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Artwork: Clare James, *The Opposite of Alone*, watercolour, 2021

WORDS Penny Harrison | PHOTOGRAPHY Penny Harrison & Clare James

Wild Side

A HEALESVILLE ARTIST FINDS INSPIRATION, SOLACE AND RENEWAL IN THE BOUNTIFUL GARDEN SHE SHARES WITH HER FAMILY

Clare James is a self-confessed bowerbird. The Healesville artist and gardener has been known to collect mounds of lawn clippings and fallen leaves from neighbours' yards, even rusty old mattress coils from the side of the road. But everything Clare collects has a purpose, whether it's feeding her garden or being transformed into one of her striking artworks.

A sculptor, painter, florist and maker, Clare's creativity is intrinsically linked to the natural world and she spends as much time in her garden as she does in her art studio.

"I get so much inspiration from our garden by walking around it every single day to look at changes occurring in the flower beds," Clare says. "I base a lot of my artwork on my findings in the garden but for me it is more than finding inspiration. I get a sense of calm, connectedness and reassurance being in the garden."

It's taken about 13 years for Clare and her husband, Mark Boulet, an environmental science lecturer, to turn the "big rectangle of kikuyu lawn out the back" into an oasis of fruiting trees, vegetable gardens and chook pens.

The garden is now a natural extension of their home, a place where they will often spend days, working, playing and eating. And it's a place deeply connected to their family story – Clare and Mark were married in the back yard, and their children, Lylah and Olive, were born in the house.

"We'll often spend entire days in the garden," Clare says. "It never really feels like a chore for us to be out there from breakfast until after dinner. Often, we light the fire bowl or the pizza oven in the early afternoon to cook our dinner. We bring a basket of bread, preserves, cheeses and pots of tea and coffee out throughout the day."

Clare says she wanted to create a garden where her daughters could get lost, hunt for eggs, pick fresh fruit and vegetables, and always find a posy of flowers.

"The first thing we did was put in a little garden near the back door and filled it with veggies," Clare says.

"We'll often spend entire days in the garden...it never really feels like a chore for us to be out there from breakfast until after dinner"



After that, the couple added a new area to their patch each year. "Together we created a wood-fired pizza oven, which in turn led us to level a large area so that we could sit and eat near the oven, which in turn led Mark to learn how to lay bricks," Clare says. "We really just make it up as we go."

Much of the family's food comes from the garden and each year they harvest apples, nashi pears, figs and plums, six varieties of citrus, feijoas, pomegranates, grapes, an array of herbs and countless vegetables.

"It feels good feeding your family from the back yard," she says. "Our food scraps are divided between a chook bucket, guinea pig bucket and worm bucket in the kitchen. The chooks eat our scraps and weeds, producing eggs and manure, and also help remove pests. The worms devour our waste and make nutrient-rich plant food. Excess fruit and vegetables get bottled, preserved or gifted to others. All of these cycles are just what makes sense to us as gardeners."

"It really becomes a way of life and a way of connecting with other people."

Clare describes herself as a thrifty gardener and says she has lost count of all the free and readily available materials – lawn clippings, old woodchips, rotting seaweed at the beach – she has brought in to build the "rich, sweet, healthy soil".

"It really becomes a way of life and a way of connecting with other people."



