

Karen Smith - August 2018



I was born and grew up in Adelaide and left school after year 10 to do a 5 year hairdressing apprenticeship.

I had met my husband when I was 13 up in the Northern Territory on his family's cattle station New Crown, 468 kilometres south east of Alice Springs on the edge of the Simpson Desert.

By coincidence my parents had met his early in their married life then after my parents moved into a new house across Adelaide they lost touch.

Then I happened to go to primary school and on to high school with a boy from a cattle station who happened to be my husband's cousin and my Mother realised he was related to the family who she had known from years ago.

I married Boof (Francis) in February 1970 and moved to the station to live with him in his parent's home and had four boys close in age.

After my in-laws retired down here to Strathalbyn in 1976 and Boof and I took over running the station I started to build up a garden, a passion of mine.

I already had started a vegetable garden so then moved on to create a beautiful cottage style garden.

I had the help of the wife of one of our workmen who had previously been the boys governess.

Robyn and I went out in one of the station's utes and picked up old sleepers from the railway line and built three high sleeper beds.

These were filled with soil from the cattle yards on the edge of the Finke River so there was some clay, lots of cattle and horse manure and composted hay.

The land around the house was limestone overlaid with sand.

Lots of lawn cuttings were also added until I had built up a fairly fertile loam.

Then I started planting all the things I had been told wouldn't grow up there - roses, bulbs, foxgloves, Russel lupins and lots of pretty flowering annuals.

We faced high temperatures in summer and frosts in winter.

Luckily we had plenty of good water and watering the gardens and extensive lawns was a constant job.

I also planted bougainvilleas, anything that would be a mass of colour.

As we ended up on a tourist route I had tourists stop and ask if they could photograph the gardens.

I would get up at daylight and spend some time weeding and caring for the garden before the kids got up.

My second son married in 1993 and his wife also loved gardening so between us we kept developing new gardens by building up the sand with lawn cuttings and horse manure.

In 2001 we moved down to a farm we had had in Highland Valley since the 1980s, into a new house, so once again I had to make a garden from scratch.

It was very different conditions from what I was used to in the Territory so I had plenty of failures to start with.

I love cottage gardens so mine was full of anything I could buy cheaply at the markets as it is larger than the town gardens and costly if all the plants came from nurseries.

I also love pot plants so (I had over 100 both inside the house and on the veranda at New Crown) before I had the pavers and garden beds done I once again started collecting pot plants - takes lots of time in summer keeping them all watered.

My poor roses had too much competition from other plants and were suffering so the garden has been thinned out a bit and old bushes removed.

We lost several trees and old large melaleucas blew over in the strong winds 18 months ago.

It has opened up some areas which now are full of salvias, roses, geraniums and perennial status and native bushes to attract the birds.

I love watching the little blue wrens, honey eaters and parrots.

My vegetable garden and fruit trees suffer from birds and the trees need to be netted if we are to get any fruit, but I'm happy to share.

I also then started putting a large variety of succulents in the garden when water restrictions came in.

Anything that suffered during the restrictions was removed and more water wise plants put in.

Agapanthus and cliveas are particular favourites.

I also started putting decorative items in the garden for interest in the barer winter months and after attending a Recycled Garden Art class in Milang a couple of months ago I am adding lots more bird baths made from ceramic and glass.

I have cleaned out cupboards and used things that have been sitting there for years and turned them into something that can be put in the garden or among the pot plants.