – but of course many are. Look for plants that come from the drier parts of the continent, rather than the wetter coastal areas. Many of these, such as Darwinia and Eremophila species also have spectacular flowers. Some species will do well in both dry and moist conditions and these are well worth including in any native garden as you then have all possibilities covered (during drought conditions or wetter years). Melaleucas, Acacias, and Banksias all prefer moister soil but will withstand periods of dry conditions.



Open Woodland created with *Casuarina glauca*. The *Casuarina* woodland has a very different aesthetic to the *Eucalyptus* woodland. The fine needle like leaves lay down a mulch that tends to deter undergrowth, more so than the *Eucalyptus* leaves.

Always do a bit of research into the plants you would like to include before going ahead and buying them – also ask experts or go to nurseries that specialise in native plants as they tend to have the most knowledge and can help you make the right choices for your conditions.

When setting out your bush garden, provide plenty of light for your plants. Avoid plants with dense vegetation and don't place them too close together. This is the most common mistake made by most gardeners – overplanting only to find that later they have an overcrowded dark garden that needs serious money spent on it to rectify the problem. If you are including trees in your garden (every bush garden should have at least one gum tree), make sure they won't shade out other plants that require sunny conditions. Spacing plants and creating some open spaces also allows you create features with rocks, ground formations, old logs and water.



Sub tropical rainforest garden created in John Mason's backyard dominated by an upper storey of *Archontophoenix alexandrae* (Alexander palms) planted ten years earlier as 20cm tall plants.

When plants are combined in the way in which they occur naturally, it is reasonable to assume that none of them will compete with each other too strongly (i.e. they should grow in harmony and not choke each other out of existence). When plants which do not occur naturally together are planted together, it is possible that some will be much stronger growing varieties than others and that these will gradually gain dominance - while others will find it harder to compete and eventually disappear.



Alpine gardens attempt to recreate the aesthetic of an alpine environment, which typically fits with a rock garden



Heathland gardens are dominated by ground covers and low shrubs



Minimalist Garden Effect – *Xanthorrhoea* used alongside a rock creates a stunning image that would only be diminished if other plants were introduced.