The colourful charm of Lambley Gardens & Nursery near Ballarat. Inset: the gardens at Versailles, created by Louis XIV's head gardener André Le Nôtre, were a symbol of status.

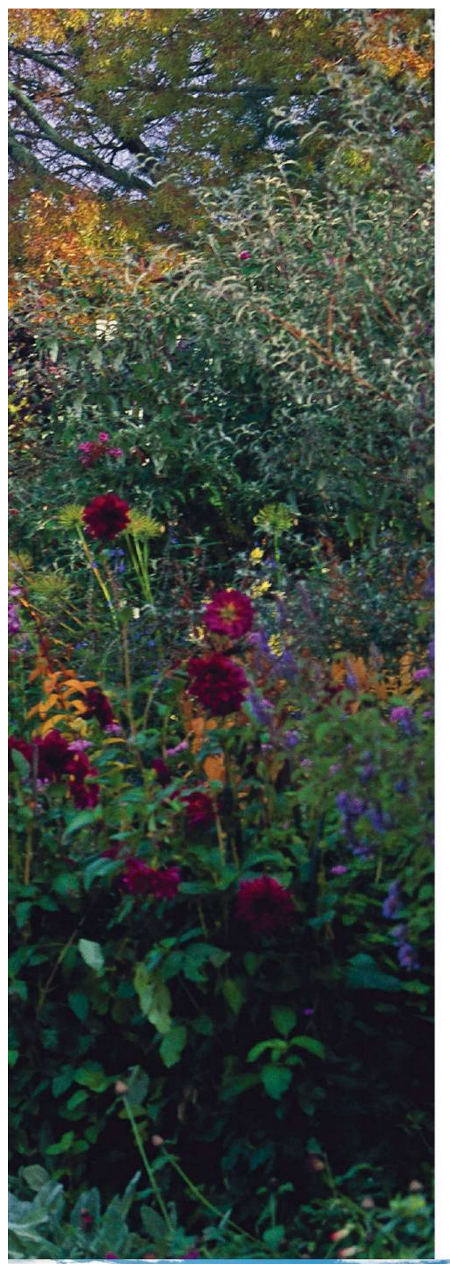
GROWTH MINDSET

Forget expensive candles, detox smoothies and week-long retreats. For the ultimate wellness hack, it's hard to beat pottering about in a garden.

BY *Amanda Hooton*

"In my garden, after a rainfall, you can faintly, yes, hear the breaking of new blooms."
Truman Capote

When I was a child, on visits to my grandmother house in the south-west of Western Australia, I mad gardens. Miniature gardens, in the forks of trees. would collect bark and twigs and native flowers fro the surrounding bush – yellow and brown egg-an bacon-plant flowers, white fairy orchids, emerald gree moss. (As a child of the Pilbara desert, this mos seemed magical to me: how could anything be luxuriously, intensely green?) I'd squash it into a vee branches, then load it with flowers and tin twig constructions for the fairy civilisation I imagine living nearby, doffing their gumnut hats and arguin about whose turn it was to carry the gooseberr lantern. I made fairy fence-posts, fairy teepees, fair clotheslines. (Not even fairies, it seems, could escap the daily grind of housework.) But it was housewor made gorgeous – quotidian tasks enchanted by th botanical world.



Does every child, given the chance, feel the magic of ardens? I am wildly biased, but even so, it seems likely. or all of our evolution as a species, our relationship ith plants has been of existential importance. Our ery bodies are proof: our eyes' retinal cones can idenfy more shades of green, with less effort, than any ther colour, and research suggests that simply being xposed to green light for short periods can significantly ssen intraocular pressure in glaucoma patients; as well s reducing frequency and intensity of migraines, fibroyalgia and chronic musculoskeletal pain. Myriad udies suggest that even mere images of gardens or ndscapes reduce blood pressure, respiration rate and stress responses. In one small but famous study, gallbladder surgery patients were divided into rooms with a view of a garden and rooms looking onto a wall: those with the garden view took fewer painkillers and barbiturates, reported less stress and went home sooner.

