



Paradise for plants

Jim and Jan Flanigan have spent a significant chunk of 40 years creating a tropical haven on a bush block in Brisbane's western periphery.

BY KIRSTY MCKENZIE, PHOTOGRAPHY KEN BRASS





THESE PAGES: Orchids are one of Jim and Jan's many horticultural passions and they contribute to a spectacular spring display against the wisteria.

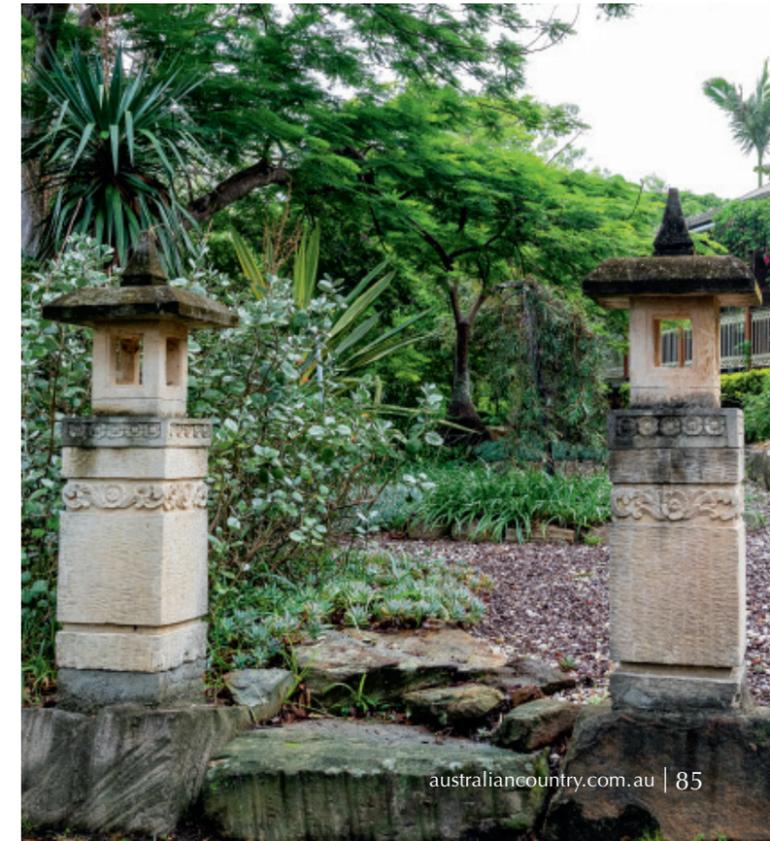
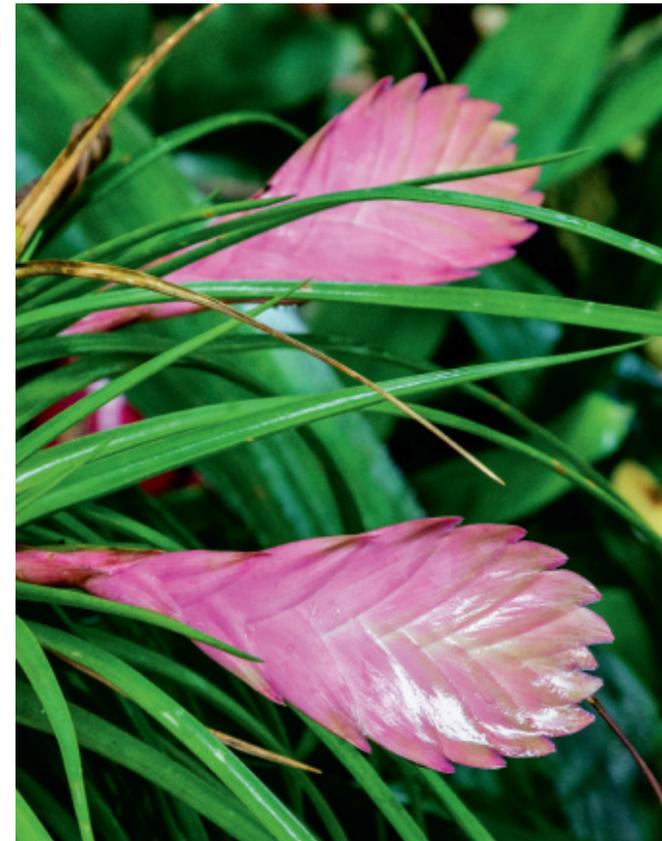


If Jim Flanigan hadn't arrived home after work just as his two-year-old son rolled down the driveway and onto the road on an out-of-control bike, his family would probably still be living in suburban Brisbane. Fortunately for the Flanigans, there were no other vehicles around so tragedy was averted. But the event did set Jim, a builder working in air conditioning, and his payroll consultant wife, Jan, on the search for a property with more space to raise a family and keep a few horses.

