



Floral overture

MUSICIANS SUZY AND RICHARD MILLER HAVE SWAPPED SOLOS FOR SEEDLINGS AT THEIR HISTORIC MANOR IN BATHURST, NSW.

WORDS JESSICA BELLEF PHOTOGRAPHY MONIQUE LOVICK



"We designed metal support frames incorporating reinforced steel meshing. They can support plants up to and over six feet – there's no need to tie them," says Suzy. **FACING PAGE** "Each of them is exquisite; so different and exciting. They are works of art," Richard says of their prized dahlias.

GARDEN BATHURST NSW

FROM TOP Suzy and Richard with their retriever Billy, who sadly passed away recently. "Billy is still with us in our hearts. He gave us so much joy and happiness," says Richard; Suzy tends to the blooms. **FACING PAGE** With more than 120 varieties of dahlia, including the pretty 'Cafe au lait' (far right), gardening is a full-time job for the pair, who prepare their flowers for commercial sale.

IF YOU EVER FIND YOURSELF travelling on the *Indian Pacific*, keep your eyes on the landscape as the train scuttles through Bathurst in the Central Tablelands of NSW. You may just catch a glimpse of Rainham, an 1832-built Georgian manor with a faded kind of beauty, firmly planted within the gentle folds of desaturated farmland on the edge of a flood plain. Travel in the height of summer, and you will see the manor engulfed in a symphony of lush, towering blossoms.

When Suzy and Richard Miller bought Rainham in 2012, it was the first time the estate had been on the market for close to a century and a half. The Millers are a talented duo who have found success in their respective musical careers: Suzy as a flute player and teacher at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music; and Richard with his 43 years in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra as a percussionist, culminating in the position of principal timpani.

Now both retired, their energy and focus is channelled into their garden and burgeoning dahlia flower farm. "Even though we had those very exciting careers, gardening – and flower farming in particular – has opened up a new world of natural beauty to us," Suzy says.

The pair was more than happy to live with the crumbling charm of the manor's rooms – "It's straight out of the pages of *The World of Interiors*," says Suzy – but the property's 32 hectares had them determinedly rolling up their sleeves. "Moving from Stanmore [in Sydney's inner west] to this old house was quite a leap as far as gardening was concerned, because we lived in a terrace before and only had a veggie garden to deal with. We liked gardening, but hadn't worked with anything of this scale," Suzy explains.

A lifetime of musical training set Suzy and Richard in the right headspace to tackle the grounds. "The discipline and doggedness required of mastering a musical instrument means we have a fairly tenacious attitude to turning up in the garden each day with our shovels and hand trowels," says Suzy. "We would spend at least six or more hours a day, every day, in this garden."

Their 20 head of cattle graze on rolling paddocks of lucerne and oats, while closer to the manor, the pastures give way to densely planted garden beds and borders, >

