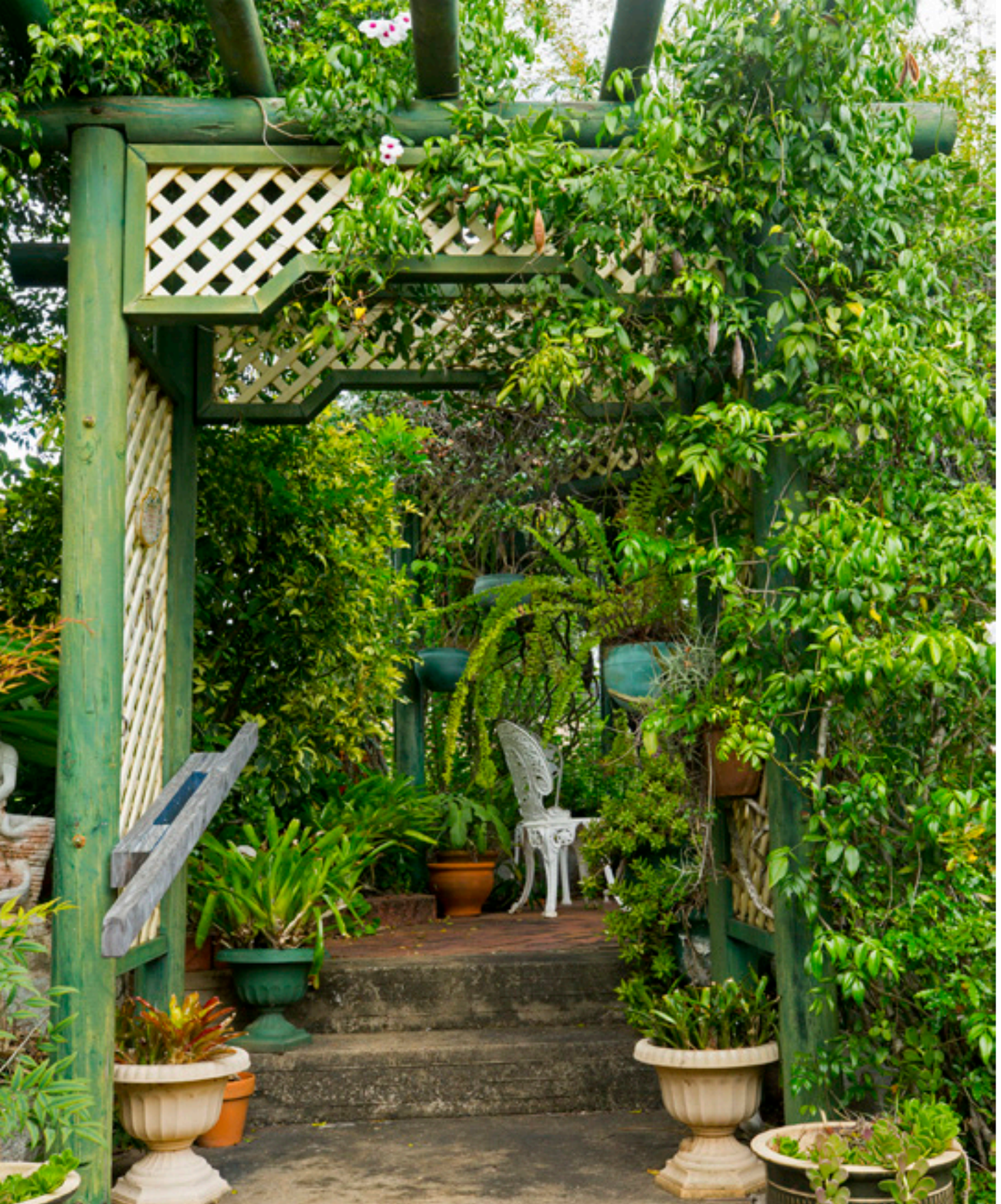

Extract from "The Easy Gardening Handbook", by Stephanie Jackson

Introduction

I've enjoyed playing in the dirt ever since I was a little tacker, and as soon as I' mastered the art of crawling I shadowed my father wherever he went, for as a gardener and nurseryman he too enjoyed having his hands in the soil. Whenever he left the house I tottered along in his wake and every journey into the garden was a new adventure that revealed more of the wonders of the natural world. I watched my father digging, planting and ripping weeds from the ground and was mesmerised as he showed me the beauty of individual flowers and introduced me to caterpillars, butterflies and a host of other insects; and he encouraged me to mimic his actions and dig in the damp soil with my tiny trowel.

