



the golden spade
GOES TO...

words by KATRINA SICHLAU photography by LUKE SIMON PHOTOGRAPHY

After much anticipation, we're excited to announce that the 2013 Gardener of the Year is Dianne Michalk from South Australia. Join us as we explore her winning garden



FLORAL DELIGHT
A blossoming magnolia stands alongside the row of desert ash trees. **Left** Crabapples are one of Dianne's favourite trees, thanks to their delicate pink flowers.

See Dianne's garden, 6.30pm
November 23
on ABC1



"I visited an iris garden in a suburb of Adelaide; I walked in and it was like a kid walking into a lolly shop. I've been buying them ever since"

WINNING COMBO
Clockwise from left

Beneath the desert ash trees, a bench provides a place for quiet reflection; an upright silver birch is surrounded by daffodils and a clipped box hedge; camellia 'Alexander Black' adds a splash of colour; this lemon is one of many fruit trees; 2013 Gardener of the Year winner, Dianne Michalk, with her Golden Spade.



Wandering through Dianne Michalk's flourishing 0.4ha garden, it's hard to imagine that when she started in 1986 the space was little more than an empty paddock. "There were seven large ash trees along one boundary, but other than that it was a cow paddock," Dianne says. "Literally. It used to have cows on it!" she laughs.

While the original desert ash trees have remained a significant part of the property – Dianne even named the garden 'Ashgrove Iris Garden' after them – the rest has been a work in progress.

As soon as the construction of Dianne's house was completed, she promptly went to work on the garden. She began by planting roses along the front of the house, but after a couple of years decided they weren't working there, so she dug them up and replanted them in another area of the garden. "If something doesn't work, I'll move it," explains Dianne. It was through this relaxed trial-and-error approach that this living masterpiece gradually evolved into what she now fondly describes as a romantic, sometimes "shabby chic", country-style garden.

The other title plant of the garden, the tall bearded iris, has been a particular favourite of Dianne's since she was in her early 20s. "I visited an iris garden in a suburb of Adelaide; I walked in and it was like a kid walking into a lolly shop.

There was every colour of iris that you could think of. They were just beautiful, and I've been buying them ever since." Initially, Dianne planted her irises in long rows directly in front of the house. But, she soon realised that although they looked brilliant when in flower, they were uninteresting the rest of the year. So, she dug them all up and replanted them in circular patterns in another part of the garden. The design means that even when the irises are not in bloom, they still make an impact.

a colourful assortment

Aside from being aesthetically pleasing, the circular layout also makes the task of weeding less daunting. "When you're weeding, you can do one little section and think, 'Great, that one's done' and move on to the next one, instead of thinking, 'Oh my God, I have this huge long row of plants to do – I'm never going to be finished'. This way you can tackle it in bite-sized chunks and you feel as if you're achieving something," Dianne says.

With some 8000 irises made up of more than 700 named varieties, including 'Excite Me', 'Smoke Rings', 'Classic Suede' and 'Dad's A Pirate', it's easy to see how the task of weeding could easily become overwhelming. ►

PHOTO NEIL PROUD (DIANNE)

In addition to the irises, Dianne has an impressive rose garden, which features more than 200 roses comprising 40 different David Austin cultivars such as 'Pat Austin', 'Mary Magdalene', 'Teasing Georgia' and 'Graham Thomas'.

There is also a wide range of other plants, including daffodils, tulips, lilacs, hellebores, bottlebrushes, aquilegias, crabapples and herbaceous peonies. "I'd rather have what you'd perhaps call a common plant, planted en masse, looking fantastic, than three or four things struggling and not doing very well," she says.

A number of fruit trees take their place along one boundary of the property, including an apple, three varieties of pear, three varieties of plum, a couple of quince and a lemon, as well as raspberry canes and blueberry shrubs.

green-thumb genes

Dianne's passion for gardening began long before Ashgrove Iris Garden came into existence. As a child she would play in her grandmother's garden and it was this remarkable woman who instilled in Dianne her love for gardens. "My grandmother had a really, really lovely garden," Dianne says. "She loved topiary and had these magnificent hedges. She also had an enormous vegie patch and a glasshouse where she'd put more exotic stuff."

In fact, her grandmother was so focused on her garden that it often distracted her from other tasks at hand. "My father used to comment about the amount of kettles or pots on her stove that she'd managed to destroy. She would put something on to cook, then go outside to garden and completely forget about what was on the stove. She'd then come in to discover she'd destroyed another saucepan," she laughs.

Like her grandmother, Dianne enjoys spending time tending her garden and says she probably spends a full day and a half working in it every week. Her 82-year-old father, Dennis Michalk, lends a hand – mostly with mowing the lawns and trimming hedges. He was also instrumental in creating many of the large structural features in the garden. "All the main physical structures, for example there are two ponds, he built," says Dianne. He also made the large steel archways in the rose garden.

According to Dianne, the secret to success is quality soil. "The most useful thing you can do in your garden is to improve the soil, and I do that by making my own compost. If you haven't got decent dirt to start with, things aren't going to grow well."

Meanwhile, regular upkeep ensures the garden is relatively easy to maintain – despite its size. "Because I keep the garden beds mulched and weeded, it's not as much work as it looks," she says. "Once you get on top of things and stay on top of them, it's not too bad. I think, if I can do this, most people can."

