

# *home for the holiday*

CHRISTMAS AT GLENMORE HOUSE IS FILLED WITH TRADITION, AND A TABLE LADEN WITH THE RESULTS OF MICKEY ROBERTSON'S KITCHEN GARDEN.

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Sheltered by the tall hedge of Leyland cypress, Mickey Robertson sets a table in her Camden garden under a Port Jackson fig.



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE Heirloom art and furniture in the former dairy; a whole poached salmon nestled in a bed of fennel fronds is the centrepiece of Christmas lunch; tiny rosemary wreaths make a festive place setting; lavender surrounds the former dairy. **FACING PAGE** This year, the old dairy has been chosen as the setting for the Christmas tree: "Simple, bright, a bit rustic and fresh, with seedhead flower arrangements, and brown paper packages tied up with string, interspersed with quail- and duck-egg paper," explains Mickey.



There are feasts aplenty at Glenmore House. The property is known to many for its kitchen garden events run by convivial owner Mickey Robertson. But inside the home there's an altogether different kind of feast.

Every wall, tabletop and cupboard is layered with years of treasured gifts from friends and family, or finds from holidays and time spent living overseas. And while the home is furnished with a considered eye — Mickey has worked for most of her adult life as an interior decorator — it is very much a personal space. "You can make a house quickly but it takes many years to create a home," she says.

Glenmore House is in the Razorback Range near Camden, about an hour's drive south-west of the Sydney CBD, and has been an ongoing project since Mickey and her husband Larry bought it in 1988. "We were taken with the sandstone house in the middle of a green landscape of undulating hills," she says.

The land was part of a grant to a Robert Johnston in 1833 and was sold to the Moore family in 1851. The original dwelling was a modest hut that was joined to a sandstone cottage in 1840 by way of a covered walkway. Over the years, the property was run as a dairy farm and remained in the Moores' hands for generations until it passed to the Robertsons. "It had been empty for about six years," Mickey says. "It was a collection of buildings that were falling apart."

The Robertsons were living in Sydney's eastern suburbs, and it was from there that they travelled while making the >



## Christmas tips

- \* "Decorate your doors with wreaths made from foraged foliage collected in the garden or even from the roadside."
- \* "Prepare food you're familiar with, that you all enjoy and brings you pleasure. Don't make life complicated by trying a new recipe. Make things that bring a sense of celebration."
- \* "Use all of your favourite things — china, cutlery, tablecloths. They don't have to match but use the things that make you smile, or have lovely associations with memory or people."
- \* "Make sure there's lovely music playing while you cook. It doesn't have to be Christmas carols. I sometimes listen to Doris Day..."



A festive eucalypt wreath on the front door. **FACING PAGE** *Agave americana* runs rampant by the entrance to the house.

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**CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE**

Timber obelisks by the murraya hedge; Mickey's painter custom mixed the colour for the kitchen cabinets, while the benchtops are Caesarstone. "The window looks towards the old stables, pool and hills, so it's easy to get distracted," Mickey says; Chinese botanical paintings line the bedroom walls, which are painted a custom-mixed colour; a mirror from England offsets the 'West Indies Toile' wallpaper from Brunswig & Fils. **FACING PAGE** Watercolours and other artworks behind the sofa, whose linen covers were inspired by the colour of the agave outside. "The long cushions come from an old Colefax & Fowler moquette, while the foliage cushions are made of French cut velvet," Mickey says. For stockist details, see page 135.



sandstone house habitable. They spent their first night at Glenmore House in November 1989, but adding additional wings, and turning it into a four-bedroom house with extra bathrooms, took time. It wasn't until 1995 that they moved in permanently. At that point their eldest daughter, Clementine, was five, and Bonnie was born shortly after the move.

The garden has informed much of their experience of the house. "It fills the view from every window," Mickey says. Two giant American aloes (*Agave americana*) flank the entrance to the sandstone cottage, and influenced the choice of upholstery fabric on the blue-grey striped sofa in the sitting room.

The decor has a British sensibility, in part due to Larry's Scottish heritage. Mickey isn't interested in what's considered the latest style. "Homes are about the story of people's lives — that's what matters — and this is the story of our combined life," she says. "It's about being real and authentic, and true to who you are."

She doesn't buy decorative pieces according to plan. "I don't buy a thing for a spot. Everything here comes with a huge emotional and sentimental attachment."