When we are in nature – which in daily life usually means in some version of a garden – the parts of our brains associated with empathy and love light up. As well as feeding, clothing and sheltering us, plants simply make us feel good. In 2001, studies by the University of Illinois showed that Chicago public housing residents who had trees and garden space around their buildings reported knowing more people, having stronger feelings of unity with neighbours, and having deeper feelings of belonging, mutual help and social support than tenants in buildings without gardens. They also had a reduced risk of street crime and lower levels of domestic violence.

It's no accident, then, that humans have embedded gardens into our most important social and cultural belief systems. Adam and Eve dwelt "in a garden in the east, in Eden" before their spectacular Fall; Allah promised "to the believing men and the believing women gardens, beneath which rivers flow, to abide in". Hindu gods love a pleasure garden; and let's not forget that the Buddha attained enlightenment while sitting under a fig tree. In all the ways that matter – physical, emotional, spiritual – the garden is, and always has been, a paradise. Indeed, it's a type of garden design – the walled gardens of ancient Persia, known as *pairi* (around) *daeza* (wall) – that give us the word "paradise" itself.

And yet, despite all this, here is the dreadful reality: in Australia today, we spend less time than ever in the garden. This is generally put down to the evils of urban living. Not all of us even have gardens, the social researchers cry: even if we wanted to, we can't garden, because we simply don't have the space. But in fact, this is not quite the case. It is true that more Australians (86 per cent in 2022), and more people everywhere (56 per cent globally in 2023) live in urban environments than at any point in human history. But it is not true that we don't have gardens.

According to a 2021 research collaboration between Macquarie University and nature-based health and design company NatureFix, some 85 per cent of Australians still live in houses with a backyard of some kind. Our access to green space rises even more if you take into account public parks and community gardens. But although these are extraordinary in their own way, I'm excluding them from this calculation because they don't offer what our own gardens do, which is privacy. A place where we can actually engage with "nature": cut flowers, pull plants up by the roots, fling compost. Even dream, like English author Vita Sackville-West, of making a garden filled with magic – with or without fairy clotheslines. "I am trying to make a grey, green and white garden," she once wrote. "This is an experiment which I ardently hope may be successful, though I doubt it… All the same, I cannot help hoping that the great, ghostly barn owl will sweep silently across a pale garden, next summer, in the twilight – the pale garden that I am now planting, under the first flakes of snow."

Even without the barn owl, the point is clear. Not only do most of us have a place where we can garden (I include balconies and indoor plants here); we also have all the history, the experts and the science to tell us that we should. We know that gardening can give us something – improved physical health; connection with the natural world; lessons in stress-free living – that we need, and which a billion-dollar self-care industry and a million wellbeing products often fail to provide.

Above: the garden at Sissinghurst Castle in south-east England – the longtime home of the late novelist and gardening columnist Vita Sackville-West.

And that's not even counting the sheer, unadulterated pleasure. The jubilation of a single unexpected crocus flower, miraculously appearing at the edge of an abandoned pot; the perfumed thrill of a gardenia from your own (albeit disease-ridden) bush; the delight of harvesting a handful of fresh chives (those not eaten by the cat, who has mistaken them for cat grass): these are delights that cannot be replaced by any yoga mandala or meal plan or health kick, however carefully curated to win our happiness-hunting hearts.

So here's my ambit claim for gardens. They are the original wellness spa; the infinitely better Goop candle; the easy alternative to smoothie bowls. They are the guru-free meditation rite, the prosaic path to mindfulness. We wouldn't need any of these things, if only we could return to the garden.