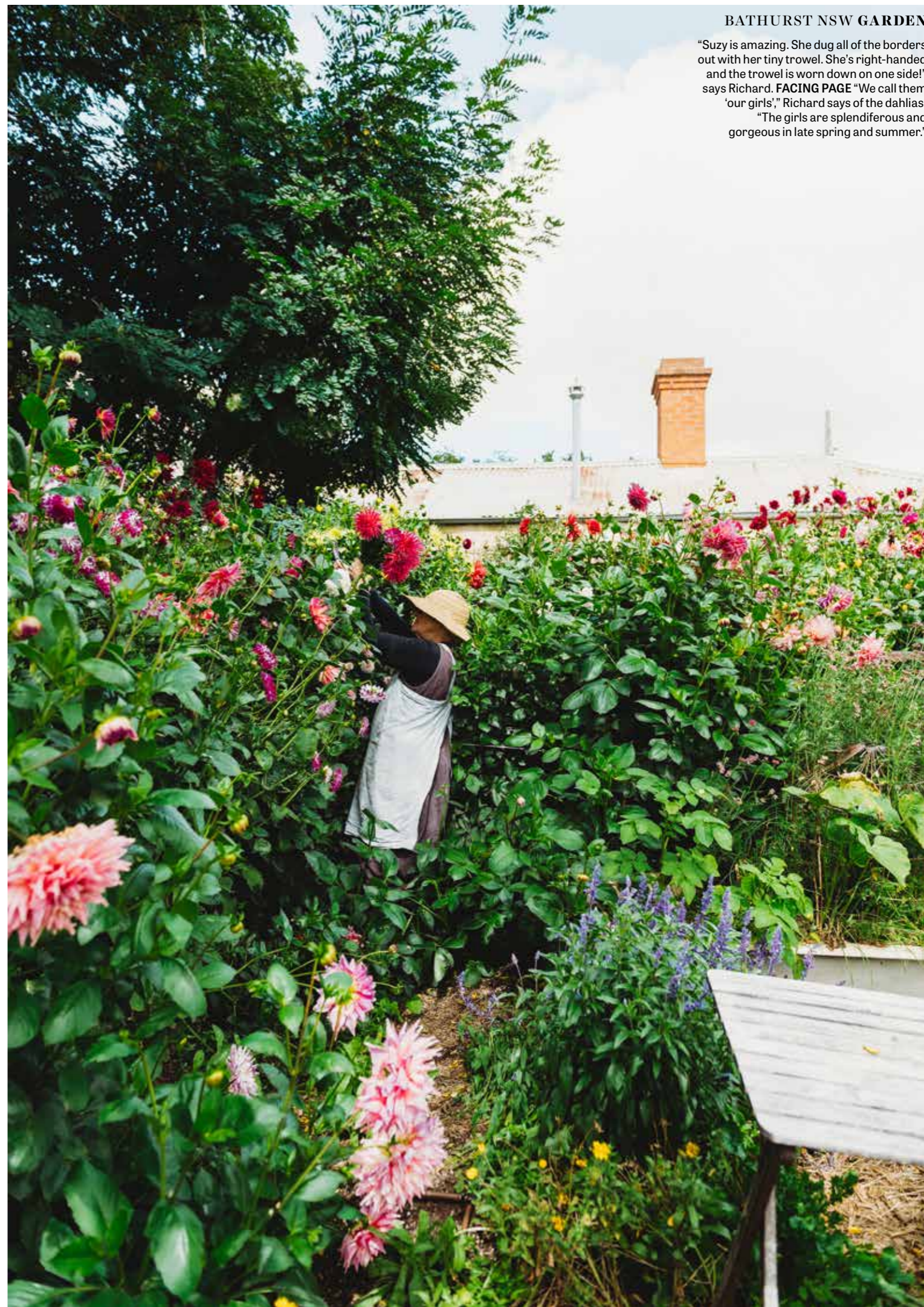




“Gardening – and flower farming in particular – has opened up a new world of natural beauty to us.”

BATHURST NSW GARDEN

“Suzy is amazing. She dug all of the borders out with her tiny trowel. She’s right-handed and the trowel is worn down on one side!” says Richard. **FACING PAGE** “We call them ‘our girls,’” Richard says of the dahlias. “The girls are splendid and gorgeous in late spring and summer.”



BATHURST NSW GARDEN

CLOCKWISE, FROM FAR LEFT “For anyone wanting to do dahlia farming, you’ve got to be prepared for hard work, but it’s great fun and rewarding,” says Suzy; the duo miss Billy terribly; “Suzy has this wonderful gift of the visual eye. She can pick up on the beauty of dahlias and see plantings in relation to other plantings. That’s one of the difficulties – the rotation of beauty throughout the season,” Richard says; the custom-designed greenhouse.



with a custom-designed greenhouse (built in 2014) nestled in the herbaceous growth.

Giant robinias, elms and pines are scattered around the property and gather in a grove at the back of the manor. Some of these trees are as old as Rainham, if not older. “We found a photo of the home from 1897 and the robinias were very large then,” Richard explains.

Rainham was built by Englishman Captain Thomas Raine, a mariner, merchant and landowner, and a historical figure of note. He engaged in wheat and dairy farming, ran a piggery and vineyard, and built the first flour mill in the district. Rainham has an industrious past, and the Millers have continued this tradition.

Their high-intensity, small-scale flower farm is young – the end of 2020 saw the first flush of blooms – but the pair is enjoying the process of experimenting with varieties and finding the dahlias’ rhythm. “They are magnificent flowers, and they are all so different. The variety is just extraordinary,” Suzy says. There’s ‘Cafe au lait’ and ‘French Kiss’. The ‘Belle of Barmera’, with deep coral tips fading into a peachy salmon at the centre. The ‘Holland Festival’, with its explosive, dinner plate-sized blooms. “They would be the top favourites at the moment, but the list goes on. We grow over 120 varieties,” Suzy says.

Rainham’s dahlias are sold at local markets, via florists and retailers, or from the front gate. A sell-out season, and many happy customers, has the couple excited about the future of their flower farm. They are expanding the dahlia crops, carving out a sun-soaked bed measuring seven by 15 metres, positioned towards the train line that cuts through their lot. “We are working spade by spade, and trowel by trowel,” says Richard.

Having spent their working lives performing and creating joy for others, the Millers have discovered a new way to share a different kind of artistic beauty.

“It’s one aspect you do miss, and it has been something that Suzy and I found particularly lovely about selling flowers at markets,” Richard explains. “Mothers come up with young children and the look on the kids’ faces is just wonderful. Having that connection is a great thing for us because we are sharing something we love, which is what we did with music. Our dahlia flower farm is an extension of that.”

Follow @rainham_flowers on Instagram.

“We are working spade by spade, and trowel by trowel.”

