

# Creative Force

ARTIST BARB SOMERVILLE'S GARDEN IN SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND IS NOW HER MAIN FOCUS.

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RAVENSBORNE QLD GARDEN

A basket full of freshly picked roses with philadelphus and Queen Anne's lace. **FACING PAGE** Barb Somerville at work in her glorious home garden.





IF ANYONE CAN DEMONSTRATE the truth of the phrase, “patience is a virtue,” Barb Somerville can. Barb, 58, and her husband Andrew, 64, live at Tallowood, an 11-hectare property in Southern Queensland’s Ravensbourne, on Jagera, Giabal and Jarowair land. They purchased the bare plot with two dams in 1998 and built a double-storey, barn-style home in a swift nine weeks. The garden, however, is a long-term project that Barb has chipped away at while homeschooling the couple’s eight children, now aged 17 to 34.

“Moving out of Toowoomba to the country was a lifestyle choice, and it was my career choice to homeschool our children full-time,” says the powerhouse mum.

However, when Barb and Andrew’s youngest, Daniel, began Year Nine at school in Toowoomba four years ago, Barb enrolled in a horticulture course at TAFE. “After TAFE, I landed a dream job at Gabbinbar Homestead, a heritage-listed venue in Toowoomba with a 150-year-old garden. As a casual consultant and gardener, my job brief is to plant flowers and bring the pizzazz!” she explains.

Barb’s study and new work experiences have reassured her that the past few decades of self-taught gardening were intensely educational. Tallowood’s rich, volcanic soil and warm, temperate climate provided an excellent starting point. “If the soil is happy, the plants are happy and less stressed, and less likely to succumb to bugs and diseases,” she explains.

Keeping the garden weed-free is one of her main challenges. “Some summers, the weeds have grown taller than me. Thank goodness for sons and daughters who like gardening!” she says, adding that tea-tree mulch has recently helped her keep the weeds at bay.

Barb’s evolving layout flows across one hectare within the garden fence. “Early on, I made the mistake of planting things too close together, so I’m spreading out into new areas of the garden,” she says. “I’ve planted some beautiful trees that I’ve collected interstate, like dogwoods, crabapples, lilacs – even a horse chestnut tree.”

A walk beyond the fence leads to a cabinet timber tree plantation where Andrew, an agricultural consultant, planted 2500 native softwood trees 18 years ago. “In time, we will get a mobile sawmill in to harvest and sell them. That’s Andrew’s superannuation,” Barb shares.

Trees play a significant role at Tallowood in many ways. When faced with that grassy paddock 24 years ago, Barb >



**CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT** The ideal setting for artistic pursuits; a vase of roses with philadelphus, Queen Anne’s lace and stocks; balcony seating with majestic views; pink rambling rose; Andrew and Barb – with border collie Peggy – have spent decades shaping their property. “We use dam and rain water,” Barb says; “We have rich volcanic soil here. You don’t have to do much with the Ravensbourne soil; we’re blessed.”; vividly coloured foxglove; Barb’s painting workshops in the garden have been a hit.







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"There are lots of nooks and crannies for the grandchildren to play in. My children have helped create the garden my grandchildren can play in," Barb says. **FACING PAGE** "A lesson learnt in the garden? Persevere," says Barb. "Some people really push the idea of only growing what commonly suits the area, but as this garden has matured, I've grown things that haven't worked in the past."







CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT A pretty trellis is surrounded by snail creeper and roses; the family's cat, Chino, fiercely guards her seat on the verandah; Peggy loves roaming outdoors; 'Mrs Reynolds Hole' rose; Barb happily spends hours among her plants. "This is a real garden that a regular person has created over time. It's not something that happened instantly or has cost a fortune," she says; Barb and Andrew's youngest son, Daniel, takes Peggy for a kayak on the dam; delicate Pierre de Ronsard roses.



instantly knew what was required: "Getting the trees into the ground was the first priority so that we could create shade." Barb cannot overstate the importance of trees in creating microclimates that allow other plants to thrive. "It's important to wait patiently for trees to provide shade before you plant the softer treasures that need the protective canopy," she explains.

An English oak was the first sapling to hit the soil. "I wanted to be here long enough to see my grandchildren climb it – and now they do," says Barb, grandmother to 11.

A collection of fragrant, old-fashioned blooms and glossy hedging complements the verdant leafiness. A trip to the UK in 2013 cemented Barb's love of English gardens – "I think I was born in the wrong country!" With secret rooms surrounded by photinia and gravel pathways leading to a water fountain, the garden retains a charming, relaxed informality. "This isn't a showcase garden; it's a garden to share," Barb emphasises.

Selling cut flowers locally, creating wedding florals and hosting watercolour workshops have been Barb's first steps in sharing Tallowood with others. In the art workshops she runs with her friend Gina, floral arrangements plucked from the garden form the enchanting subject matter.

"I invite people here and give them permission to play, providing them with the space to have a beautiful and relaxing dose of pretty," says Barb. "I'm not an art teacher; I just introduce people to the joy of colour and flowers." Her most recent project involved printing her vivid paintings onto linen, working with Gina's knowledge of digital design.

Tallowood is entering a new season as Daniel prepares for university and a move away from home. The bittersweet milestone signals Barb's opportunity to focus solely on the garden and develop the ideas dashing about in her mind. "I feel like my head is full of popcorn at times!" she says, laughing. Her bouquet of blossomy dreams includes open garden days, more workshops and events, and developing the fabric designs.

"I'm excited for my new chapter with Tallowood," Barb says. "This is a real garden that has been created over time, little by little, and now it's coming into its own." It sounds like Barb may be doing a touch of that, too. *CB*  
For Tallowood updates, follow @countrygardensnippets on Instagram.