



SEEDS OF INSPIRATION

Living in London and yearning for green pastures, Australian journalist **Lindy Sinclair** embarked on a garden project that has brought her satisfaction in spades.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARLA COULSON



About 200km inland from Marseilles, France, this centuries-old former farm is a haven for London-based Australian Lindy Sinclair (pictured opposite).



Seven years ago, I was a journalist working in England and yearning for some land to establish my own garden. After a long search, my husband David and I found what we were looking for... in another country. Our 6.9ha mountainside farm is in the Ardèche region in the south-east of France. It's a property that dates back to the 1650s, and one that started life as a *magnanerie* (a silkworm farm) – yet for the past 250 years much of the land has been devoted to chestnut production.

The steep, rocky site, which is terraced with traditional dry-stone walls, offers dramatic views towards the Cevennes. As a working farm the emphasis had been on the edible; it had fruit and nut trees galore, a vegetable garden, but few flowers or shrubs.

The current garden is a work-in-progress: we've spent seven years cutting back brambles, rebuilding walls, landscaping, planting and growing interesting flowers and vegetables. Yet now our labour has started to show results.

Drought-tolerant gardening is no mystery to Australians, but here climate extremes present a challenge. This is a Mediterranean garden adapted to long periods of summer heat and drought, but winter temperatures can fall to -18°C, which limits the planting options.

I made numerous mistakes at first, but success finally came through long discussions with my friend, garden designer Andrew >



The stalwarts of this dry garden – rosemary, santolina, nepeta and cistus – provide a permanent structure and are enlivened by iris and lavender in their seasons. French lavender flowers in early spring, followed by English lavender. In good years, deadheading the French lavender gives it a second flowering. Santolina flowers are cut back just as they flower to stop the shrubs becoming top heavy and collapsing. **OPPOSITE TOP** A dining table is set under a canopy of grapevines, which provide shade in summer. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** The former silk-weaving barn has been converted into guest accommodation.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
 The hammock beside the pool is a lovely spot to take time out after a busy day of gardening. The temperature here can reach 35°C, so the pool comes in handy. Ulysse, "the mighty lawnmower", borrowed from a neighbour's riding stables. Handmade chestnut frames in the potager. Climbing beans, cucumbers, zucchini, sweet peas and nasturtiums scramble over the top to provide shade for the lettuce planted underneath. **OPPOSITE TOP** The potting shed. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Lindy harvesting vegies in the 100m² potager.



◀ Wilkie, and advice gleaned from a French plantsman, Olivier Filippi, whose ideas on soil preparation and watering techniques provided inspirational solutions, as did plants from his nursery. In his book, *The Dry Gardening Handbook*, Filippi recommends watering each plant copiously just once a fortnight for just the first year, to establish deep roots. Subsequently, you never water again. And it works.

Working in London but gardening in France is not as mad as it sounds. With a bit of creative commuting, you can reach the south of France in six hours by train. Every month, I travel to the farm for two weeks and spend long summer holidays gardening, growing fruit and vegetables, and making jams, preserves and cordials.

To save money, I have learned how to take hundreds of cuttings, and grow all my vegetables and flowers from seed. My potting shed was once home to the chooks, but I took it for myself, rebuilding it with reclaimed windows and doors. The many windows and a polycarbonate roof allow plenty of light for seed sowing and keeps the temperature warm enough for it to double as a greenhouse. I am training Virginia creeper over the roof so it can provide necessary but dappled shade in summer. Add tools, a chaise longue, a cat and a library and it is a gardener's paradise.

To follow the story, visit my blog at www.fruitfulresearch.com.

