

# ORNAMENTALS AND EDIBLES - IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN RYAN

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Stephen Ryan is a plantsman of quite some renown. His encyclopaedic knowledge of horticulture is coupled with a natural 'gift of the gab' and he's also a born storyteller. It all adds up to making him a great communicator about all things botanical and his enthusiasm is both uplifting and contagious.

Stephen has a special interest in unusual plants, of the edible as well as ornamental kind. A self-confessed 'plant geek', he is a keen collector and runs the rare plants nursery, Dicksonia, in Victoria's scenic Macedon Ranges. Although he has quite an impressive track record as a horticultural writer and broadcaster, he is probably best known for his role as a former host of the ABC's 'Gardening Australia' television program. That evolved after Stephen took part in the filming of a series of segments on maintaining a herbaceous border throughout the seasons, using his home garden, Tugurium, as an



The pathway from the patch opens up to some ornamental interest.



At home with Stephen Ryan - enjoying some early Winter sunshine in the orchard.

example. Recognised as being both knowledgeable and 'good talent', he was invited to join the show when the endearing Peter Cundall retired.

Stephen Ryan's passion for plants is self-evident and a garden tour at his home in Macedon is informative and entertaining.

So where did this love of plants begin? It's a bit of an inter-generational story. Stephen is quick to point out that he didn't actually grow up on one of the beautiful country estates that are a feature of Mount Macedon, however he was surrounded by their grand gardens



Stephen takes a tour of the garden with botanical illustrator, Craig Lidgerwood.



The attractive, bright orange flowers of an ornamental Oxalis, on a rockery wall.

and got to know the local gardeners responsible for their maintenance. "They were largely old world trained gardeners in those days, so I learnt a lot from them," he explains. "It's a serious gardening area around here so you almost take in gardening by osmosis!"

Stephen's family had three acres up on top of Mount Macedon and his father decided to set up a plant nursery. "He didn't really know a dandelion from a dahlia when he first started but he was a bit of an entrepreneur and saw an opportunity

to service the area," recalls Stephen. "I was like a pig in the proverbial and basically started helping out in the nursery at the age of 10. Slave labour I think you'd call it!" he laughs. But what a wonderful apprenticeship! The die was cast, so to speak.

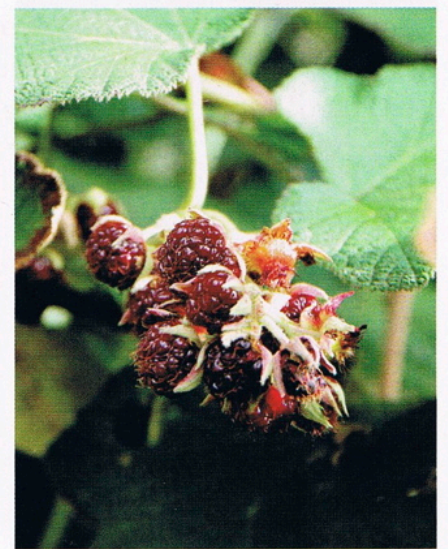
Stephen's trademark energy and drive must have been evident from a young age. At 18, he started writing a weekly column in the local paper, called "I've Got Gardenitis", which would answer readers' questions. By 19 he had taken on the role of President at the historical



Drawing inspiration from the garden, literally - an illustration of Hardenbergia violacea by artist Craig Lidgerwood.



Rhubarb growing amidst a large-leaved, ornamental form of Oxalis (which also has edible tubers).



Antioxidant-rich Keriberries (*Rubus rugosus*) resemble blackberries but taste more like a raspberry.



A hot pink burst of Nerine colour lifts the spirits in a Winter garden.



Beauty in simplicity.



## THE MEDLAR - EXPLORING UNUSUAL EDIBLES

Stephen Ryan loves experimenting with the more unusual varieties of edible plants. This Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) for example, is a beautiful fruit tree or a productive ornamental, depending on how you look at it. Its unusual fruit is like a cross between a pear and hawthorn and can be eaten fresh or used to make preserves or jellies. The fruit is ripe at the point of becoming mushy (almost rotten) and tastes somewhat like a cinnamon apple.

Mount Macedon Horticultural Society. Undertaking a formal apprenticeship in horticulture then led on to a couple of overseas study scholarships to work in parks and gardens in New Zealand and the UK.

With such a thorough early education in ornamental gardening, the foray into food gardening has come a little later in life for Stephen. Growing up on Mount Macedon, with its cold wintery climate, formal gardens of rhododendrons, camellias, conifers and the like were far more common

than vegetable gardens. And this was certainly reflected in the choice of stock within his father's nursery.

When Stephen opened his own nursery further down the mountain, he started cultivating all sorts of rare and exotic ornamental plants. But when he got his private garden in order at home, he found that he wanted to start growing some more edible things. A new adventure began! Stephen discovered a new passion and food gardening has since become an important part of his life.



Along the 'citrus walk', steps lead up to the raised vegie garden area.

