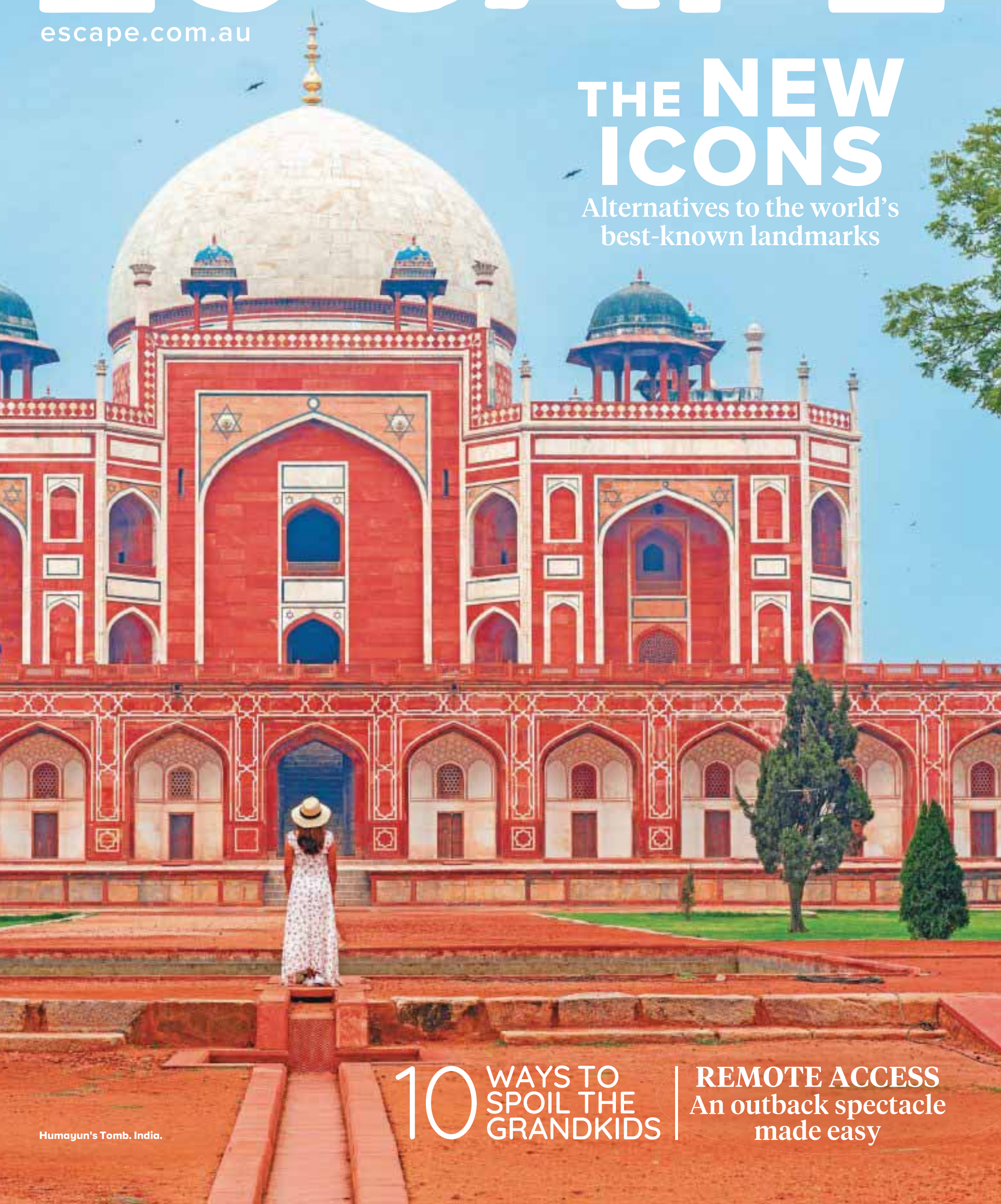


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Backyard blitz

A tour makes it easy to visit regional Victoria’s exquisite gardens, writes Margaret Barca



Inspired by the Botanica tour, Melbourne writer Margaret Barca is turning over a new leaf and getting her own garden in order.

From top: Geese patrol Babbington Park; Paul Bangay’s Stonefields; Dame Elisabeth Murdoch’s Cruden Farm.



“Wombats eat some of our plants. And sit on others,” says Julian Blackhirst as we gaze at a crushed shrub. “But that’s nature.” Like a true gardener, he takes it in his stride.