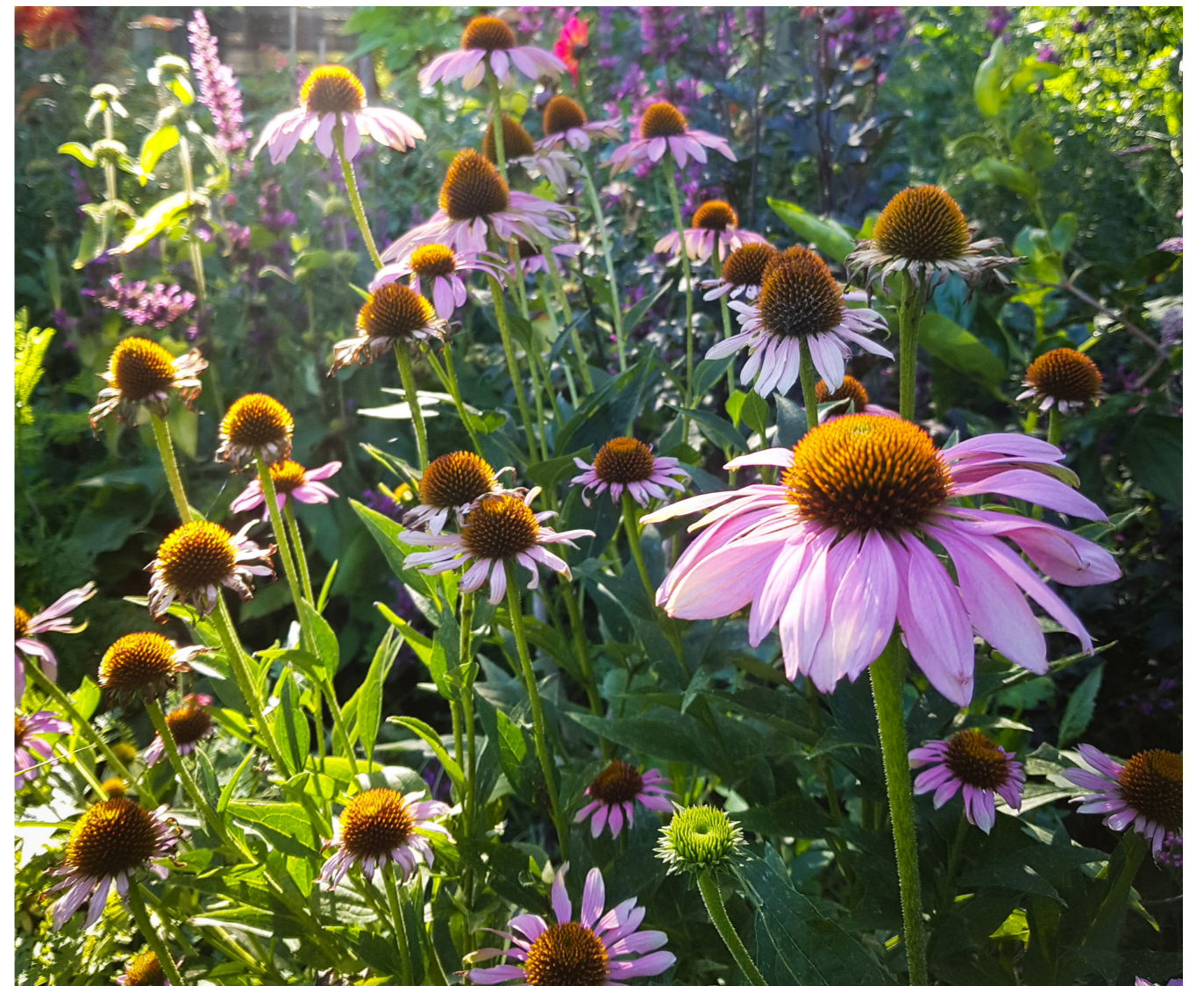


Artwork: Clare James, I Belong, sculpture

"All these valuable additives and conditioners have cost us no money, just a little time," she says. "And we do this, partly through a lack of money, partly through the thrill of free things, partly in defiance of the wasteful world that we live in and partly because you can't always buy what you want."

The garden, which is home to pet chooks, ducks, rabbits, guinea pigs and birds, now has a frog pond, a bug hotel and a lizard lounge for the resident blue-tongue lizard. And nestled up the back, at the end of an inviting pathway, is Clare's "patchwork tip-shop, hard-rubbish, hand-built studio". This is where she spends most of her days, often accompanied by several members of her large menagerie.

As an artist, Clare creates exquisite watercolour paintings, sculptures and ceramics. She is a regular participant in the Yarra Valley Open Studio program and her work can be seen in wineries and galleries throughout the valley, as well as at Queens Park in Healesville. Her latest solo exhibition, Hideaway, at the YAVA Gallery and Arts Hub opened the day Victoria went back into lockdown this year. "To go into lockdown on the first day of my show was really hard," she says. "I'm still living in hope that lots of people will still be able to see it in real life... As we all know, seeing art in real life is so much better than seeing it online."





Artwork: Clare James, Fungi Rafts, watercolour, 2020

“...what I can do from here is to try, through my artwork, to remind people to take notice of those small things.”

The exhibition is described as a collection of watercolour paintings, of imagined and true landscapes, all with shelters nestled within, a video installation documenting beauty and its unravelling, installations of ceramic and mixed-media sculptures, and a Clare-sized, cocoon/cubby made from her home-garden prunings.

“I’ve had a thing in my artwork that’s about shelters, hives, nests, burrows, cubby-houses – and, I realise that, through gardening, what I’ve been doing is trying to create a sanctuary,” Clare says. “Because I do worry enormously about the world, but what I can do from here is to try, through my artwork, to remind people to take notice of those small things.” ■

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