They found what they were looking for in a bush block at Mount Crosby on Brisbane's western periphery. It was close enough for them to commute to the city for work and the children to attend school in Kenmore, and while it felt like a move to the country, these days the city has spread almost to their back door. The Flanigans originally bought six acres (2.5 hectares), but subsequently sold a third of the land and now have four acres with about half of it cultivated garden.

"We arrived in 1980 with two kids, a caravan and a truckload of plants," Jan recalls. "Jim built a lean-to then the garage where we lived while he built the house. We quickly discovered that the lack of water and soil was not a good combination for growing a garden so, for a while, I contented myself with growing orchids in bush houses and small garden areas."

Then in 1998, Jan and Jim had a big overseas trip that took in many open gardens including Sissinghurst Castle Garden in the English county of Kent and The Butchart Gardens on Vancouver Island off Canada's south-western





THESE PAGES: The Flanigans say Butchart garden in a former quarry on Vancouver Island, Canada, provided inspiration for their own site.



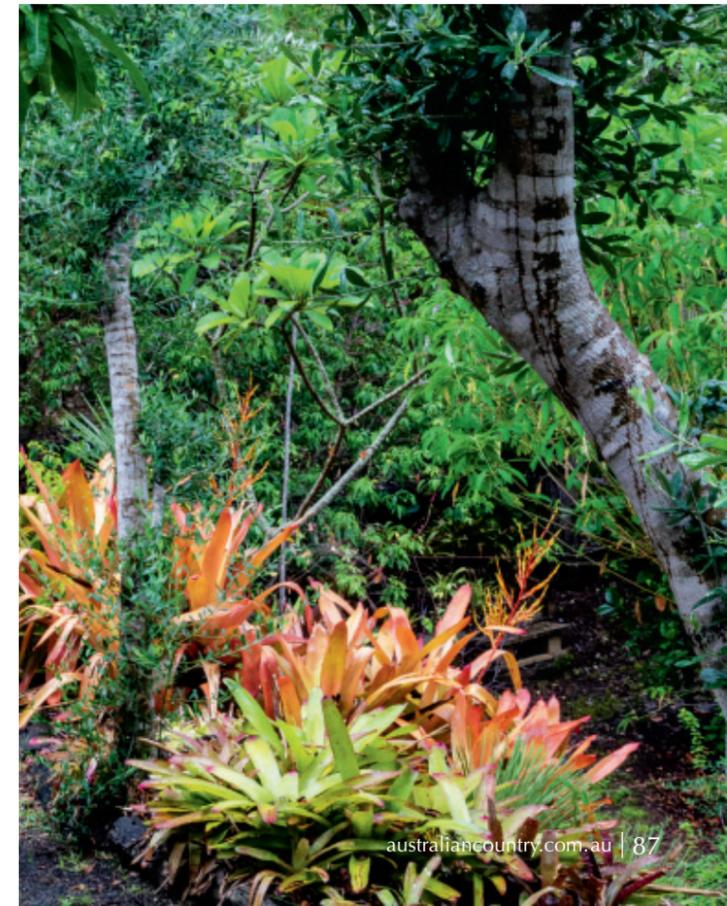
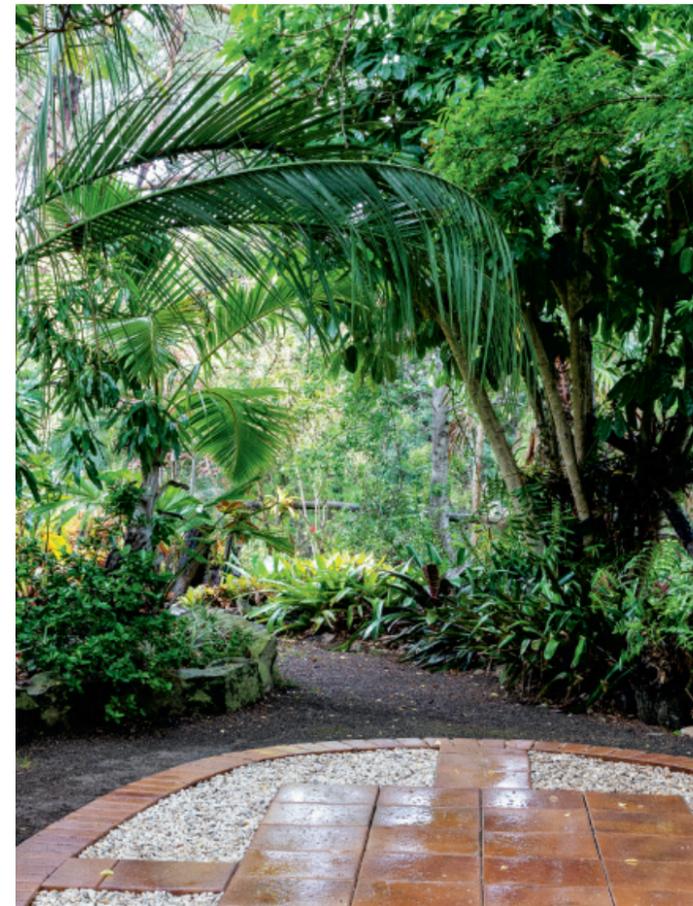
coast. “Butchart just blew me away as it was sited on a former quarry,” Jan recalls. “It put my struggles into perspective and I came home inspired to try harder.”