Julian has watched over the Garden of St Erth, deep in the Blackwood State Forest, northwest of Melbourne, for 15 years and guides us around its mature deciduous and native trees, perennial borders, heritage vegetables and goldmining-era cottage.

St Erth is one stop on a five-day Botanica tour, based in Melbourne, that explores gardens not always open to the public. Each day is different – a wild coastal garden, an Australian native garden, a permaculture “edible forest”, a formal garden of parterres and topiary. We visit a nursery that sells rare perennials, and cool-climate gardens in the Dandenong Ranges. These are some of the highlights.

Garden to table

“We call them fluffy bums,” says chef and restaurateur Annie Smithers as a gaggle of fluffy Sebastopol geese waddle across the lawn. The French-inspired garden that Annie and her wife, Susan Thompson, have created at their farm Babbington Park, near Lyonville, includes a menagerie of heritage-breed animals (speckled hens, miniature Cheviot sheep, miniature Galloway cattle) that add to the garden’s charm.

Annie’s dry humour and seemingly boundless energy further enhances her garden’s appeal.

The weather turns squally but a gardener appears with a trolley of brollies and soon we’re back on our way, inspecting the extensive kitchen garden.

Annie’s bio-intensive gardening program supplies virtually all the produce for her restaurant, du Fermier, at Trentham – French beans, turnips, zucchini, heirloom raspberries. She even uses cashmere from her goats as mulch.

Roses, delphiniums, peonies, tulips and more flowers in the picking garden. Dry stone walls, wattle-and-wire fencing and a shower of roses tumbling over a white timber chapel are romantic, though the garden is not without its follies. A two-storey chicken coup is “more form than function,” says Annie. “It’s wildly impractical but I love it.”

We share a picnic garden lunch, with coffee served from a quaint caravan (with a mini chandelier.) Fresh

baguettes (baked by Annie) and choux pastries with just-picked berries are on the menu, and then it’s time to explore another garden.

Precision at play

Dappled light filters through a canopy of trees as we turn off the country road leading to Stonefields, the private property of landscape designer Paul Bangay. Paul’s head gardener, Tim Fawcett, walks and talks us through the garden – a raft of clipped green with shafts of colour in a bucolic Australian landscape.

Garden rooms, precision hedging and masses of topiary (400 meticulously pruned spheres), are softened by seasonal flowers – 4000 white tulip bulbs bloom among the buxus hedging in spring (“Paul hates a bare patch”, sighs Tim). Boston ivy clinging to the house turns brilliant red in autumn (“and helps keep the house cool”). The walled rose garden is a symphony of pinks, deep purples, mauves and russet, inspired by a Persian rug.

Crimson apples are underplanted with 200 bulbous English box. “The rosellas eat the apples, and so do the resident foxes – but there’s enough for everyone,” Tim says. Drifts of perennials, hydrangea and delicate Japanese windflowers border lawns rolled like a bowling greens. Hydrangea are fading, hellebores are waiting to bloom.

Dame Elisabeth’s vision

On the bus headed to the Mornington Peninsula, our Botanica guides, Julie Prent and Sophie Holloway, fill us in on the history of Cruden Farm. More than 100 stately lemon-scented gums lining the curved gravel driveway were part of a 1930 design by gardening legend, Edna Walling.

Dame Elisabeth Murdoch – philanthropist and mother of Rupert – worked on her garden for 80 years. Together with “Gardener No 2”, Michael Morrison, who helped her for 48 years, they created a property that feels intensely personal and serenely beautiful.

The picking garden – a patchwork of full-blown roses, dahlias, standard honeysuckle and iris – is “a florist’s dream come true,” says Sophie.

Within the walled garden, a tumble of late-summer flowers, studded with spires of delphiniums, flank the walls, and weathered stones rim the pond.

There are towering trees and lyrical open spaces, with lawns flowing to the ornamental lake that reflects weeping willows. Copper beech and tupelo trees (which turn purple in autumn and finally an intense



OTHER GARDENS ON THE TOUR

Jo Ferguson’s (private) garden, Mornington Peninsula

A family garden, a healing coastal place that’s messy, wild and colourful, with grasslands, native and Mediterranean plants.

Garden of St Erth

Tucked deep in forest near Blackwood, featuring mature deciduous and native trees, glorious perennial borders, a heritage vegetable garden and goldmining-era cottage.

Cloudehill Garden

Two hectares in the Dandenong Ranges, with lofty rhododendron, hornbeam and copper beech hedges. A walkway of grasses leads to rare Japanese weeping maples. Don’t miss the bonsai garden.

