



Linda Carr heads to Skipton and meets a woman whose retirement plans include creating a garden visitors can enjoy



Determining what makes a good retirement is a common topic of internet posts and one of the key messages is about choices that maintain independence. While some people may ponder what's next the day after their work's farewell party, Heather Hunter has been planning and working hard to establish her future independence and enjoyment. Her planning started well before the big farewell party was even in sight.

"I want to be on the land and was looking for an original miner's cottage that hadn't been touched, one that still had its



original features. I found this place about seven years ago but it had been absolutely neglected," explains Heather.

A renovation project is not what immediately comes to mind when imagining a relaxing retirement.

"There was garbage everywhere, the grass was waist high and there was no garden, Heather continues. "I painted the house myself, the weatherboards are the originals from 1886. The house was only just habitable but I managed. I commute to my business in Geelong and I've spent much of my weekends during the past six years restoring the house."

The resulting picturesque cottage sits on two acres in Skipton beside Emu Creek, the longest creek in Victoria. Retirement is still some years in the future and in between work and renovation Heather has also completed a diploma in horticulture from Melbourne's Burnley College via distance learning. Armed with this new knowledge she then set about building a garden.

"It's not a formal garden like those in Italy," she laughs. "I see it as a rustic



cottage garden. I don't use chemicals and don't mind a little bit of self-seeding here and there. Kiss Me Quick is one of my favourites."

The informal charm of the garden, where a 100-year-old plum tree takes centre stage, attracted requests for engagement parties and wedding receptions, particularly in spring when the many varieties of flowers are in full bloom. Being socially connected is important for Heather and these requests gave her confidence six months ago to consider developing her site into an Open Garden.

Brainstorming with a business mentor, the name Heatherlea Cottage was chosen for this new venture. Heather is quick to stress that she did not name the garden after herself but rather the name's Old English association with a flowing stream fitted the location well.

"You never think your garden is good enough and I wasn't going to do it but so many people seemed to enjoy the garden. I haven't done any serious advertising yet. I really enjoyed recently having a group of 38 people from a city garden club come for the day."

Opening your garden on a regular basis is an heroic move – as any home gardener will attest. It is impossible to maintain perfect condition all year and so failures are shared with the curious eyes of both novice



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and experienced visitors. This is a new kind of pressure for Heather but gardeners are renown for being nice people and she is now able to raise money for the Royal Children's Hospital through a portion of her entry fee.

The last weekend of each month members of the public come to see the youthful garden and even have a picnic in the shade, accompanied by many a bird song.

The front garden is a set of rooms defined by recycled material found on the property and the general area. Out the back, on the south side, is a paddock with a small dam where Heather's 50 chickens, ducks and geese roam when the garden is closed. This area is still in design phase and provides an insight into the original landscape. On the west side of the house is a large organic vegetable section.

The appeal of the gardens is topped off by two ageing – but still noble – white Maremma, Princeton and Penelope, who have been part of the family since they were pups. These dignified dogs protect the poultry flocks and charm visitors with their meet and greet routine. When visitors are less comfortable around furry friends, the regal pair are put inside the house, still keeping a watchful eye through the windows.

Open Gardens are not so common in the hotter country areas of our state so this early and brave endeavour in Skipton is especially noteworthy. Fresh eggs and home propagated plants can also be purchased.

Heatherlea Cottage, 63 Montgomery Street, Skipton is open 10am-4pm the last Saturday and Sunday of each month

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