

An ornamental cherry
underplanted with
valerian, achillea, cardoons
and sedum. **FACING PAGE**
The seductive blooms of
peony poppies unfold.





outer
BEAUTY

FALLING IN LOVE WITH AN OLD
COTTAGE ON SYDNEY'S OUTSKIRTS SAW
THIS INTERIOR DECORATOR DISCOVER
A TALENT FOR OUTDOOR DESIGN.

WORDS MEREDITH KIRTON PHOTOGRAPHY SUE STUBBS



This wisteria is one of a pair that Mickey moved from the front to a paddock at the rear. FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT "We spend more time out than in," says Mickey; a bed of iris; Tabitha keeps a keen eye on all garden activity; the former stables are now the pool house.



WHEN THE ROBERTSONS came to Glenmore House in the late 1980s, the property's essential charm was recognisably as it is today. Like much early colonial architecture, the 1840s sandstone cottage had a quiet simplicity, with its unadorned driveway and austere façade punctuated by hardy succulents and yards outlined by old post-and-rail fences.

The city's south-west edge may have almost reached Camden in the foothills of the Razorback Range, but the property said 'country retreat' to Mickey and Larry.

However, the couple had not intended to make the retreat permanent. "Fix it up just enough to use as a weekender" was the idea, according to Mickey. "Babies weren't on the agenda either," she says with a laugh. "But then we did the classic thing and fell in love with it."

The object of their affection acquired a wing on each side, complete with a new kitchen, bathrooms and bedrooms, and some extra inhabitants. As is often the case, babies and renovations happened simultaneously. Their daughters, Clementine and Bonnie, are now 20 and 14. "This is where our children have grown up, played with dogs, cats, rabbits and friends both imagined and real," Mickey says. "We've had Easter egg hunts and Christmas mornings and birthday parties."

Becoming a garden expert was another unplanned development. The interior designer suddenly found herself with 11 hectares of exterior space to play with; it wasn't long before "gardening books became prescribed bedtime reading". One set of professional skills provided a foundation for the other — Mickey has deliberately linked the garden to the different rooms of the house.

One of the most charming features is the verandah, which was built at the same time as the new wings. One part was left unroofed and is draped with a beautiful white classic Chinese wisteria.

"This is one of our favourite places for breakfast on Sunday mornings," Mickey says. "In the winter, the >





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wisteria loses its leaves, making it a sunny nook; in the spring it’s covered in lovely flowers and in the summer, it provides dense shade outside the kitchen.

“We really use the garden — we spend more time out than in. We take umbrellas into different areas, and move furniture and picnic rugs around to suit the occasion.”

Elsewhere, lavender borders the laundry and tropical ornamentals, such as shell gingers, crinum lilies and strelitzia, surround the bedroom wing, providing what Mickey calls a “West Indies” or “early colonial” feel. Against the wall of the original cottage, the frangipani trees — underplanted with red ‘Bishop of Llandaff’ dahlias, yellow ginger, golden solandra and Burmese honeysuckle — flood the house with scent on warm summer evenings.

“For me the garden is inextricably linked to the interiors,” Mickey says. “What’s happening outside is a reflection of what’s happening inside.”

At the front of the house, which faces east and has to cope with extreme heat in summer, is a gravel drive leading to giant agaves that came from a neighbour. Around the other side lies a courtyard with a formal pond and steps flanked by bay trees. Oak-leaved hydrangeas and hellebores flourish in the shade.

This cool retreat is largely provided by the wonderful canopy of a 150-year-old peppercorn which stands sentinel in the rear lawn. Like a wizened old farmer with

work-weary hands, the twisted trunk speaks of tough times, extreme weather and perseverance. It’s fitting that a child’s swing hangs from one of its branches.

As we return to the sunshine, Mickey names plants that are usually associated with warmer climes — yucca, ceanothus, romneya, teucrium, euphorbia and Greek poppies. Towards the old milking shed and the swimming pool, Mickey points out another beautiful section, where soft pink and pale yellow flowers are punctuated by ornamental cherries and grey foliated perennials. It’s backed by a rustic hayshed and a meandering orchard of olives, almonds and figs.

And finally, we are surrounded by Mickey’s latest venture — the kitchen garden. On one side is a traditional four-bed garden, through which crops can be rotated, and on the other side Mickey is trying out permaculture’s guild method of placing mutually supportive plants together. “These days I spend most of my gardening time in the kitchen garden. Every day there is a new thrill, it changes constantly. And we can eat the results!

“I just wish I knew 22 years ago what I know now,” she muses. “I could have achieved what I wanted so much earlier. Still, you have to make mistakes in order to learn.” *

Glenmore House is open on October 16–17 for Australia’s Open Garden Scheme. For details on Mickey’s garden classes, 0419 1654 84, (02) 4654 5484; www.glenmorehouse.com.au



Prunus x yedoensis 'Akebono', a popular cultivar of the Yoshino Cherry, in full bloom at Camden. FACING PAGE, FROM LEFT White Chinese wisteria forms a canopy over the verandah; a venerable pepper tree entertains young hearts with a swing.