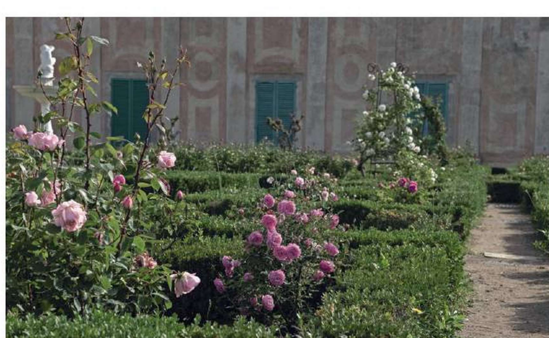
"My life now is just trees. Trees and champagne."
Judi Dench

Amanda Sturgeon is the CEO of The Biomimicry Institute and an expert in biophilic design. (The biophilia hypothesis proposes that as humans evolved, an interest in nature improved our chances of survival, so an innate sympathy with the natural world became encoded in our genes. Biophilic design attempts to create a built environment that connects people with nature.) Sturgeon, who has recently returned from some years working overseas, is trying to purchase a house in Sydney. "There are an amazing number of ads that say 'maintenance-free garden'," she says. "And what that means is 'all concrete'. It couldn't be worse! Or further from what I wanted – some flowers, some bees, lorikeets in my backyard while I'm eating my breakfast."

In Australia, according to Geelong-based academic and landscape architect Ross Wissing, who ran the Macquarie/NatureFix survey, average block sizes in Australia have decreased by more than 50 per cent since the 1950s – from about 1000 square metres to just over 400 square metres. But whereas only 30 to 50 per cent of a block used to be covered by a house, with the rest usually cultivated as a garden, now between 80 and 90 per cent of the block is taken up by the house alone. "Houses in real terms are four times bigger than what

they were per capita in the 1950s," says Wissing. "Their embodied energy has increased by around 400 per cent, and energy consumption by more than 300 per cent."

Tony Matthews, urban and environmental planner and lecturer at Griffith University, agrees: "On average, in terms of floor area, Australians are building among the largest houses in the world. We're on a par – if not beyond – North America." And although even now most houses do have some open-air space – "a patio or little deck area" – it's rarely actual garden space: "nothing that requires trimming or mowing or maintenance. It seems to me that the desire to have a garden as something you would maintain and be proud of and be invested in as a hobby – that's a priority that seems to have largely faded away. Not completely, but largely."



Above: landscape designer Paul Bangay says that general knowledge about gardening has been lost or diminished since he started his career 40 years ago. Right: the Medici family instituted the Boboli Gardens in Florence, Italy.

Wissing's research shows that where once the Aussie backyard allowed for a high degree of self-sufficiency, with people growing vegetables, herbs, even small orchards, these days there's barely room for a tomato or basil plant. "There might only be one, two, five metres of actual garden," he says: "the rest is hard surfaces. You do sort of think – why would you bother?"

There are exceptions, of course. Perth-based architect Simone Robeson has recently completed a house for a family who chose to not only maintain the large garden they'd built on their old 1950s block, but also to make it of equal importance to the house. She has a growing number of clients with similar priorities, but "unfortunately, they're still the exception," she admits. "The default position is not 'How much space do we need?' but more 'How big are we allowed to build? Fifty per cent, 90 per cent? Well, let's just do that for maximum resale value.' "

This story is repeated all over the country: our national obsession with real estate and property prices, combined with lax council and government regulations for half a century, have allowed bigger and bigger houses to be built on smaller and smaller blocks. "Garden space just isn't valued in our property prices," says Sturgeon. "And that goes to a deeper question. Why is a second living room or a fourth bathroom worth more to people – especially in the beautiful Australian climate – than sitting outside or lying on the grass in your garden?"

"If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need."
Marcus Tullius Cicero

Paul Bangay is one of Australia's most famous landscape designers. When he started his business more than 40 years ago, gardens were, as he puts it, "a place to engage in horticulture – a place to interact with plants". That's changed completely: "Now it's outdoor rooms, it's outdoor kitchens, it's outdoor televisions, barbecues. Trampolines are everywhere. The garden really has become an extension of the house.

"When I began my career, more people were passionate gardeners: they designed their own gardens, maintained their own gardens, knew the name of plants," he continues. "Now, except in rare cases, that actual knowledge about gardening has been lost, or at least diminished. Instead, you find that a lot more people employ professionals in the garden – as they do elsewhere, like in interior design or architecture. They employ garden designers, and then they employ gardeners. Which is great – but it does mean they're not looking after the garden themselves the way they used to."

