

TRULY GROUNDED

TWO NOVICE GARDENERS NOW SPEND THEIR DAYS TENDING TO THEIR FLOURISHING ESTATE IN THE SCENIC BLUE MOUNTAINS.

WORDS STEPHANIE HOPE PHOTOGRAPHY BRIGID ARNOTT

At Brenda and Brett Ainsworth's Mount Wilson garden, a gravel pathway hedged with boxus winds its way to the house. **FACING PAGE** A stunning purple-tinged rhododendron; Brenda and Brett with Bindi, their five-year-old rescue greyhound, at the front gate to their home, Bryn Mawr.





BRENDA AND BRETT AINSWORTH have seen both the good and the bad sides of living in the bush. In 2013, they lost their home in the NSW Blue Mountains town of Winmalee to bushfire, which led them to explore a sea change in Sydney’s idyllic Cronulla. But they couldn’t stay away forever.

“In 2020, our daughter Hannah was married in Blackheath, and the love and the pull of the mountains got us excited to look for a new property,” says Brenda, 62. “We found Bryn Mawr in Mount Wilson and fell in love with it.”

The 14.5-hectare property, on the traditional lands of the Gundungurra and Darug people, is set in World Heritage-listed rainforest, with over four hectares devoted to the homestead and its sprawling gardens. “The garden was >

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CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT A Blue Atlas cedar sits amid assorted rhododendrons and azaleas. “The garden has surprised us with how quickly the changes we have made have taken hold so that you would have trouble discerning what was new and what was established,” says Brenda; *Buxus sempervirens* ‘Variegata’ hedging curves and curls its way through the garden; a *Picea smithiana* spruce brings shade to this sitting area; geraniums spill over the sides of an ornamental planter. FACING PAGE A striking *Cedrella sinensis* puts on a show of flamingo-pink foliage in spring.





beautiful but very organic in nature and unplanned,” recalls Brenda. “Many areas were overplanted and didn’t follow a particular plan or design. We were definitely not gardeners when we bought the property, but probably naively we just thought we would learn along the way.”

Thankfully, they happened to know someone to teach them: Brenda’s brother-in-law and landscape designer Michael Cooke. He helped bring structure and purpose to the grounds, creating a 10-year plan for the gardens that Brenda and Brett, 62, could continue to follow.

“Nobody moves to Mount Wilson if they don’t like gardens,” says Michael. “Brenda and Brett were looking forward to getting stuck into theirs as a retirement project and were keen to learn all about it. The inspirational images that Brenda showed me were of traditional, formal gardens, and they were happy to let me take the lead and design it as if it were my own.”

As part of the redesign, Michael kept many of the established trees, only removing some to allow in more light. Existing shrubs were pruned and shaped and in some cases relocated to more favourable positions, while a double row of variegated English box was replanted into curves and curls to form pathways and wrap around the trees.

“Under Michael’s guidance, we’ve established new garden beds and redesigned a number of the original beds using a ‘mass-planting’ approach, displaying particular plants to their finest,” adds Brenda.

With such a large area to work with, Michael divided the garden into a number of zones. There’s the Parkland, where established blue spruce trees are interspersed with the above-mentioned mass-planted beds of azaleas, May bush and rhododendrons. The Parterre is an ornate area of Korean and English box hedging accessed by a laburnum-covered arbour, while the Paisley Garden is named for the shape of its garden beds full of deciduous azaleas. The Orchard is planted with apple, fig, pomegranate and plum trees, while 18 holm oaks form the Truffle Oak Grove, with truffle spore inoculated at their roots to produce Perigord black truffles. “Each July we harvest the truffles with the help of truffle dogs from Hartley Truffles,” says Brenda.

The Glades is made up of a gravel path that winds its way through azaleas, rhododendrons, hellebores, tree ferns and Japanese maples, while the Magnolia Grove is exactly as the name suggests, showcasing dozens of cultivars in their full glory. Finally, there’s The Nursery, where Brenda and Brett propagate and nurse rescued plants. “Brenda likes to cut flowers for the house, so we also made large garden beds in open sunny areas to grow them,” says Michael. >

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP FAR LEFT The garden came with numerous established rhododendrons, many unlabelled. They flower faithfully every spring; a path meanders through towering eucalypts; a bright red rhododendron; “Spring is beautiful with the arrival of blooms including peonies, lilies, azaleas and rhododendrons,” says Brenda; tubular lilac blooms on an Empress tree; a fluffy pink rhododendron.



The couple now spend their days in the garden, while Michael and a team from Verduous Gardens visit twice a year to make necessary tweaks and trim the large hedges. “Brett loves the hard landscaping and the ‘projects’ – building steps, painting the house, creating new garden beds and tending to the nursery – while I enjoy the mowing, hedging, pruning and edging,” says Brenda. “We both share the weeding and mulching, but can’t say we love either!”

The reward for all their hard work is sharing the garden with friends and family. “My son, Ryan, and his wife, Lauren, were married here in 2021, and stayed with us again in 2022 for four months after their baby boy, Brody, was born. Being able to share the space and tranquillity of The Mount was really special,” says Brenda.

In fact, the couple’s three children – Ryan, Hannah and Liam – and their partners Lauren, Jonathan and Claire, are frequent guests. “When we bought the house in Cronulla, the kids visited, but not often,” says Brenda. “Now they come frequently and stay for weekends, relaxing and enjoying the ambience of a country home and garden.” *CB*

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Mounds of *Pittosporum tenuifolium* surround slender birch trees. **FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT** “The Parterre garden is a beautiful place to sit and think and take in the ambience of that part of the garden,” says Brenda; the Empress tree is a captivating sight; yellow and orange rhododendrons lead to the Parterre garden; “Friends and family love to stay and wander the garden with a glass of wine in hand,” Brenda shares.