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Hillston, Springwood, NSW

By **HELEN YOUNG**, LIFESTYLE COLUMNIST

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There is something wonderful about getting to know a place through painting it,” says artist Leo Robba. “It’s quite a different experience to simply visiting – you get to know certain features in a much more concentrated way.”

Robba, 55, has a Masters of Fine Art, a PhD in painting and more than 30 solo exhibitions to his credit. He lives, gardens and paints at Hillston, his property in Springwood in NSW’s Blue Mountains. The 0.7ha semi-formal garden, perched on a ridge, dates to 1890; the property has had just half a dozen owners.

After working for two decades in Sydney as a designer and art director in the media sector, Robba and his wife Adrienne Richards, a fellow artist, bought Hillston in 2006. The couple share the home with their two adult children, who are also “creative souls”, he says. “But I’m the only gardener.”

The connection between painting and gardening has always been there for him. “I’ve painted since I was a child and my father was a keen gardener. I’ve always been interested in watching things grow,” he says. “I really enjoy just looking, but every time I go out into the garden I am thinking about how I can make a picture from it.”

Robba walks through the garden every day, sometimes several times. “I check the health of plants and their growth patterns, looking at what needs to be done. That flows directly into how I see images and the way I paint.” He likes to explore the physical and metaphysical parallels between gardening and painting: “The experiential nature of painting and gardening is similar – you’re working creatively with materials, perhaps reimagining a place, and it’s highly visual. Gardeners have special demands on their powers of observation and I think artists have the same thing.”

He regularly spends 15-20 hours a week in his garden. “Actually that’s another parallel – gardens are never finished and paintings are the same,” he says. “You can almost always keep working on them.”

Of the garden's many mature trees, Robba believes two pears planted either side of the house are from the original 1890s garden. "They still bear fruit but they're like rock," he laughs. The sandstone terracing is from the 1950s, likewise the 'Swanes Golden' cypress pines that stand like sentinels and frequently appear in his paintings.

He is respectful of the garden's heritage, only recently starting to add things he would like to paint. Japanese box hedges encircle individual pomegranate trees, the old tennis court is slowly being converted into a fruit grove, and he is building a reflection pond, positioned to mirror a magnificent Sydney red gum (*Angophora costata*). "It's the most incredible tree and I never get sick of painting it from different angles," says Robba.

"One of the cores to my paintings is that I really love the changed landscape – that idea of the formal European garden positioned up against native bush, and the boundary between them. I'm also interested in painting inside the garden, rather than a vista or grand view, so maybe the viewer can feel me sitting in the garden and they're in the garden with me. That's an important part of what I do."

Should I replace all my kikuyu grass with a better turf as I try to restore a neglected garden in stages? It creeps insidiously into my fruit tree beds. *Kaz Reimann, Encounter Bay, SA*

Kikuyu endures heavy wear, sun and drought but is invasive and needs weekly mowing in summer. Nor is it good in shade. Softleaf buffalo types such as 'Sir Walter' and 'Kings Pride' are most popular for home gardens, being tolerant of shade, lush, green all year and low maintenance – but they're less drought tolerant and reasonably pricey. Turfing is like painting – it's all about thorough preparation. So choose an experienced professional for the job and ensure you have completely eliminated all the kikuyu first, or it will come back.

My olive tree is over 10 years old but has never produced fruit. What am I doing wrong? *Ros Mayes, Eumundi, Qld*

To fruit well, olives need a Mediterranean climate of hot, dry summers and cool winters. Some varieties, such as 'Arbequina' or 'Big Spanish', can fruit in subtropical areas but not reliably. You also need cross-pollination from a second tree, and ideally, alkaline soil.

Near to our beautiful screen of rhaps palms some small ones have grown. Can I reposition them closer to the others? *Sarton May, Ballina, NSW*

This elegant, multi-stemmed, clumping palm is expensive because it is slow growing. However, it will gradually spread through underground rhizomes, sometimes appearing 30-50cm away. In spring, check if the new plants are mature enough to have their own roots by digging gently in moist soil. If they do, sever the rhizome with a sharp knife. Remove half the leaves before replanting and keep moist until re-established.

Send your questions to: helenyoungtwig@gmail.com or Helen Young, PO Box 3098, Willoughby North, NSW 2068. Website: helenyoung.com.au. The best question over December/January wins a Maze Compost Tumbler worth \$249, featuring two compartments to enable batch composting, and a geared turning handle. mazingproducts.com.au