Bangay hasn't noticed his clients sacrificing their gardens in order to build extra rooms and increase their house value, but that may be because – though he is too discreet to point this out – he works for people who are wealthy enough that such compromises are unnecessary. Indeed, in his sphere, "gardens can add a lot to the real estate value of a property. The fact that our name is used to sell a property is an indication that gardens do matter."

This is true – gardens have always been important symbols of economic and social power. In Europe, thanks to various gardening Medicis (Cosimo, Giovanni, Giulio), a sequence of French kings (most famously Louis XIV at Versailles), and various members of the English aristocracy (who all seem to have employed Capability Brown), having the right kind of garden became the ultimate mark of refinement, wealth, and status.

Today, in this country, a Paul Bangay garden does much the same thing. But the owner of a Bangay garden, just like Louis XIV (whose gardener, André Le Nôtre, razed entire villages to build the gardens at Versailles), is sending a message to the world. "I have taste, I am rich and I am powerful. Just look at my garden, where I am in command, not only of where we will grill the sausages, but of nature herself."

As well as wealth and taste, gardens are also associated with brains. In 2012, Damon Young, a philosopher and honorary fellow at Melbourne University, wrote a book, *Philosophy in the Garden*, about the way gardens have influenced great minds of history. As he points out, the philosophy of what we now call Western civilisation – democracy, morality, right living – was hammered out in gardens. Plato and Aristotle both taught in gardens, and Aristotle's successor Theophrastus used the Lyceum gardens (Aristotle's gym-cum-parade ground-cum-garden outside Athens) as the basis for the first botanical treatises in history. The famous sage Epicurus taught his followers to pursue lives of tranquillity from a school called, literally, The Garden.

"You can't have an ego with a garden. The f---ing plant just won't grow wher you want it to grow."
Helen Mirren

Most people who garden in the averag backyard are not – unlike the Medicis or, fo that matter, Aristotle – trying to change th world. Well, actually they are, in the sens that they're trying to control nature – bu this, of course, is an almost invariably futi goal, because nature always wins. Th Pierre de Ronsard rose will *not* flower i the shade; the snails *will* eat your orchi spikes if you forget the snail pellets. Indee there are so many disasters in gardenin that sometimes it's hard to remember wh you like it. "Gardening isn't easy," points ou David Glenn, legendary Australian plant man and owner of the beautiful Lamble Gardens & Nursery near Ballara Glenn has been gardening profe sionally for some 60 years, and h speaks with the resignation of lon experience. "Gardens need wor and thought. And you have as man failures as successes."

They can also be challenging, eve alien places – far removed from ou sanitised daily world. There are in sects; germs; soils filled with myste rious microbial danger. There is th unspeakable evil of cat poo. Ther are curl grubs – ditto. There is als the expense of growing things tha don't last, don't thrive, don't perfor as expected. (I spent $27 on tomat plants this year; my total tomato harvest was zero. Se curl grubs, above.) And there is the stark reality that i this time-poor age, growing something that might tak weekly – let alone daily – care can seem like an outra geous imposition on our lives.

And yet. I am not a good gardener, in the sense that am not consistent, I procrastinate, and sometimes mi ing up the pest oil to spray the lemon tree for leaf mine yet again is more than I can bear. But there is no othe activity in which I regularly experience what gurus an psychologists call *flow*: total, unconscious immersio in the present moment. I find th process of gardening easily, utter absorbing – potting on geraniu cuttings; seeing the passionfru spring to life before my eyes afte watering; watching the worm turning our unbelievably revoltin kitchen scraps into perfect, good as-the-YouTube-video compos How could anyone who has wi nessed such miracles resist them?

"People are growing up now who've never spent time in a garden, so they literally don't know what they're missing."

Perhaps the point is they *haven't* witnessed then suggests Amanda Sturgeon. "I do think it's a bit lik the frog in boiling water. People are growing up no who've never spent time in a garden, so they literal don't know what they're missing. And that mean they don't notice how gardens are disappearin and they don't look for them when they're buying house – so there's no demand for them." Tony Matthew agrees. "You could say that what's happened is that, i every generation, there's more young people who ar unfamiliar with the look, feel, touch, sensation, realit of nature and natural things. And that unfamiliarit has been replaced with an over-familiarity with th digital world. And so in many houses, we've inverte the outdoor space of the backyard into an indoor spac – some kind of media room or something. That's th new backyard for a lot of people."

