

# Penny Fairweather - May 2018



My name is Penny Fairweather and I have lived in Strathalbyn for 15 months.

Having moved around the country a lot and being somewhat of a nomad I wasn't sure where to begin this profile.

On reflection I have decided to relate a little background and then focus on the gardens I played with while a Remote Area Nurse on Aboriginal Communities across the top end and the Centre of Australia.

## **Memories are made of this**

I owe my love of gardening to my father, Hal Blackmore.

As a child I spent the first years of my life on sheep stations in the West Darling out of Broken Hill.

Fresh vegetables were only available if you grew them yourself and we always had prolific vegetable gardens and fruit trees.

A strong memory was of my mother bottling and preserving produce in the hot summer months in a kitchen fuelled by an old slow combustion stove.

My parents eventually bought a farm at Bull Creek and had to learn a totally new way of land and stock management, however the vegetable garden was established and a multitude of fruit trees planted.

Dad had spent much of his early childhood with Aboriginal people and respected

their philosophy of land care and sharing.

## **Leaving some for the Bluey**

He had planted a large strawberry patch at the farm and soon realized it had been discovered by a blue tongue lizard that had an insatiable appetite for this delicious bounty.

Dad carried him to the far corner of the farm thinking 'problem solved'.

Not according to lizard though. Within a week he was back so Dad fenced off the patch except for one row that was for the lizard's exclusive and assumedly grateful use.

I left the farm when I was 17 to go nursing back in Broken Hill and surrounded by the country I love.

I married from here and my husband took over the management of the outside of the house and I, the children and inside.

It wasn't until I was on my own again that my love of gardening began to evolve.

I returned to Adelaide and had my first house built.

To build on my limited knowledge I attended WEA courses, photographed garden designs I admired and visited the Waite Arboretum and the Adelaide Botanic Gardens for inspiration and had the most amazing fun.

## **Going Bush**

I had another two houses before I decided to run away bush again.

I am going to jump forward to 2003 now where I decided to have a break from Mental Health and so I traded my Mazda 121 in on a 4x4 wheel drive, resigned my position at Glenside, rented out my house at Stirling and drove up to Cairns initially to visit my brother, but also to see what else was out there.

I discovered Remote Area Nursing and a new kind of bush. That's what was out there.

One year I planned to be away and I simply forgot to come home for another ten years or so.

During these years I completed the training to become a fully qualified Remote Area Nurse and then travelled throughout Cape York, the Torres Strait, Arnhem Land, Central Australia and the Kimberleys.

On most of the Communities I worked,

even if for only a few weeks, at least one or two shrubs or trees were planted.

My gardens ranged from small balconies in a flat above the Health Centre to quite large gardens.

The accommodation out there was as varied as the people and the country they inhabited.

I would relocate plants I found in the bush with varied results and had plants sent out by mail truck or barge depending where I was.

Fertilizer was collected from the buffalo in Arnhem Land and the donkeys abandoned once the telegraph line from Adelaide to Darwin had been completed and they had been let go into the bush.

Like the camels and buffalo they had adapted beautifully to the country around them and bred up prolifically.

### **Nursing the Top End**

As nurses we were flown in to our tertiary centres such as Broome, Darwin, Thursday Island, Cairns for example for our professional development at least once a year and often twice and I always managed to fit a box of plants into the cargo somehow.

Flotsam found on beaches made wonderful additions to these gardens such as old fishing nets, glass fishing buoys, petrified wood and the like.

Mutitjulu (located in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park) was my most ambitious project, turning a large dirt back yard with an old Ford Ambulance and a fenced in potential vegetable garden as the only decoration into an oasis was a real challenge.

### **An outback garden**

I would go out after clinic and collect rocks to outline my garden beds.

The soil would grow anything given a bit of water and bore water we had in spades.

Fertilizer was provided by the camel tour operators and mulch was brought back bale at a time on my monthly meetings in Alice Springs.

I also brought back stores, pharmacy, nurses shopping and the odd Aboriginal person who discovered me in Todd Mall and would beg a lift home so space was limited in my Land Cruiser.

Plants were always squashed in somewhere.

Bob, the plumber, was amazing and put

in an irrigation system for me on tap timers and the garden began to grow.

By the time I left 17 months later trees were over 8 feet tall and plants were flourishing.

It was very exciting as I was also eating my own produce and sharing same with the other nurses.

### **Gardening expertise**

Aboriginal people, unlike most of our popular beliefs also had their gardens - they were literally their country.

They knew exactly what time of the year and where to collect witchetty grubs and honey ants for example.

At Mutitjulu they would come to me and tell me it was time to collect Minkulpa, their native tobacco.

We would take at least three vehicles, each troopy holding up to 18 people, and off we would go often for hours on tracks only they could see down towards the Western Australia and South Australia borders.

It was like watching Toorak matrons at a Jimmy Choo shoe sale.

Those women would be off among the rocks picking the leaves from this plant as though their life depended on it.

They would grind the leaves and mix it with the bark of a particular tree which they had burnt to ash and then make a wad and place it in the corner of their mouths, where it sat.

It produced a mild opioid effect so I have been told.

People in Arnhem Land would only collect magpie geese eggs once a certain shrub had flowered.

Certain fish were only caught under similar criteria.

They managed the land in ways the land told them, not to rigid schedules and by the calendar as we do.

One old man in Arnhem Land pulled up a small plant and told me this was the plant used for sugar before putting it back in the ground and saying "grow strong and big little plant" softly.

I kept a journal both written and photographic while I was away and often go to these with nostalgia.

I have taken on a large project, for me, with my new Strathalbyn garden which incidentally is part of the original land where my parents retired back in the 70's, but that is definitely another story.