



Promoting the enjoyment, knowledge and benefits of gardens and gardening

## Open Gardens South Australia

### Welcomes you to **Irmina's Garden**

**Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> & Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2025**

Welcome to my garden! It is a happy place and the expression of my creativity and effort. I think of the garden as a peaceful oasis, where chirping birds, colours, smells and shifting light provide moments of joy as I wander about on my daily rounds. Situated on a corner block, under the canopy of majestic trees, the garden has evolved organically over more than twenty years. When I moved onto the property, the house was a run-down brick box, surrounded by concrete and wasteland. No shed, no carport, no verandas, no garden path, no garden. From inside the house I saw dead and diseased trees, ugly fences and concrete. Kikuyu was the only surviving weed.

While there was no preconceived plan, in the first place I wanted to create a view. I needed something worth looking at from inside through the large windows. Outside, I uncovered remnants of an earlier garden layout, which gave me a start. Walking around in the neighbourhood I looked at what grew well in other gardens, and so I began. Some trees were removed, then some more, giving others the space to develop. Meanwhile I painted the entire exterior of the house, which took nearly a year.

I've managed to develop and care for the garden by myself and on a shoestring, by creatively using whatever is at hand, found, given or bought on the cheap. 'Use what you have' is my motto. This includes the plants themselves, as most have been grown from cuttings or bought as tube-stock. So many of the plants are quite common. The fun is in placing them where they complement each other and can cope with particular conditions. The plants must be resilient and survive hot summers and occasional neglect. Nothing gets molycoddled. The garden is irrigated, but on a basis of 'just enough'. Different sections are irrigated at different rates, the east side for instance is 'arid' while the vegetables get watered more often.

Surrounding the house on four sides, each side of the garden has developed its own style and character. The west side under the Kurrajong tree was once a concrete expanse, where after smashing a large triangle with a borrowed sledge hammer and crow bar, I created a succulent garden in the rubble. Later I broke up more concrete and re-used some of the pieces to build the brick diamond-shaped path. The pretty flat-growing groundcover *Dymondia* fills gaps. In the far west corner grey and silver leaved plants give a Mediterranean feel, with fruit trees, including guavas, quince, plum and feijoa contributing to the effect. The big verandah was built after a massive old almond tree was removed, and the deck is a wonderful recent addition, replacing the old concrete surface. Here I can sit and work, have lunch with friends, and with the studio doors open on sunny days, inside and outside are truly connected as one.

Around the covered hills hoist is the herb garden, with scented geraniums, tansy, yarrow and many others perfuming the air on warm days around the creeping thyme lawn. Further along the south side is the vegetable garden, flanked on one side by the grape vine (now covered in sweetpeas, until vine leaves take over), and on the other by the wonderful blood orange tree. The site, while shady, was chosen for easy access from the kitchen. Originally a wasteland under a massive old fig tree, I began really small, with a bit of silverbeet and lettuce. I slowly built up the soil with layers of straw and manure, and the fig tree went. Lolo Houbein's *One Magic Square* gave me practical hands-on advice. These first lessons led to success among all the early failures.

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**Open Gardens South Australia Inc:** is a not for profit organisation opening private gardens to the general public. The purpose of Open Gardens SA is to educate and promote the enjoyment, knowledge and benefits of gardens and gardening in South Australia and to build strong public support for the development of gardens.

Web page: <http://opengardensa.org.au/>

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Surrounding a central circle of mint now grows a wide variety of vegetables, edible flowers and herbs. Many self-seed, and I save seeds to re-sow the next season. There is a permanent asparagus bed, and perennial Okinawa spinach, which is delicious. As the seasons change so does the vegie-patch, with summer vegetables now going in where space becomes available. While I can't grow everything in part shade, most plants thrive and I cook with what I harvest from the garden each day.

On the east side the garden is mostly native, including local plants and grasses, like coastal tussock, kangaroo grass, *Dianella*, *Phormium*, *Lomandra* and others. They create habitat for small birds and insects. This part of the garden is an ongoing challenge, under the canopy and over the roots of the massive ironbark tree. Many plants in this section are still in early stages. Maintenance here includes the constant removal of gum leaves, that otherwise choke the plantings and acidify the heavy clay soil. With mulching, the topsoil is improving and now able to support wildlife-friendly plants like *Westringia*, *Maireana*, *Correa*, *Dodonea* and the lovely soft-leaved *Eremophila*. There is a lawn, but no grass. Low-growing groundcovers like *Dychondra*, *Lippia* and native violets happily intermingle. Others, like *Bacopa* and creeping oregano try to sneak in, which I mostly allow.

The north side is an informal cottage garden, with subtle colours and many different greens. There is no real showy season as different plants flower throughout the year. In winter the contrasting leaf colours intensify, and the strong reds of *Iresine* are a striking highlight. The groundcover lawn is dissected by a garden path I built some years back with help from my son, using bricks found on site. When the old fence was replaced a garden gate was installed, connecting the house with the street in a welcoming way.

Decorative objects are scattered throughout the garden. They include artworks, recycled containers, handmade cushions and bunting, dried plants, old found garden furniture and random quirky objects. All are given a place and add a playful element. The iron baskets hanging on the east fence are a recent addition. I look forward to their plants growing up and trailing down, covering the fence.

I feed the garden with compost from kitchen and vegie-patch waste. Other garden waste gets chopped and returned to the garden as mulch. This is good for the soil and encourages self-seeding. I supplement the mulch with bark chips where needed, and in the vegie-patch I use pea straw and sugarcane mulch. I keep feeding the garden on the lean side, aiming to increase its ability to self-feed, through dense plantings at varying heights. The groundcovers keep roots cool and add compost for neighbouring plants. This is still an experiment in early stages, but is already improving the soil structure here and there.

Caring for this informal garden is a tremendous learning process, from knowing almost nothing to slowly over the years improving my skills and understanding. Early on, my ignorance may have been a blessing in disguise as, unaware of the difficulties of the site, I wasn't too badly discouraged and kept going with simply mulching and removing unwanted plants. My love of reading led me to be inspired by garden writers like Trevor Nottle and Cheryl Maddox among many others. More recently Kelly Norris' *The New Naturalism* has influenced me to see the garden from the ground up in horizontal layers, all interdependent on each other. But I never know what is next. I will change things as I go along and new ideas come to mind. I look forward to screen plants and climbers covering the fences, and to growing more fruit in old bins. Taking care of the garden is a lot of work, but it's meditative, physically and mentally satisfying and totally rewarding. As I write this I look out through the window. Small birds are darting about and I smile at the view.