Edible Forest, Dixons Creek

A 0.4ha permaculture food forest, with 320 species of edible and medicinal plants. Productive year-round, it’s rich with elderberries, sloe plums, Chinese quince, medlar trees, heritage apples, vegetables – and birds.

Alowyn Gardens, Yarra Valley

A breathtaking wisteria arbour, a topiary parterre, and a garden of whimsical cloud-pruned shrubs and olive trees. A rose garden, lavender garden, Zen garden, kitchen garden, French provincial garden and a plant nursery.

Antique Perennials, Kinglake

Matt Reed and Michael Morant have pioneered a wholesale nursery specialising in rare and unusual perennials, both Australian and international, and are happy to share their knowledge.

scarlet) are just starting to turn. Dame Elisabeth was famously frugal but her garden offers a wealth of welcoming spaces.

Chelsea winner

On another day, our drive winds through a cathedral of mountain ash, the tallest of all flowering plants, to the Dandenong Ranges, “known for lyrebirds and wedge-tailed eagles, and a scattering of snow in winter”.

After a morning at the sprawling Cloudehill Garden with its towering hedges, Himalayan tree rhododendrons, rare Japanese weeping maples, European species such as beech and magnolias, and grass walks, we stop for lunch at Sassafras. Do we really need scones with jam and cream after lunch? Why not, we all say, before being shepherd back onto the bus by Julie and Sophie.

At Olinda, we meet landscape designer Phillip Johnson, was the first Australian to win Best in Show at the UK’s prestigious Chelsea Flower Garden Show, in 2013.

He explains the intricacies of recreating his award-winning, sustainable Australian native garden in Olinda. A path meanders past rare Wollemi pines, silvery eucalyptus, purple smoke bush, grevilleas and kangaroo paw to a tranquil billabong, with a fabulous waratah sculpture.

“The original garden was the size of a tennis court. This is 20 times that size. We have 442 different species, 33 Huon pines, more than 450 waratahs. There are bush foods such as lemon myrtle.” The garden is waterwise and off-grid. “And there are goat tracks,” says Phillip, “where kids can run along and explore.”

Heirloom varieties

Heronswood, a handsome 1860s bluestone Gothic Revival house on the Mornington Peninsula, is the home of The Diggers Club. The house – all quaint roof turrets and pointed windows – is surrounded by a true plant-lovers’ garden, with gorgeous bayside views. For many on the tour, it’s a bucket-list destination.

The property showcases the myriad heirloom seeds, rare plants and bulbs of flowers, fruits, vegetables and nuts that The Diggers Club, started by Clive and Penny Blazey in the 1970s, cultivates and sells.

A sprawling Moreton Bay fig and Cook Island pine, both over 150 years old, backdrop emerald lawns, colour-drenched but orderly garden beds, and softly waving grasses. Fruit trees are laden and vegetable parterre is as elegant as any flower garden.

Head gardener Sarah Penno answers endless questions. Everyone is keen to stop by the nursery and stock up on heirloom seeds, plants and gardening paraphernalia. There’s lots of chatter on the bus as gardeners (and us want-to-bes) compare notes.

Showstopper day

Our tour includes a day at the popular Melbourne International Flower & Garden Show where talks, workshops, garden designs by professional and up-and-coming designers, advice on sustainability, and stunning floral displays, are all on the agenda. Stalls offer gardening tools and gear, books, plants, bulbs, heirloom roses, wind chimes and pots.

It’s at the Royal Exhibition Buildings and Carlton Gardens and held annually in March.

The writer was a guest of Botanica World Discoveries.



> DISCOVER

Botanica World Discoveries runs luxury year-round garden and cultural tours in Australia and internationally.

> PLAN

Outings Across the Garden State is a five-day tour, including the Melbourne International Flower & Garden Show, departing March 15, 2027, exploring celebrated private and public gardens in Victoria. The tour’s pace is ideal for all garden lovers, with each day different. Other Botanica Australian tours include autumn and spring gardens in Victoria; Western Australia’s spring wildflowers; and Queensland Outback Heritage & Oasis Gardens.

> BOOK

The tour is from \$5495 a person twin share for four nights in a central, five-star hotel, with five days touring in a spacious coach with expert guides. Ten meals and some drinks, private airport-to-hotel transfers and a full-day ticket to the Melbourne International Flower & Garden Show are included.

botanicatours.com

From above: Heronsfield on the Mornington Peninsula centres around an 1860s bluestone Gothic Revival house; display at the Melbourne International Garden & Flower Show; Phillip Johnson’s garden in Olinda.