As my life became increasingly dominated by plants I felt more at home in their company than with members of the human race and I began to recognise flowering species by the unique faces of their blooms. There were the pansies that wore a perpetual smile, the dahlias that, with earwigs as seasonal residents among their gaudy petals, had every reason to scowl, and the lovely wisteria that seemed to chuckle with laughter as its meandering tendrils grabbed my hair whenever I walked through the archway that it claimed as its personal domain. I chatted to plants more than I talked to my mother and whenever she couldn't find me in the house she knew exactly where to look, for I'd invariably be in the sprawling garden that was my playground.

'It's time you showed me what you've learnt,' my father said one day, and when he offered me my own garden bed near the entrance to his nursery I was as excited as a witch's apprentice with her first book of spells and eager to create a little magic of my own. 'Your garden will be the first thing that every customer sees so it will always have to look perfect,' he said sternly as he presented me with several punnets of seedlings. I wanted to tell him that, at the ripe old age of eight, creating a garden that would mirror his standard of perfection was well beyond my abilities but as he turned to walk away I kept quiet and hoped that his faith in me would prove to be justified. When he eventually returned to check on my progress he was less than impressed however, for I was sitting on a garden bench in a state of lethargy rivalling that of a scarecrow on the night shift.

'You won't get the job done by being lazy and sitting around daydreaming,' he said with an unfamiliar scowl on his weathered face. I was momentarily insulted by his words for I certainly wasn't being lazy. I was simply taking the time to decide how to set out the fragile seedlings and create the picture of perfection that my father had demanded. As soon as I had formed a concept of how the completed project should look I began my task with enthusiasm. I yanked out the weeds that had been allowed to dominate the area and covered them with a deep layer of pea straw. I scattered some fertiliser across the surface, then planted the seedlings directly into the mulch in a haphazard fashion that replicated the chaos of woodland vegetation that I'd always admired. When my father returned I was sitting on the bench appreciating my handiwork. 'You're obviously not so lazy after all,' he said with a grin of approval. 'And you've done a good job for your first effort.'

My knowledge of gardening has increased dramatically over the ensuing years but I've retained the same philosophy that I used to create my first simple garden. I still take my time to consider the design of every garden bed and I still work at a slow and steady pace that some people might confuse with laziness. They'd be wrong however, for my aim is to spend minimal time and effort on every task yet to obtain optimum results.

I never shun hard physical work but I adamantly refuse to become a slave to my extensive garden. It's been designed not as an environment where I have to work myself to the bone day in and day out but as a place of natural beauty and tranquillity in which I can relax with a cup of coffee, watch the activities of the birds that appreciate the garden too, or simply sit and daydream. I have to admit that I occasionally suffer from a hint of laziness but the opportunity to spend some quiet time among the flowers and foliage is my reward for having designed and created a low-maintenance garden.

Careful planning, together with the selection of tough and drought-tolerant plants that, to a considerable degree, can fend for themselves, have been the key ingredients in my success, and although it might occasionally seem as though I have perfected the art of laziness, I have no twinge of guilt when I'm sitting around taking life easy.

Each of the approximately 250 plants featured in this book is growing contentedly within my garden and most are more than just a pretty face with colourful flowers or attractive foliage. Every one, large or small, has been invited to share my environment not only for its value as a resilient and physically attractive species but also for its unique 'personality' and behavioural characteristics. They're all my mates and I'm not embarrassed to admit that I talk to most of them on more than a rare occasion.

'You're looking beautiful today fellas,' I say with quiet sincerity as I wander past perennials that scramble among the boulders of the rockery and dawdle past ferns that spill enthusiastically over the edge of decorative containers. The response from my garden companions may be one of silence but I'm sure that, every now and then, I glimpse a subtle smile of gratitude for the tough love that I've given them to ensure that they remain happy and healthy from one season to the next.

