

## AN AUSTRALIAN BUSH GARDEN

I garden because I like animals. Gardening, I can take it or leave it. But what would the animals do if I didn't garden? I'm sure they would practically starve to death. I'm okay. I can buy my food. They don't have any money. Come to think of it, if they had I wouldn't have to travel to town every two weeks to do my shopping. Still it's fun feeding the animals. I get to play games with them.

We started off settling this isolated valley in the bush by finding a clear spot near the creek and digging it up for a garden. I lived under an old bit of canvas stretched over a couple of poles so that I could do first things first. That is: garden rather than build.

The climate is good, the soil unused, and we imagined a surplus of produce, even though it was hard work carrying bucket after bucket of water up from the creek on hot summer afternoons. Still this was our dream: a non-technological Lesbian paradise and carrying water was turning us into Amazons. Besides we never could get the pressure pump to work off the trickling creek.

My life of gardening for the benefit of animals began as soon as the first seeds went in. Swarms of big, mean looking, beady-eyed currawongs flocked from the sky, stuck their huge beaks into the rows and pecked for seeds. I developed a strong arm from lobbing stones at them.

What seeds were left duly sprouted forth and the nights were filled with the gentle thud, thud, thud of dozens of wallabies hopping to graze on green shoots. I took to sleeping in the garden and waking at regular intervals to leap up clapping and yelling at the sound of bounding in all directions.

Now and then I'd wake to find our horses had decided the garden was a good place to clomp around. After all our water carrying it was much greener than the burnt out grasses of the Australian bush in summer.

Despite our love for the wide open unfenced places, when the neighbour's cattle arrived through the broken boundary fence to join the garden throng we decided it was time to fence - at least the garden.

Wanting to do this as ecologically and naturally as possible we spent weeks collecting long sticks to weave into a wicker like work of art. It was an enormous amount of work, but the aesthetics were worth it. No nasty wire with sharp damaging ends and a capitalist price to pay would disgrace our bush haven.

The fence finally completed we closed the gate and planted a corn crop. Bush wallabies spend their lives pushing through thick, scratchy scrub, and they seem to like corn. They look so cute holding the unripe cobs in their little paws as they squat on their tails.

Meanwhile we were importing sacks of rice, etc. and carrying it all in on horseback down the rough track to our one-day-to-be-self-sufficient paradise of flourishing gardens.

Soon we were also carrying in big rolls of wire. At least we scrounged the posts from dead trees felled by storms. The first generation, three strand wire fence was no object to the half wild cattle who managed to push through the gaps. They sometimes even managed to snap thick gauge wire in their efforts. All for a few little carrot tops or leeks.

By this time I was getting very strong from carrying water, wire, posts, shopping, and running wildly at a variety of wildlife day and night while flailing my arms and exercising my mouth. It was hungry work.

After our first year of gardening I'd eaten five home grown Tiny Tina tomatoes, three small carrots, one bean and lots of wild nettles from outside the garden, which no one else seemed to touch. I guess that's the one thing we had over the animals: they didn't know how to cook them so they don't sting your mouth.

I haven't mentioned the insects. Insects are cute creatures who love to flourish on lush growth unaffected by pesticides and chemicals. Good on

them. So do I. I think companion planting only works when the plants get to grow up big enough to develop companionships. I wouldn't know for sure.

Our fence progressed to a chicken wire mesh tied with wire onto three strands of the thickest gauge wire, stretched between closely spaced tree trunk sized posts over six feet high. The gate system was worthy of an engineering degree, which still didn't stop women from forgetting to shut it sometimes.

Suddenly the plot was thickening. The garden was smallish. We couldn't fence a large area to that degree. The wallabies were giving us dirty looks. The horses kept watch till someone forgot to close the gate while she went down the creek for a five minute swim. Then they'd wander in for a browse.

Still it seemed like finally the season was going to come to some sort of fruition. Most of the animals were making do with the compost heap. As the first fruits of our labours grew to edible proportions and softened towards ripeness our mouths began watering in anticipation.

That is until we started noticing a bite out of a tomato here, a chomped zucchini and a ripped off pepper there. We scratched our heads. We checked our gate. We inspected the fence inch by inch. We posted a look-out.

Once again enjoying a moonlit bed in the garden I flashed my torch at a scuttle to see a possum scurrying up the fence and into the branches of an overhanging tree. There are thousands of possums swarming in the Australian bush. They resemble overgrown rats more than squirrels if you ask me, though people who haven't had to live with them think they are rather bright eyed and bushy tailed beauties. They are fearless, smart, and persistent. Baby possums are sent to safe breaking school while they still ride on their mother's backs.

The next generation garden fence involved building a chicken wire mesh canopy over the whole garden and tying it with wire to the upright fence every two inches. When we finished that one we stood back, rubbed our hands together and chuckled at our immense skill and ingenuity.

So did the possums. The very next morning there were the familiar chomps. Possums don't bother to eat one vegetable at a sitting. They like I to wander around the garden and take a bite here and a mouthful there. Sample a bit of everything and finish nothing. It is one of their endearing features. We'd already noticed this custom when they raided our store bought food.

A close inspection of the fence revealed where they had managed to unravel the chicken wire joins and make a neat round hole. Chicken wire is not welded at the joins, but merely twisted around itself. I pass that on to you for what it is worth, because if I'd realised that I could have saved myself a lot of bother.

After a few more months of wire tying practice I retired from gardening to take up a career in bush track repair, to make it easier to get our supplies in.

I have learnt how to live in harmony with nature and enjoy nettle soup. The garden self seeds and the fence is half fallen down. The gate swings open and everyone wanders in and out at will, which is the equal, unbounded sort of society I believe in. We still manage to harvest quite a few chokoes the one thing no one seems to like a lot of. Including me.

I suppose my main pleasure in gardening has been that it's given a lot of animals a chance to put one over on people. Being a gardener has really developed my skills as a fencer and road builder. So it has been worth it.

The possums have long lost interest in the garden. When the orchard is out of season they spend their nights bouncing up and down on my roof as I develop ever more elaborate window catches.

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