In the kitchen, where Mickey spends much of her time, she illustrates her point. On the top of one of the cupboards is a 1920s plate that belonged to Larry's mother, a ginger jar from Shanghai, and collections from the garden and the ocean in terracotta pots.

"I'm always marrying the sea and the garden, and that's just in here," she says. "I repeat this throughout the house." >



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CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE Mickey goes foraging; the map of Glenmore by Albury-based estate cartographer Catherine O'Neill hangs above Mickey's treasured button-back tub chair from London's Beaumont & Fletcher, covered in a Pierre Frey cotton ikat; on the verandah, a just-picked cabbage sits on a table rescued from the Wollondilly Shire Council office, and surrounded by second-hand director's chairs covered in tan canvas. FACING PAGE The summer pudding that Mickey ceremoniously prepares for Christmas Day lunch. For stockist details, see page 135.



While Mickey trained as an interior decorator in London, which is where she met Larry, she is a self-taught cook and gardener. "I think that passion gets you a long way," she observes. She enjoys preparing food with the lightest possible touch and rarely bothers with recipes from day to day, instead she simply picks produce from the garden and adds it to chicken, fish or pasta dishes.

"I don't like to disguise the taste of the thing itself, so we really eat quite simply," she says.

The couple knew when they bought the property that it would have to fund itself. For many years they hosted weddings, and the footprint of the original dairy was taken as a guide to build a sturdy replacement to host events and workshops, while the original separating shed has been converted to a kitchen. Mickey now prefers to focus on the simplicity and intimacy of her garden events.

"It's quite deceptive," she says. "It's not a big garden. It's not formal. It has a certain charm. I think it's a romantic garden but it's also quite clean and bright. People find it quite accessible, and they can take elements away from it and plant combinations of it for themselves."

Now Mickey is focusing on the lead-up to the festive season. The house is often full of visitors and family. The decorations always go up 12 days before Christmas and come down 12 days afterwards. "I'm a very traditional girl," she says.

She spends Christmas Eve cooking and enjoying its special sense of anticipation. Christmas Day always involves a swim before the opening of stockings and an alfresco breakfast. Where the dinner table will be set up is never decided until the morning — and then the house becomes a hive of activity, from hanging lanterns and laying tablecloths and cutlery to erecting umbrellas and moving chairs. And while the location changes, the meal does not. This is another firm family tradition: carrot and orange soup, then poached salmon, followed by a summer pudding.

Boxing Day usually involves a swim, another outdoor breakfast, and relaxing under an umbrella with a book — usually one that has arrived in a Christmas stocking. "Boxing Day is divine, the most quiet, dreamy, idyllic day of the year," Mickey says. And Glenmore House provides the perfect backdrop. *cf*

For information about events at Glenmore House, visit [glenmorehouse.com.au](http://glenmorehouse.com.au)

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#### SUMMER PUDDING

Serves 8

500g fresh or thawed frozen raspberries  
500g fresh or thawed frozen blackberries or boysenberries  
500g fresh or thawed frozen redcurrants\*  
1½ cups caster sugar  
15 slices 3-day-old white sandwich bread, crusts removed  
2 x 300ml cartons double thick cream, to serve

Place raspberries, blackberries and redcurrants in a large bowl. Add sugar and gently stir to combine. Cover with plastic wrap or a clean tea towel

and stand for 1 hour or until the sugar dissolves.

Meanwhile, line base of a 10-cup capacity pudding basin or glass bowl with 1 slice of bread. Line side of basin with bread slices, overlapping slightly, until completely covered.

Spoon berry mixture and syrup into bread-lined basin, pressing down gently to level. Arrange remaining bread slices over berry mixture, overlapping to cover. Cover with plastic wrap. Place a plate over pudding and weigh down with cans of food. Place in refrigerator overnight to firm and develop flavours. (The

syrup will seep through the bread, turning it pink.)

Remove cans of food, plate and plastic wrap from pudding basin. Place a serving plate over basin. Invert pudding onto plate. (If pudding sticks to basin, insert a round-bladed knife between bowl and pudding to gently release.) Serve with cream.

\*Fresh redcurrants are available for a short time in December and January. Frozen redcurrants are available from gourmet food stores or delicatessens.

NOTE If using frozen berries, allow at least 2 hours for berries to thaw.