

## **The Amateur Gardener (1903)**

**By Banjo Patterson**

The first step in amateur gardening is to sit down and consider what good you are going to get by it. If you are only a tenant by the month, as most people are, it is obviously not of much use for you to plant a fruit orchard or an avenue of oak trees. What you want is something that will grow quickly, and will stand transplanting, for when you move it would be a sin to leave behind you the plants on which you have spent so much labour and so much patent manure.

We knew a man once who was a bookmaker by trade -- and a Leger bookmaker at that -- but had a passion for horses and flowers. When he "had a big win", as he occasionally did, it was his custom to have movable wooden stables, built on skids, put up in the yard, and to have tons of the best soil that money could buy carted into the garden of the premises which he was occupying.

Then he would keep splendid horses, and grow rare roses and show-bench chrysanthemums. His landlord passing by would see the garden in a blaze of colour, and promise himself to raise the bookmaker's rent next quarter day.

However, when the bookmaker "took the knock", as he invariably did at least twice a year, it was his pleasing custom to move without giving notice. He would hitch two cart-horses to the stables, and haul them right away at night. He would not only dig up the roses, trees, and chrysanthemums he had planted, but would also cart away the soil he had brought in; in fact, he used to shift the garden bodily. He had one garden that he shifted to nearly every suburb in Sydney; and he always argued that the change of air was invaluable for chrysanthemums.

Being determined, then, to go in for gardening on common-sense principles, and having decided on the shrubs you mean to grow, the next consideration is your chance of growing them.

If your neighbour keeps game fowls, it may be taken for granted that before long they will pay you a visit, and you will see the rooster scratching your pot plants out by the roots as if they were so much straw, just to make a nice place to lie down and fluff the dust over himself. Goats will also stray in from the street, and bite the young shoots off, selecting the most valuable plants with a discrimination that would do credit to a professional gardener.

It is therefore useless to think of growing delicate or squeamish plants. Most amateur gardeners maintain a lifelong struggle against the devices of Nature; but when the forces of man and the forces of Nature come into conflict Nature wins every time. Nature has decreed that certain plants shall be hardy, and therefore suitable to suburban amateur gardeners; the suburban amateur gardener persists in trying to grow quite other plants, and in despising those marked out by Nature for his use. It is to correct this tendency that this article is written.

The greatest standby to the amateur gardener should undoubtedly be the blue-flowered shrub known as "plumbago". This homely but hardy plant will grow anywhere. It naturally prefers a good soil, and a sufficient rainfall, but if need be it will worry along without either. Fowls cannot scratch it up, and even the goat turns away dismayed from its hard-featured branches. The flower is not strikingly beautiful nor ravishingly scented, but it flowers nine months out of the year; smothered with street dust and scorched by the summer sun, you will find that faithful old plumbago plugging along undismayed. A plant like this should be encouraged -- but the misguided amateur gardener as a rule despises it.

The plant known as the churchyard geranium is also one marked out by Providence for the amateur; so is Cosmea, which comes up year after year where once planted. In creepers, bignonia and lantana will hold their own under difficulties perhaps as well as any that can be found. In trees the Port Jackson fig is a patriotic one to grow. It is a fine plant to provide exercise, as it sheds its leaves unsparingly, and requires the whole garden to be swept up every day.

Your aim as a student of Nature should be to encourage the survival of the fittest. There is a grass called nut grass, and another called Parramatta grass, either of which holds its own against anything living or dead. The average gardening manual gives you recipes for destroying these. Why should you destroy them in favour of a sickly plant that needs constant attention? No. The Parramatta grass is the selected of Nature, and who are you to interfere with Nature?

Having decided to go in for strong, simple plants that will hold their own, and a bit over, you must get your implements of husbandry.

The spade is the first thing, but the average ironmonger will show you an unwieldy weapon only meant to be used by navvies. Don't buy it. Get a small spade, about half-size -- it is nice and light and doesn't tire the wrist, and with it you can make a good display of enthusiasm, and earn the hypocritical admiration of your wife. After digging for half-an-hour or so, get her to rub your back with any of the backache cures. From that moment you will have no further need for the spade.

A barrow is about the only other thing needed; anyhow, it is almost a necessity for wheeling cases of whisky up to the house. A rake is useful when your terrier dog has bailed up a cat, and will not attack it until the cat is made to run.

Talking of terrier dogs, an acquaintance of ours has a dog that does all his gardening. The dog is a small elderly terrier with a failing memory. As soon as the terrier has planted a bone in the garden the owner slips over, digs it up and takes it away. When that terrier goes back and finds the bone gone, he distrusts his memory, and begins to think that perhaps he has made a mistake, and has dug in the wrong place; so he sets to work, and digs patiently all over the garden, turning over acres of soil in the course of his search. This saves his master a lot of backache.

The sensible amateur gardener, then, will not attempt to fight with Nature but will fall in with her views. What more pleasant than to get out of bed at 11.30 on a Sunday morning; to look out of

your window at a lawn waving with the feathery plumes of Parramatta grass, and to see beyond it the churchyard geranium flourishing side by side with the plumbago and the Port Jackson fig?

The garden gate blows open, and the local commando of goats, headed by an aged and fragrant patriarch, locally known as De Wet, rushes in; but their teeth will barely bite through the wiry stalks of the Parramatta grass, and the plumbago and the figtree fail to attract them, and before long they stand on one another's shoulders, scale the fence, and disappear into the next-door garden, where a fanatic is trying to grow show roses.

After the last goat has scaled your neighbour's fence, and only De Wet is left, your little dog discovers him. De Wet beats a hurried retreat, apparently at full speed, with the dog exactly one foot behind him in frantic pursuit. We say apparently at full speed, because experience has taught that De Wet can run as fast as a greyhound when he likes; but he never exerts himself to go faster than is necessary to keep just in front of whatever dog is after him.

Hearing the scrimmage, your neighbour comes on to his verandah, and sees the chase going down the street.

"Ha! that wretched old De Wet again!" he says. "Small hope your dog has of catching him! Why don't you get a garden gate like mine, so that he won't get in?"

"No; he can't get in at your gate," is the reply; "but I think his commando are in your back garden now."

Then follows a frantic rush. Your neighbour falls downstairs in his haste, and the commando, after stopping to bite some priceless pot plants of your neighbour's as they come out, skips easily back over the fence and through your gate into the street again.

If a horse gets in his hoofs make no impression on the firm turf of the Parramatta grass, and you get quite a hearty laugh by dropping a chair on him from the first-floor window.

The game fowls of your other neighbour come fluttering into your garden, and scratch and chuckle and fluff themselves under your plumbago bush; but you don't worry. Why should you? They can't hurt it; and, besides, you know that the small black hen and the big yellow one, who have disappeared from the throng, are even now laying their daily egg for you behind the thickest bush.

Your little dog rushes frantically up and down the front bed of your garden, barking and racing, and tearing up the ground, because his rival little dog, who lives down the street, is going past with his master, and each pretends that he wants to be at the other -- as they have pretended every day for the past three years. The performance he is going through doesn't disturb you. Why should it? By following the directions in this article you have selected plants he cannot hurt.

After breakfasting at noon, you stroll out, and, perhaps, smooth with your foot, or with your spade, the inequalities made by the hens; you gather up casually the eggs they have laid; you whistle to your little dog, and go out for a stroll with a light heart.