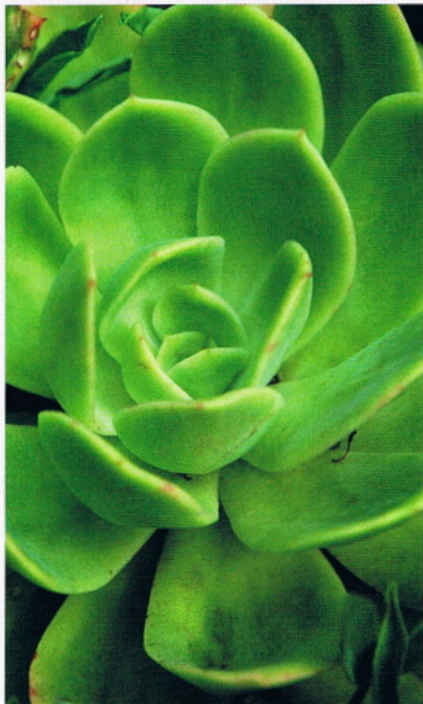


A ripe persimmon adds some lovely autumn colour.





A water-wise cacti sits atop a rocky outcrop, overlooking a pond.



Nature as designer - a simple succulent.



When Stephen ran out of space on the ground ... succulents started appearing on the roof!

"I really like being able to go out into the garden and get productive things as well as enjoy the beautiful things that are growing there. I like to have both – the useful and the beautiful – and a balance between the two," he explains. "There's no reason why you can't interweave them within a garden."

While Stephen does have a dedicated vegetable patch, he also recognises the ornamental value of many edible herbs (like Bronze Fennel, Thyme and Oregano), and productive plants and trees, and he has incorporated some of

his favourites into the general garden. As an example, he describes the appeal of the feathery ferns of *Asparagus* (which die down and make way for the flowering of the Tulip bulbs planted beneath them – representing a good, alternating use of garden space).

Stephen believes that many plants can work just as well in the ornamental garden as the veggie patch. Like the attractive Peruvian Yacon (or 'Ground Apple', *Smallanthus sonchifolius*), with its big leaves and yellow, daisy-like flowers. This plant produces sweet



An unusual water-loving plant (*Elegia capensis*) from South Africa, near the tranquil front pond.

tasting tubers that can be eaten like an apple, popped into a salad or cooked in a stir-fry.

Encircling the only section of lawn on the property is a mini orchard. The eclectic collection includes a Snow Apple, Persimmon, Nashi Pear, Crabapple and the intriguing Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*), bearing an ancient European, pear-like fruit. All were chosen on the basis of their ornamental appeal and the fact that their fruit couldn't easily be obtained from a greengrocer.

"I originally took that approach to the vegie garden too and experimented with all sorts of weird and wonderful things, like edible Chrysanthemum greens. But it turns out I don't really like them anyway – they smell like Mortein and must be an acquired taste. However, they self-sowed and it's taken me three years to get rid of them! You can come unstuck at times," he muses.

"I've tended to turn back towards the staples and childhood favourites – broad beans, silverbeet, spinach – you can't go past the classics. They're the things I enjoy the flavour of the most," he says. "Although, it's good to mix it up a bit, with Asian Greens or old-fashioned varieties. Aesthetics are important too, so if there's a variety that is particularly attractive, I'm usually willing to give that a

go." Stephen cites ruby chard as against straight silverbeet as a good example, pointing out that it's visually appealing enough to plant in the main garden.

"Most of the principles of ornamental gardening cross over well into vegetable gardening. One thing I love is that it's almost instant gratification and if something goes wrong, it's usually only for that season. I am constantly learning from the vegetable patch and experimenting to see what works best within this local climate," he says. Having the plants themselves looking



### AMARANTH - FLOWERS, GREENS AND GRAINS

With ornamental as well as edible value, *Amaranthus* self-seeds in Stephen's vegie patch – providing beautiful, rich colour every year. Young leaves can be cooked as a green vegetable, the flowers make great, long-lasting cut flowers and the seed can also be collected for use as a grain. According to Stephen, it's a good all-rounder and certainly earns its place in the garden.





*A Muscovy duck in the poultry pen – a provider of eggs for culinary use and nutrient-rich manure for the garden.*

good in the garden is important for Stephen but he also sees beauty in having an ordered and organised space, even within the constantly changing tapestry of a veggie patch.

The rest of his garden is full of meandering pathways, with lovely surprises around each corner. There are even two peaceful looking ponds,

surrounded by water-loving plants. But it is remarkable to think that all of this greenery and abundance has been created upon what was once a burnt-out bush block – which is what Stephen purchased nearly 30 years ago, after the Ash Wednesday fires. Yet it only takes a glance over the back fence to see what would have been



*Relaxation beckons in a sheltered spot in the garden.*

the original landscape – dry ground, hosting little more than tussock grass and some scrubby eucalypts. You can see that little grows on land comprised of white/yellow clay and practically no topsoil. The key? Compost and mulch – Stephen's mantras! The end result is transformation and a garden paradise – which is also productive.



*Rural Macedon, which Stephen calls home, is nestled at the base of the beautiful Mount Macedon.*



*A boardwalk through a patch of shade leads on to the back pond.*