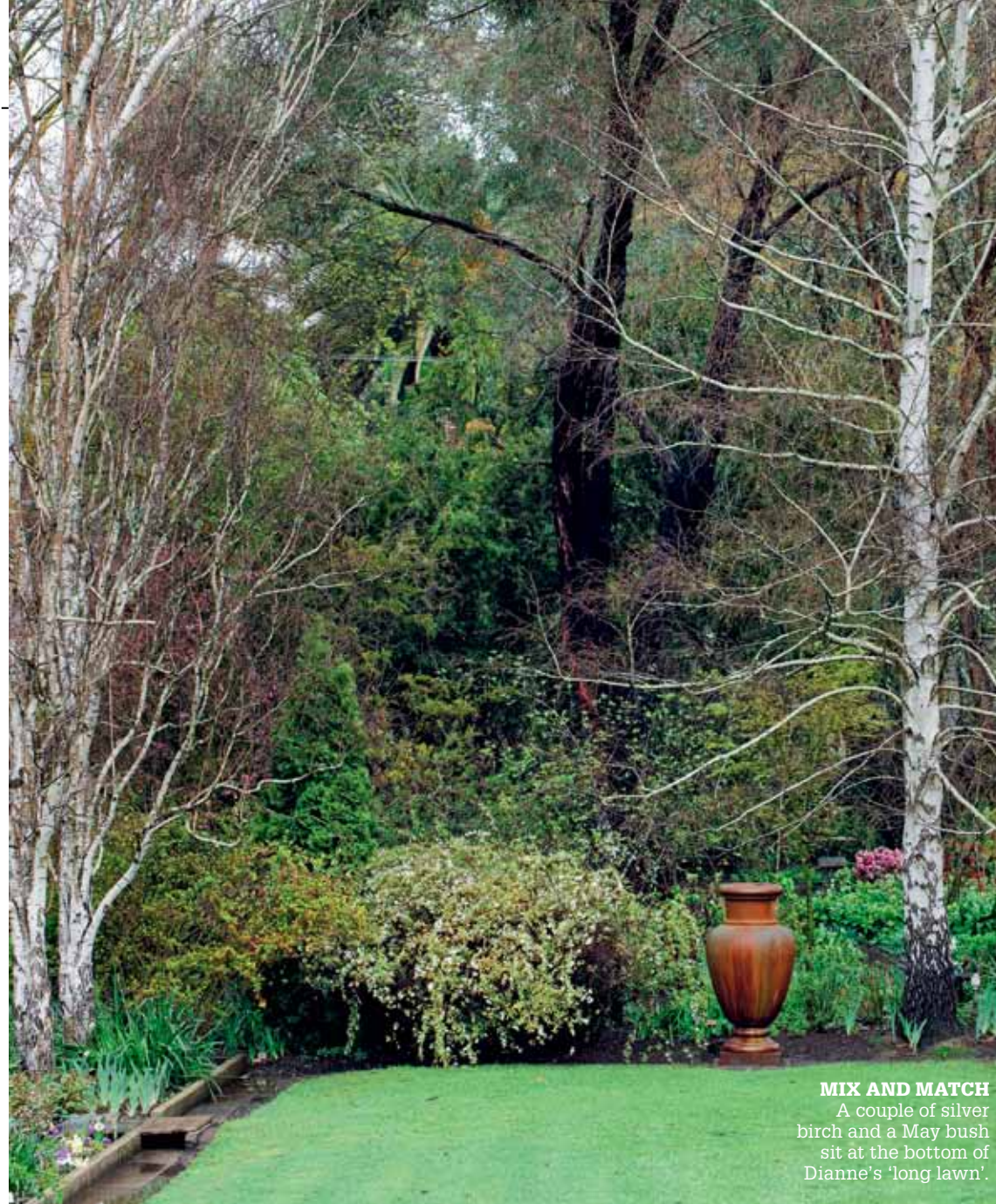
But not many people can boast about having a garden like Dianne's and even fewer still have received the coveted Gardener of the Year title. Dianne says she was stunned to find out she'd won. "You sort of think, 'I want to win, I'd love to win, but you don't get your hopes up,'" she says.



PERFECT HARMONY

Above Dianne's two pet ducks wander through the garden.

Below, from left A clipped box hedge surrounds a sundial and spouting water feature; this striking purple bearded iris, 'Excite Me', is just one of 700 iris varieties in Ashgrove Iris Garden.



MIX AND MATCH

A couple of silver birch and a May bush sit at the bottom of Dianne's 'long lawn'.

as the 2013 Gardener of the Year, Dianne wins:

- Trip for two to Tasmania, thanks to Tourism Tasmania, including return airfares, four nights' accommodation; five days' car hire and entry to some gorgeous gardens and attractions
- Golden Spade from Digadoo
- \$2000 cash and a gardening pack from Seasol



"The most useful thing you can do in your garden is to improve the soil, and I do that by making my own compost"

a never-ending project

With the Gardener of the Year whirlwind winding down, Dianne could be forgiven for putting her feet up and taking a well-earned break – but instead she's outside, gardening gloves on, furiously getting ready for the next big event. "Right now, I'm focused on preparing my garden for the open days (part of Open Gardens Australia) to ensure it is looking its absolute best for the visiting public."

Dianne opens her garden to the public each November. Check opengarden.org.au to find out when to visit in 2014.

Once the hard work is done, she intends to make the most of the Tasmanian holiday that she won as part of her prize:

"I see the trip as an ideal opportunity to look at other beautiful gardens for inspiration," she says.

As for the future, she already has more projects planned, including putting in a large vegie patch and finding something to do with the tricky space under the ash trees. "I was thinking I could put some sort of a feature down there that I can plant into. That is the one area that isn't planted out to my liking."

While there is always more to be done in the garden, right now there's only one problem weighing on Dianne's mind: "I've just got to work out where to put my Golden Spade!" **GA**

The winners of the Young Gardener of the Year and Community Garden of the Year categories will be announced next month, so be sure to grab a copy of the January 2014 issue!