

Garden designer Rick Eckersley offers a glimpse of his own private paradise

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Megan Backhouse

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Musk Cottage opens the weekend of September 26-27 to launch Open Gardens Victoria. Photo: Eckersley Garden Architecture

Everything about Rick Eckersley's Flinders garden is big: the sweeps of grasses, the groves of eucalypts, the garden furniture, the wetland. You have never seen such a vast timber deck, or such high pergolas or so many enormous banksia flowers.

Eckersley doesn't plant one *Corymbia maculata*, but a long string of them – way too many to count – in a tight spiralling curve that makes their spotty trunks look like totem poles. He makes a veritable stage show of *Eucalyptus leucoxylon*, juxtaposing its black bark with a dramatic underplanting of *Ligustrum vulgare* (pruned before it flowers to stop it being spread by birds).

When Eckersley does rosemary he doesn't go for a pot but for a dramatic cascading bank. He grows the notoriously vigorous *Pandorea pandorana* as big as a house and, likewise leaves *Acanthus mollis* to spread into a wild, glossy stretch. Elsewhere, he has great carpets of succulents or native grasses, all pierced by winding paths that lead visitors around his four hectares.



Musk Cottage's vast timber deck invites lazing around outdoors. Photo: Eckersley Garden Architecture

You can see this brazen excess for yourself when Musk Cottage opens the weekend of September 26-27 to launch Open Gardens Victoria, the new open-garden scheme that has been established in the wake of Open Gardens Australia folding. The Royal Botanic Gardens' Tim Entwisle will be at

the garden on Sunday to formally kick off the year-round program.

The new outfit's chairwoman, Liz Fazio, says openings are being scheduled for most weekends in spring; there will be a break over the summer holidays but regular openings will restart in February. She says Eckersley's garden makes an "inspirational" setting for the opening, which will include guided tours, plant sales and other activities.

Eckersley, who has been designing gardens for other people for 40 years, bought this Mornington Peninsula property a decade ago when it was almost entirely mown lawn. He has since contended with kangaroos, rabbits and drought followed by heavy rain to turn the property into a garden with "lots of areas". He is careful not to use the word "rooms" – there are no hedges or gates, and while each space contains a tight palette of plants there is deliberate blurring around the edges.

"I like grouping," Eckersley says. "I like plants where they bleed together and then there are another four or five or 10 scattered on a bit further, like a weed that's seeded. Then you haven't got definite borders."

He is also a fan of "laid-back" colour in his plantings (though is not averse to punchy paint schemes on his house and outbuildings.) Yellow wattles, wine-red banksias and lime-green lomandra are about as bright as it gets in early spring. He says he wants the garden "to look like a Fred Williams painting".

While there are some exotics, he has mostly used Australian plants. Many have a prehistoric, sculptural feel, such as the corky red-pink trunk of *Allocasuarina torulosa* or the jagged leaves and heavy flowers of *Banksia praemorsa*. He also plays up the textures of his ornamental grasses, such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus', which he no longer cuts back but leaves the new growth to mingle with the old.

"It has taken me quite a long time to work out what plants really work with each other," he says. "I see a lot of people who have a go at putting natives with exotics in gardens and very seldom does it work. You have to look at colour, form, textures."

You also have to look at your site. Eckersley says drainage "is of No. 1 importance" for a garden like his. "I got caught out here. I planted a whole lot of dry-tolerant plants and then the wet seasons killed them." He's sunk agricultural drains and established swales over the top and had much more success.

Most of the garden is irrigated by rainfall alone and Eckersley says it has been designed to be environmentally friendly. "I am a great believer in climate change. It's happening. Over my designing career it has seemed to me that gardens in Australia have been doing it all wrong. We just couldn't cut the apron strings from that English approach, and that is still very much at the forefront even though Mediterranean plants are having more of an input."

Just as Fred Williams highlighted the patterns in the Australian landscape, Eckersley says he wants the garden to look like it might have occurred naturally but to feel "defined" at the same time. "It's soft sculpture," he says. "It's not too serious but a little bit humorous."

Go to opengardensvictoria.org.au for details about the scheme and openings. Musk Cottage, 371 Musk Creek Road, Flinders, opens September 26 and 27.

PLOT LINES

VOLUNTEERS

Now is the time to put your hand up if you are interested in becoming a volunteer at Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens. The institution calls for new volunteers only about every three to five years and there are now 60 places available in the garden ambassador, visitor guide and children's garden programs. Information sessions will be held next month with applications closing on October 30. Successful applicants will be given a 12-week training program.

Go to rbg.vic.gov.au/about-us/job-opportunities/volunteering for more information and for application forms, or phone the volunteer co-ordinator on 92522331.

FAIR

The annual Mount Macedon Horticultural Society Garden Lovers Fair will be at Bolobek in Macedon this weekend. More than 30 stalls will include local and interstate specialist plant growers and artisan tool-makers. Bolobek is at 370 Mount Macedon Road, Macedon, and the fair runs from 10am to 4pm, entry \$10/under-18 free.

SEED SAVING

Australian PlantBank has released its latest plant-storage figures revealing that seeds from more than 5300 Australian species are now held at the facility. The storage bank, which was established two years ago at Mount Annan's Australian Botanic Garden, is part of a global seed conservation program that aims to collect and store seeds from one quarter of the world's plant species by 2020. Seeds are collected from the field and placed in freezer vaults.

CLIVIAS

A wide array of clivias will be on display at today's Clivia Expo, Phoenix Park Community Centre, 22Rob Roy Road, Malvern East. It runs from 10am to 4pm, admission by gold coin donation. melbournecliviagroup.org.au



A shady walkway at Musk Cottage. Photo: Eckersley Garden Architecture



Timber decking and greenery combine to stunning effect at Musk Cottage. Photo: Eckersley Garden Architecture