

Blank Canvas

Story by Malcolm McPherson

Malcolm McPherson is a Bushcare volunteer legend who moved into his unpretentious brick veneer in Katoomba in 2016. His yard has gone from a blank canvas to a native garden wonderland. This is Malcolm's story.

When I moved into my house in Katoomba it looked like it could be anywhere in suburban Sydney with the front entirely concreted. It is only a small piece of land, less than five hundred square metres. At the back had been a fibro shed, eight metres by four metres. The shed had been removed but the concrete slab remained. In fact, half of the backyard was covered on concrete. The rest was covered in weedy grasses where anything was able to grow at all.

In the garden I decided to remove as much concrete as I could. My plan was to remove all the concrete at the front between the driveway and a path on the other side under which water and gas pipes were laid. I hired a waste bin and borrowed a jackhammer. The concrete at the back under the shed was poor quality and of the consistency of sandstone. Breaking it up was easy.

The concrete at the front was good quality and reinforced. I decided that it took me about two hours per square metre. I could only do two hours per day. I abandoned the job where there was an expansion joint. There remains twenty square metres of concrete that could be removed. That is the latest project. This time, I am not breaking up the concrete myself! In the course of breaking up the concrete at the front, I wore out one jackhammer and had to replace my borrowed tool with a new one.

The first improvement I added was a steel-framed timber deck with an opening louvred roof on the eastern side of the kitchen and family room. That could be opened to allow sunshine to enter in winter and closed for shade in summer. The roof even when closed does not keep out the wet. Being a naïve Sydneysider, I had not accounted for the mists which wet everything except a four square metre area in the corner!



Photo 1: More concrete than I'd like!



Photo 2: Site of the shed

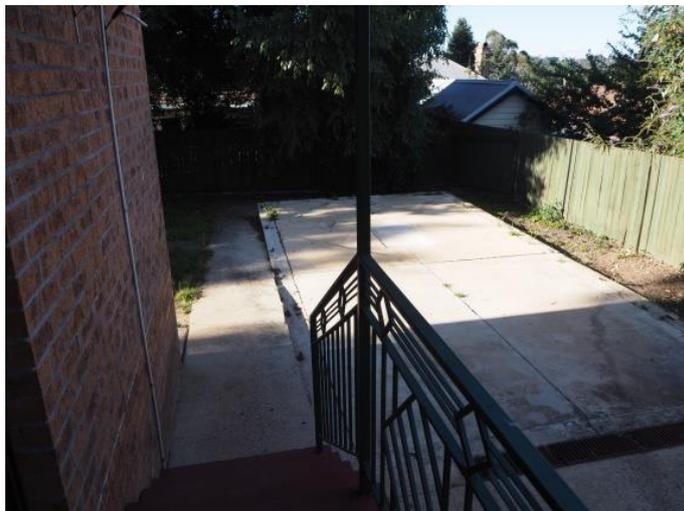


Photo 3: Another view of the shed's slab



Photo 4: Some green in the backyard!



Photo 5: Excavating the farther section of slab

In the backyard I did not want to dig up all the remaining slab so had planter boxes made to cover part of what remained. I cut a channel in the concrete down the centre of each so that rain could penetrate the subsoil. The small trees that I planted can send their roots down and will break up the soft concrete in the immediate vicinity. The boxes provide some variety of height and texture and lead our eyes to the birdbath.



Photo 6: The back is taking shape

At the front, I had a box made into which four large plastic pots fit. This did not provide for enough vegetation so I had a second made which I filled with soil. The first I moved in front of the window. My logic was that if I wanted the additional car space, I could simply remove it. Both of these planter boxes could not provide sufficient vegetation to provide privacy and safe places for birdlife.

The latest stage in the project involves moving these planter boxes and repurposing at least one as a vegetable garden. The remaining concrete will then be removed as I originally planned.



Photo 7: the front with the first planter box



Photo 8: Tube stock soon grows!



Photo 9: Showing the two planter boxes

Native gardens need less water than most gardens of exotic plants. With winters becoming dryer, I wanted to be able to water at least once a month during winter. I installed a three-kilolitre water tank in the back corner where almost nothing will grow. The first tank enabled me to water twice. That was not going to be enough so I purchased a second tank identical to the first and connected them. That gives me a total of six thousand litres. It is not a huge amount but it does provide me with a water supply during bushfires if I should need it as well as enough to water four times during the winter.

Selecting plants for a bush garden is always problematical. It takes a deal of thought to choose plants that will work in the environment of the garden. My plants were all sourced from the [Conservation Society nursery](#) and [Wildplant Rescue](#). Flexibility is necessary!

Bush Backyards produce a planting list for the upper mountains. I have deviated from that list when suitable plants present themselves. When I have so much semi-shaded areas, I opted for two species of *Correa*. I have a couple of endangered species from other areas:

Prostanthera scutellarioides from Penrith and *Callistemon megalongensis* from the Megalong Valley.

Birds in Backyards also produce a useful list for the Blue Mountains. Even though I am 'in town', I am still careful about bushfires. Blue Mountains City Council has excellent advice about what to plant in bushfire prone areas.

It is important, as my neighbour's *Alnus* show, that I consider the mature size of all my plantings. However, shrubs that may be small in their native habitat can grow much larger in a garden. The *Indigofera* I planted in the front grew to be the biggest specimen I have seen. It grew too fast and was top heavy so that I had to cut it almost back to the ground. It has since recovered most of its former size. The *Eucalypts* I have planted are mallees which can be cut down to the base before they become too large.



Photo 10: View from the deck January 2020



Photo 11: Prostanthera scutellarioides



Photo 12: Spring display of Indigophera australis and Hakea sericea (pink)