This book not only provides information about the habits and cultivation requirements of the featured plants but also offers advice on how to design and create a low-maintenance garden where work can be kept to a minimum to ensure that there's always plenty of time to smell the roses.

Orthosiphon

Lamiaceae family
Orthosiphon aristatus
Common names: Cat's whiskers, Java tea plant

Most people prefer to call *Orthosiphon aristatus* by the more memorable name of cat's whiskers in reference to the unusual form of its striking white flowers but to me it's my old mate Lazarus. Like that legendary Biblical character it sometimes appears to be dead, apparently having succumbed to the onslaught of drought, but it miraculously comes back to life, resurrected by nothing more than the magical powers of a deluge of rain.

It's a member of the mint (Lamiaceae) family and a native not only of India, southern China and south-eastern Asia but also of northern Queensland.

It's a very easygoing character that's almost invincible and its immortality is assured if it's planted in either full sun or light shade in a warm, frost-free location that has well-draining soil. It will quickly attain a height of around 80 cm and a width of around a metre and, with an occasional snip here and there, particularly after flowering, it can be encouraged to become a neat and tidy plant.

Its unique flowers, which range in colour from white to pale mauve and pink, appear in late summer through to autumn and complement its dark-green slightly glossy leaves that, in some Asian cultures, are used in herbal medicine and have earned it the colloquial name of 'Java tea plant.'

With new plants easily propagated from stem cuttings, I'm confident that this species, which really is the cat's whiskers, will live forever in my garden. Its invincibility is put to the test, however, when an army of hungry kangaroos invade the garden and discover that the foliage of *O. aristatus* is good bush tucker. With its characteristic resilience it soldiers on, grows a new cloak of leaves and produces a new flush of blooms that seem to smile in the face of every adversity.

Osteospermum

Asteraceae family
Osteospermum ecklonis
Common names: African daisy, Cape daisy

Osteospermums are the extroverts of the vast daisy (Asteraceae) family. They continually crave attention and adoration and if they could shout out loud you'd hear their incessant call 'Look at us! Look at us!' booming across the landscape but these mute exhibitionists can rely on nothing more than the gaudy colours of their flowers to encourage admirers to shower them with praise and thus inflate their already ballooning egos.

Fortunately, they're less fastidious about their living conditions than a swarm of blowflies in a dustbin and will thrive in poor-quality slightly acidic soil, providing it has adequate drainage, and although they appreciate regular watering in their early days they're relatively drought tolerant once established. A location in full sun is their preferred option and they'll tolerate a range of climatic conditions and will only be in fear of their lives if a heavy frost settles on their foliage.

The only maintenance they require is the removal of any spent flowers and then, when their flowering season, which lasts from spring until late summer, has come to its inevitable conclusion some tip pruning encourages them to stay in shape.

The majority of the many modern cultivars of the species reach a height of around 30 cm and a width of 40 cm and are draped, throughout the

year, with deep-green foliage. While those that I've planted in a mixed garden bed are as happy as pigs in mud, others are quite content to grow in large containers.

There's rivalry for my attention among the community of *O. ecklonis* cultivars that reside in my garden with 'Akila Purple', which produces vivid-purple flowers and 'Blue Eyed Beauty' that lives up

ABOVE: *Osteospermum ecklonis* 'Blue-eyed Beauty'.
BELOW: *Osteospermum ecklonis* 'Voltage'.

to its name with bright-yellow flowers with purple centres, both flaunting their charms and desperate to be admired. The dark-red flowers of 'Flame' and the golden yellow blooms of 'Voltage Yellow' always catch my eye too but it's the purple-flowered '3D Double Purple', which has an additional touch of glamour thanks its double layers of petals, that is the envy of its neighbours.

When their blooms have finally died they're not very alluring but with osteospermums being easy to propagate from stem cuttings I enthusiastically create a new cohort of plants to ensure that these resilient perennials will remain my much-admired garden companions for many years to come.

OPPOSITE: *Osteospermum ecklonis* 'Akila Purple'.

ABOVE: *Osteospermum ecklonis* 'Flame'.
BELOW: *Osteospermum ecklonis* 'Double Purple'.