

GARDENING

COAST

The gut feeling for a balancing act

BY MEGAN BACKHOUSE

Peter Shaw trained as a greenkeeper and started out working at bowling clubs. He can do flawless lawn. The discrete patch of kikuyu growing in his Anglesea garden is, however, not that. Tree roots suck the moisture out of it and it takes a pummelling from Shaw's four children. As his kids have grown, Shaw has been making his peanut-shaped area of grass smaller but it is still not exactly what he had in mind.

Shaw's next idea is to give it more of a slope. By creating two merging mounds, he believes he will cut the impact of tree roots and create a sculptural element as well. The manicured knolls will be a counterpoint to the uneven tufts of poa scrambling down the middle of his driveway, which also serves as the front path.

Growing only where the car wheels don't roll, the tussock grass looks spontaneous and random and lends the gravel a neglected air but it is in fact as considered as any other part of the garden. Shaw torches it with a gas burner "every now and then" and within two weeks it is growing back fluffy and green as if a bushfire had come through.

The whole space is a balance between the wild and the polished. Shaw, who started domestic landscaping 20 years ago – in his spare time from tending bowling greens – within two years had set up business, and has spent years perfecting his own garden. He will never be done. It is one of three Anglesea properties open this weekend hosted by Open Gardens Australia.

Shaw and his wife, Simone, bought their surf coast block about 10 years ago. It contained some eucalypt wattles (since removed), eucalypt barks (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) and a narrow strip of indigenous grasses scattered with local orchids. The couple built a western red cedar house and ensured there were garden views from every window.

Left to his own devices Shaw says he might have leaned towards a strictly indigenous space but – "I realised that he had looked at his 'own patch a bit too long' – he seconded landscape architects Jim Sinatra



On show: Peter Shaw in his Anglesea garden Sunnymead, which he acknowledges will never be done.

PHOTOS: SCOTT HASKINS PHOTOGRAPHY, PETER SHAW

and Phin Murphy. They shook things up a little.

While Sinatra and Murphy are finely attuned to the natural attributes and inherent "spirit" of a site, they also have an eye for the dramatic. They proposed the decorative *Pistacia chinensis*, which hails from China and provides generous summer shade and wild autumn colour, for a prominent spot near the front door. Tolerant of dry, sandy sites, it is growing in a shell-grit courtyard where they also prompted Shaw to introduce graphic lines of tufted grasses in different colours. While the duo encouraged Shaw to splash out with South African blood lilies with their bold flowers and tongue-shaped leaves, it is only now that Shaw (originally concerned that would all be too busy) is coming around to the idea.

Shaw says Sinatra and Murphy helped him to relax his plant palette and refine the layout of the whole

garden. "They broadened my horizons while respecting my background and knowledge in the area. I enjoyed working with them and their quirky way of thinking," he says. "I wouldn't have opened my door to just anyone but they helped me to clarify that a strictly

He likes plants to sit well ... and pique your interest

indigenous garden was not where I was heading. I am not a purist and you can't really recreate the bush that easily and it is not necessarily what you want in a space anyway."

Shaw says he wants a garden that is "lively and colourful and makes you feel you have arrived

home". He likes his predominantly native plants to sit well with the wider natural landscape but to also pique your interest. In the large front yard, which takes up most of the block, he has *Eremophila glabra* 'Silver Ball' – clipped into silver balls – while moss-like *Scleranthus biflorus* oozes about in yellow-green splotches. Nearby is the ragged prostrate form of *Casuarina glauca* 'Shagpile' as well as a cluster of white-trunked *Eucalyptus victrix* and scatterings of *Santolina*, *Correa*, *Rhagodia*, *Indigofera*, *Olearia* and others. There are also raised vegetable beds.

The driveway – at the suggestion of Sinatra and Murphy – takes a circuitous route from one side of the block to the other and meanders past another initiative of structured lines of planting that extend at a 90-degree angle from the garage.

But the central focal point is a large, twisting *Eucalyptus obliqua*

with theatrically angled branches. Such is its – and the garden's other eucalypts – consumption of water, however, that Shaw says his soil, a shallow, sandy loam, gets so thirsty it becomes hydrophobic. He applies wetting agents a couple of times over summer.

His children have applied – for purely decorative purposes – white paint with a red stripe to the lower trunk of the forest of Moonahs that Shaw has planted in the back garden. They have also constructed a variety of tall structures from sticks and stones. They are at once simple and elaborate and tie in with Shaw's own stone walling throughout the garden.

Shaw says working with Sinatra and Murphy in the garden's early stages and then spending a decade finessing the space has taught him to trust his "gut feeling ... You get a sense of what colours work well and that if they are right for you they are right.

PLOT LINES



Terry Smyth will share her knowledge of Chinese plants.

Tour

Chinese New Year will be celebrated next week with guided tours of the Southern China collection at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. The collection's curator, Terry Smyth, will not only discuss the Chinese plants used to celebrate and decorate for the new year (which this year falls on January 31) but also tales of her plant-collecting adventures and some of the country's more unusual specimens. She will start at the RBG's kitchen garden with citrus hailing from China (think oranges, mandarins and cumquats, pictured right) before moving – via a selection of other Chinese plants – to the Southern China garden proper. The tour will finish with local Chinese jessamine tea and dried fruits. The tours are on Friday, January 31 and Saturday, February 1, 11am to 12.15pm. \$18/\$15 concessions and RBG Friends members. Bookings essential. Phone 9252 2429.

Open gardens

Anglesea isn't the only coastal town gardens open this weekend. Sorrento represented with a largely indigenous garden at 2-6 Keating Avenue (profile on this page last weekend). It is open with Open Gardens Australia – today and tomorrow, 10am to 4.30pm, \$7. Also tomorrow, there is a walk that takes participants through six private gardens and coastal paths in Shoreham. Visitors can get a trail map from 1pm at the Shoreham School building in Byrnes Road, tickets \$10/\$25 for families. All proceeds will go towards a new CFA fire station. shorehamsecrets.net

MEGAN BACKHOUSE



"You tend to be a bit isolated down here but as time goes on you own the space more and become more confident."

■ The Shaws' garden, Sunnymead, is one of three Anglesea gardens open today and tomorrow, 3pm to 8pm, \$7 each. Sunnymead is at 48 Harvey Street, and the other gardens are at 2 Bronwyn Court and 1 Purnell Street. opengarden.org.au, Shaw's landscaping business is Ocean Road Landscaping (ori.com.au).

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