

This page Glenmore House is a garden of contrasts. Here, a clipped conifer hedge is layered with rosemary and a yucca specimen in front.

GROWING UP

An expansive *historic property* outside Sydney has flourished during the owners' 26-year stewardship, with *Mediterranean influences* enhancing its unmistakable Australian spirit.

Photographs NICHOLAS WATT Words RICHARD UNSWORTH

This page A peppercorn tree, thought to be more than 170 years old, overhangs the octagonal lotus pond and provides welcome shade. In the winter, the firepit and attendant seat offer a warm vantage point for enjoying the garden. Opposite page, from top Huge agave specimens at the front of the sandstone house create drama and scale. Mickey's beloved frangipanis frame the original stables, now a pool house complete with wooden shingled roof and an ironbark slab fence.



Twenty-six years ago Larry Robertson was scouting the outskirts of south-western Sydney for a rural property for friends back in the UK, and came across a small, historic sandstone farmhouse. He mentioned it in passing to his wife Mickey who, at the time, didn't think any more of it. A few weeks later, Larry phoned Mickey to confess that he was the successful bidder on the property, and the adventure and love affair with Glenmore House began.

The 12-hectare property sits west of Camden, an hour's drive south-west of Sydney. In the decades following the arrival of the First Fleet, these areas were farmed by the early pioneers, and the home was purchased from descendants of the original settlers.

Mickey Robertson had grown up in Sydney's leafy Woollahra and she adored Glenmore House as soon as she saw it. "I saw a sandstone cottage in rolling green countryside with a big, beautiful frangipani tree next to it. How could I not love it?"

The house and various outbuildings dated back to the 1840s and were in a very poor state of repair. The couple set about returning the house to its original form, removing unsympathetic fibro additions, lean-to sheds and outdoor loos. It took almost two years before they could spend a night at the house. "There was no power, no running water, nothing," says Mickey. For years she was cooking on one electric ring, and it was a big moment when a kettle was able to be plugged in – albeit outside the house.

With sensitivity to the building's heritage, new wings were added allowing more expansive living space for the Robertsons and their two young daughters, and Mickey's skill as an interior designer ensured every detail was in keeping with the original structure.

The surrounding ramshackle and overgrown original outbuildings consisting of a barn, stables, hayshed, dairy and cow shed were also sympathetically restored and rebuilt. It is their location and positioning, along with that of the house, that determined the garden's layout and defined the 'rooms' within.

Practical and structural elements of the garden all had to be built from scratch. Driveways, fences, gates and dry stone walls were all constructed with an aesthetic and scale that sat perfectly with the period and style of house.

An early addition of a swimming pool was a necessity rather than a luxury, giving respite from the scorching summers, and the stables made for a perfect pool house. Mickey planted a pair of her beloved frangipanis for shade, and a series of imposing vertical ironbark slabs are the most striking, natural and robust pool fence. These provide a strong backdrop to a heavily layered and textured herbaceous border.

As well as strong foliage and soft flowers, fragrance plays a huge role in Mickey's garden. A hedge of osmanthus sits outside the pool fence and, when it is in flower, Mickey says "swimming in the pool is rather like drowning in apricot nectar". Similarly, a visually unremarkable but heavily perfumed night-scented jessamine planted close to the kitchen "permeates our summer evenings".

Mickey's innate sense of style and personality is all over the garden. It is natural, unpretentious and incredibly romantic. In fact everything that Mickey and Larry restored, built or planted at Glenmore House have combined to create a magical and sensuous experience.





This page, clockwise from top left
Fading hydrangeas next to the
original timber barn dating from
the 1840s. The garden is as much
about foliage as flowers: the
ornamental bronze seed heads of
Miscanthus catch the light. Early
squatter's chair on the verandah.



Species have been chosen over the years from visits to other gardens and travels far and wide. You don't have to look far to see both Anglo and Mediterranean influences in the borders, although the garden is unmistakably Australian in feel and spirit.

The beautifully laid-out and thriving kitchen garden is located next to the old dairy and provides much of the family's produce needs. Mickey applies mostly organic, crop-rotation methods with companion planting to encourage the desired bugs and insects. What must be the happiest chickens around are housed in a well-crafted timber and stone compound among abundant citrus trees with drooping branches of fruit. The dairy is now the perfect space for Mickey's in-demand workshops on kitchen gardening.

The huge frame of the original hayshed is bordered by a fragrant hedge of rosemary and next to it sits a productive orchard of gnarled olive, almond, fig and apple trees.

The ornamental planting schemes around the property create deliberate looks that correspond perfectly with the practical use and nature of the buildings.

At the front of the house, which is dramatic and striking in its simplicity, four huge clumps of once tiny *Agave americana* provide scale, structure and drama, their spiky undulating limbs contrasting with a soft reed-filled circular pond within the gravel courtyard.

Bold tropical foliage of strelitzia, crinum, ginger, canna and ornamental banana off the main bedroom give a luxuriant, almost Caribbean feel when viewed from within.

Visiting Glenmore House is like stepping back into a softer and more genteel world. It fills the soul, lifts the spirits and reminds us of how important it is to connect with our gardens.

For more visit glenmorehouse.com.au. Follow Richard Unsworth on Twitter @mygardenlife or visit gardenlife.com.au.