

## CELEBRITY GARDENER DON BURKE

Our celebrity gardener for this week is none other than Don Burke who invented the term. So I've come to a rural hills retreat north west of Sydney and perched on wonderful sandstone rock.

From the road the house is concealed by what gardeners call bush and there's a gravel drive with sufficient curve to reveal next to nothing until you have driven well onto the property.

I am greeted by Marea, wife and the CEO of Don's business empire (Burkes Backyard TV, Backyard Blitz and Burkes Backyard Magazine) that invites me to go for a look round. Don will be here in an hour she says.

My first impression is that Don is not a lazy gardener, but a lucky gardener – because all of the bush plants are positioned to give privacy, a home or food source for birds and yet allow unobstructed vistas from the home sitting high on a deck platform overlooking a steep sided valley.

I met Don an hour later to find that the 'lucky' is all-wrong. Apart from a handful of trees, the now bushy block was scraped bare when purchased 19 years ago. So all the profusion of greenery was planted since then.

Don propagated trees, shrubs and groundcovers by seed or cutting taken from the valley at the bottom end of the property and from his next-door neighbour. This is what environmentalists call 'local provenance'. One of the original Scribbly Gum trees on the block has been called by Don the BC tree and is estimated to be 2000 years old.

There is a theme that oozes out of every part of this 5-acre garden and it's birds. Over 200 species of Australian birds have been noted on the property including wedge-tailed eagles.

While talking to Don on one of the wooden landings above a chasm in the sandstone over which the house is suspended, a kookaburra landed on the balustrade. This carnivorous bird sat less than a metre away from us for at least 20 minutes. Toward the end of this time I just had to ask Don how much he paid the kookaburra in posing fees.

There is no doubt that the strategy of growing a selection of nectar rich flowering shrubs, dense prickly nesting and resting bushes and trees all around, make Don's garden a haven for birds. All day long I saw clouds of finches, honeyeaters by the dozen and many native pigeons visiting the garden.

Don also has legions of caged birds. His childhood breeding experiment with budgerigars has not only led him into intense study of genetics, but blossomed into a

sophisticated breeding program which sees world class budgie being developed in a purpose built bird nursery.

Don's passion for genetics finds expression in the breeding of world- beating quarter horses as well as compact low growing, free flowering grevilleas.

Most visitors to the garden just don't get it says Don, 'it's just bush they say'.

Under a natural looking veneer of soil and plants lie high tech arteries of pipe and electronics.

The garden is fully reticulated using geared pop up sprinklers for silent running, soft buffalo lawn, the variety Sir Walter Buffalo, has been planted as not only pathways, but swales. Swales are very flat, shallow drains that direct the water away from the house and down the slopes to run into a pond at the base of the hill.

The biological septic system converts grey and black water into solid compost and nutrient rich waste water that is pumped onto a wide area of the same lawn. The lawn grasses strip the nutrient from the water before it drains pathogen and fertiliser free into a duck pond.

Don has a 'pending tray' or a growing trial area near the front garden. Here he trials out plants to see how tough they are and test various treatments. For example he has enjoyed good success with a showy WA shrub, *Chorizema cordata* i.e. egg and bacon as it is better known. When the plant was on its last legs from attack by the common die back fungus, he treated the plant with phosacid (sold under that trade name of 'Anti-Rot'. When I looked at this plant in full flower it was a colourful picture of good health.

Some of the WA beauties I spied include the shinny pink coneflower (*Isopogon cuneatus*) and *Pimelia physoides* from the Stirling Ranges of WA and the native rose (*Diplolaena grandiflora*), which comes from the Shark Bay area. All these plants have been grafted onto special rootstocks to enable them to grow in clay soils as distinct from the sandy soils of their home range. Don was experimenting with a number of kangaroo paws including the Black Kangaroo Paw (*Macropidia fuliginosa*).

The bush poolside garden also reflects the Australiana theme with rainforest plants typical of the area including cordyline terminals, tree ferns – Birds nest, maidenhair and staghorn ferns, ground orchids, Gynea lily (Don has 2 plants of the rare white flowering form) and a range of native reeds and grasses. No exotic Koi carp in the ponds either, but instead a number a native fish species live here.

Overall I found these a very peaceful and contemplating garden, a necessary escape I surmised from the frantic activity of performing in front of the cameras most days of the week as has been necessary for the 16 year run of Burkes Backyard.

This ground breaking lifestyle show has created a new category of entertainment married to information, which has now been taken up worldwide.

It is encouraging to see a man who practises what he preaches. Don won't see green material leave the property – all organic wastes are recycled through chooks, compost or mulch back into the gardens.

Spraying insecticides is not on - instead the balance of nature takes care of any outbreaks, and birds are prominent in this strategy.

The lawn swales and the sandstone gravel drive are an important design element of this garden as these make a soft internal frame – defining the edge of the wildflower garden. It somehow tames the bush.

The house with its more outward facing windows than walls is really a giant bird watching hide. From behind the Venetian blinds you can observe the many-feathered visitors to this home all day long.

Making television is very much a family affair these days. Apart from Marea who looks after the major role or resourcing and managing the company, daughter Chris is the Director of Burkes Backyard television and son Sean produces TV for the nine network.