



A quiet morning by the billabong



Image: Night fall at Wombat Bend

WORDS Helen Collier | PHOTOGRAPHY Supplied

## Retreat to Nature

LIKE A GOOD PAINTING, A GREAT LANDSCAPE  
BEGINS WITH A VISION

**Y**ellow comes in many shades, but there's a standout that is the Snowy River Wattle yellow. Right now the wattle is bursting its buttons throughout *Wombat Bend*, an inspirational five-acre Dixons Creek property. It's the favourite wattle of owners, horticulturists Sue Forrester and Bill Molyneux.

They were planted 40 years ago, when *Wombat Bend* was just a treeless paddock, and grown from seed gathered along the reaches of the mighty Snowy River. Back then, the couple spent their free time crossing Australia in their Land Rover campervan, exploring wild country, spending weeks in isolation immersed in a world of natural history, seeking new plants that would strongly influence Australia's gardens, horticulture and landscape design.

The pair established *Austriflora Nursery* in Montrose in the early 1970s, inspiring everyday gardeners to grow Australian plants. It was a period of great change in Australian garden design, as people discovered the excitement and extraordinary beauty and resilience of Australia's native flora. *Wombat Bend* has featured twice on *Gardening Australia*, such is Sue & Bill's contribution to Australian garden design.

It's incomprehensible to the likes of you and me, that back in 1978, when Sue & Bill came to view the block of land in Dixons Creek, they found exactly what they were looking to buy: a flat, over-grazed paddock, without buildings, trees, water, birds or wildlife of any kind, save for some creek-side wombat burrows. It's even harder to imagine that they fell for such a patch of unloved farmland. Yet it was everything they wanted; a quiet locality in the Yarra Valley, ripe for them to work their magic and create their own paradise.

Where the rest of us would shake our heads, Sue & Bill's lifetime of fieldwork and profound understanding of the natural environment, qualified them to work with the land to create a sustainable sanctuary.

Their first year was spent absorbing the conditions: local vegetation and creek, prevailing winds, prospective house site and view lines, and most importantly, where to site the billabong and wetland, which would occupy half the property. Their vision was to create a sanctuary and habitat, to live in harmony with nature and wildlife.

The pair set to, designing and building their octagonal mudbrick and timber home, with shade-giving verandas. Every window captures views of the water and park-like landscape. Later, when they built *The Burrow B&B*, they applied the same principles; the moment you step inside you are instantly drawn to the views.



Angus taking Sue for her daily walk



Photographer: Barbara Wall  
The Yellow-Billed Spoonbill is a regular visitor to the billabong



Waterways and dwellings

The buildings, including a timber studio, nestle in an embracing arc. Roof lines echo each other in harmony, and trees strategically provide cooling and shade. The vast, majestic eucalypts that now tower over the banks of the billabong appear so at home here, it defies belief they were planted a mere 40 years ago.

The heart of *Wombat Bend* is the magnificent billabong (Wiradjuri 'bilabang'). It is its life force, providing habitat, nesting and food for the 100+ species of birds that call *Wombat Bend* home, along with turtles, fish, 13 species of frogs, 9 species of microbats, native bees & butterflies. As well as giving life to the wildlife, the billabong undoubtedly saved Sue & Bill's lives on Black Saturday when fires roared through the region.

There is nothing more soothing to the senses than to quietly watch the water birds going about their daily business on and around the billabong; be amused and delighted with the parrots and pigeons that descend on the swing feeders when seed is spread for them; be captivated with the little dancing blue wrens and the grey fantails, and wake in the morning to the pure carolling of the magpies and the songs of the willy wagtails.



Veggie garden at Wombat Bend



A writer at work in The Burrow



Sue and Bill run AireNet - Australia's Airedale Terrier Rescue & Adoption Network



Jane Edmanson and Sue Forrester for Gardening Australia

*'...it's reassuring that nature carries on regardless. Her vibrant and cheerful displays help us to focus on the present and the vivid wattles deliver a lift to our spirit...'*

For guests staying in the B&B, be they writers, artists or simply people escaping their 'to do' list, it is restorative to be able to wander amongst the 20 varieties of wattle and callistemon along the paths by the billabong, accompanied by Angus the Airedale (if he's invited). Of course, each season brings its own delights. Right now, in spring, when you wake to the view of sunlight on the billabong, the birdsong calls you out of bed for a morning stroll by the water and rewards you as the dancing light changes and the glassy water offers up cloud reflections, while a cormorant warms his wings and the day begins to glow.

In these times we're all adjusting to, it's reassuring that nature carries on regardless. Her vibrant and cheerful displays help us to focus on the present and the vivid wattles deliver a lift to our spirit, which is something to be cherished. ■

For more information: [www.wombatbend.com](http://www.wombatbend.com)