That meant introducing tonnes of rock from the Helidon sandstone quarry to build retaining walls to hold imported soil. As Jan’s willing ally in the earthworks, Jim took on the task of cutting the blocks to make them go further and then set about adding 17 water tanks holding 310,000 litres and a sprinkler system to keep the gardens watered. “We started with the roundabout garden at the front and kept going working our way around the house,” Jan explains. “Apart from blood and bone for the roses, we don’t fertilise, but we do use layers of newspapers and lots of mulch on the beds. Fortunately, sugar-cane mulch is readily available here, and we also have a mulcher to cut up palm fronds. Prunings from plants such as heliconias, gingers and salvias, which are soft, go straight onto the beds.”

For Jan, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of plant names and origins, researching and trialling new plants has become an absorbing pastime. Having spent her early childhood on the English Channel island of Guernsey, she was tempted to incorporate roses and temperate plants into the mix, which includes drought-tolerant as well as more tropical species. “I’ve always been inspired by my grandfather,” she says. “He had greenhouses for tomatoes and saved seeds so, to a certain extent, he has been my mentor. I divide the orchids and propagate and sell plants to support the next development and I’m always trying something new. At the moment, I’m deeply into eremophilas. I’ve joined a study group and I’m trialling varieties from all over Australia.”

Native plants and trees remain an important part of the garden and eucalypts and kurrajongs provide cornerstones for the cultivated areas. More recently, the Flanigans have developed several sloping sites, which have enjoyed some success along with the odd “dramatic failure”.

The Flanigans named their property Coucals for a whooping pheasant that inhabits the region. As the garden developed, they’ve attracted a host of birds, along with bats





THIS PAGE: Weather permitting, Coucals is open to raise funds for local charities in spring and autumn.



and bees and other beneficial insects. Adequate rainfall remains a constant challenge and, while Jan and Jim haven't kept formal records, weather patterns have changed during the past 40 years and they are constantly hoping for rain. "Gardeners get used to working with the conditions," Jan says. "You have to adapt to keep a garden going and, through the years, we've done plenty of that."

Brisbane summers add to the challenges and Jan says they usually head outdoors by five or six in the morning before the heat forces them indoors by nine. For this reason, winter is the preferred season for most of the hard construction work.

Even after four decades, the Flanigans always have a new project on the go, whether it's another bed to be planned and planted or Jim building a gazebo or garden seat to enhance each visitor's experience. When the weather cooperates, they open the garden in spring and autumn, with local charities benefiting from the gate takings.

"The local Red Cross has been catering morning teas for the past 15 years," Jan says. "We set up tables on the verandah and on the terrace and it's a beautiful sight when the wisteria and orchids are flowering. We can have up to 400 visitors across a weekend and some people return every year to see what has changed. It is a lot of work, but it's also very rewarding. Gardening is cheaper than therapy and I can't imagine life without it."

For more information and opening dates, go to coucalsgarden.com. **AC**