I find this concept, while believable, completely de pressing. But Amanda Sturgeon isn't willing to give u "Love of nature is innate within us," she insists. "It

Right: urban gardener and Instagram star Connie Cao says more fellow Millennials are getting into gardening for wellness. "To me, gardening feels like a really nourishing therapy session."

part of our DNA, our ancestry, how we've evolved. So although we might have lost a lot of our experience, it doesn't take much to reconnect us."

Says David Glenn: "I think people have just got to have one really good experience when they're young, and that will turn them into gardeners. My first triumph was when I was 14 or 15; we inherited a very large house with a big garden and a wide nature strip beside the road, which I planted as a garden. And for the few weeks when it was at its prime, I would walk half a mile up the road to catch the bus past my house, just so I could hear everyone on the bus going, 'Oh! Look at that!'"

"To forget how to tend the earth and dig the soil is to forget ourselves."
Mahatma Ghandi

Gardeners are good at hope, which is just as well – no one would ever plant tomatoes two years running without it. And there does seem to be some optimism among experts about the future of gardening. Connie Cao is an Instagram (@connieandluna) vegie garden queen, and a star of the Nine Network's *Garden Hustle*. Her first pleasure in the garden came as a teenager, when she grew Asian vegetables with her dad; today she has her own super-productive garden on an average-sized block in Melbourne. "Today I harvested 125 chillies from one potted plant – no kidding!" she reports. "That's an entire year's supply." She sees lots of people of her own (Millennial) generation getting into gardening, she says, not for reasons of prestige or power, but actually, ta-da, for wellness – personal and planetary. "To me, gardening feels like a really nourishing therapy session – and I feel like there's an increasing interest in gardening that is beneficial for the environment – whether it be growing flowers to feed pollinators, or re-establishing native gardens to help bring back native biodiversity."

This is a little-known impact of the domestic garden: its power to affect global warming, loss of biodiversity and carbon emissions. A single tree can lower the temperature under its canopy by a good 10 degrees; a large tree can remove 22 kilograms of particulates and 45 kilograms of carbon each year from the atmosphere. Home-composting green waste can cut household carbon emissions by up to a half. And gardens may contain literally hundreds of individual plant species, which in turn – especially in dense urban areas – provide habitat, sustenance and stepping stones for native animals. Saving the planet really does begin in your own backyard.

Another reason for gardening hope is sheer economics. As construction costs rise, and people can no longer afford the media den or yet another bathroom, gardens may be preserved – or even established – almost by default. "People are getting better," says Simone Robeson. "There's not as much desire for home theatres and all the extra rooms that used to be really common. It is an economics thing, but it's powerful – as is the fact that if, say, we can shade with a tree from the setting sun, it reduces the heat load of the house, and your aircon doesn't need to work as hard. So there's a cost benefit as well. And you can make that case for any sustainable measure.'"

Tony Matthews, meanwhile, hopes that knowledge may bring power. "The research internationally is absolutely explicit: we now know that access to nature and green spaces is fundamental for us as human beings. So we may have less experience of nature, but we also know that we need to have interaction with nature. And that is driving councils and government."

Whether it's driving us as individuals is not yet clear. But Ross Wissing has one final persuasive statistic. The longest-lived people in the world, he points out, garden an hour each weekday. The centenarians of the Sardinian Blue Zone – a region where 10 times as many people per capita make it to 100 than in the United States – not only walk everywhere, but also grow most of their own food, and garden four to five hours a week. "It's mind-blowing."

I don't care if it's a melon or a melaleuca you're growing, as long as it's something. Every unfurling anemone, every waving fern frond, every windowsill succulent is a force for good in the world. As Amanda Sturgeon puts it, "Each backyard makes a difference." To us, and to everything else. ■

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