



Photograph by Claire Tanács.

The vista along the former entrance driveway into the gardens at Banongill.

# H&G gardens

**SENSORY EXPERIENCES**  
Soak up the springtime splendour of historic Banongill garden. Then, step into chef Peter Gilmore's vegetable garden to glimpse the home-grown gems behind his world-class dishes.



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In spring, massed daffodils burst into bloom beneath the early-flowering prunus in the wild garden alongside Mt Emu Creek.

## LIVING COLOUR

Every spring, this property in western Victoria comes alive as thousands of daffodils dance at the feet of mighty river red gums.

STORY CHRISTINE REID | PHOTOGRAPHY CLAIRE TANÁCS



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**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** The north-facing front of the homestead. A view across the bluestone terraces to the old orchard and greenhouse. The driveway is strewn with fallen blooms from the flowering gums (*Corymbia ficifolia*). Irises in the sunlight. A classical urn helps set the scene in the rose garden. **OPPOSITE TOP** Sue Gull with corgi Miss Bobbi among the terraced gardens. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** The blue spires of the grape hyacinths are a colourful contrast to the daffodils.

The five-kilometre-long driveway at Banongill Station winds through native bush and windbreaks of sugar gums before it dips down to a crossing over Mt Emu Creek and terminates in an elegant sheltered courtyard. Along the way, signs point to the woolshed, paddocks, outbuildings and cottages that make up this renowned 7000ha sheep and cattle station, established in Victoria's Western District in the 1850s.

But there are no signs to tell you that Banongill is a beautiful historic garden and if you happen to visit in spring, you will be blown away, not by the prevailing south-westerly wind, but by the incredible south of the creek, which has been in existence since Charles Fairbairn's time and it thrives without attention.

The house and garden are kept in pristine condition, despite challenges from nature. "The floods of September 2010 and January 2011 were devastating," Sue says. "Mt Emu Creek became a swiftly flowing river. This is hard to believe, looking at the languid creek, until I notice an old bathhouse, located several metres above the creek, which bears a floodmark that is above average

landscape around the house, which features a rose garden, a wisteria-draped pergola and extensive stone terraces. The other is an informal area along the banks of the creek, affectionately called the 'wild garden' by successive owners.

The current owners, Sue and Stewart Gull, who bought the property six years ago, are well aware of the property's revered status among gardeners and are nurturing it for future generations. "Over the decades many people have lived at Banongill; there are nine houses on the property. And every now and then in spring, we have an open garden because people love to come back and visit," says Sue.

Of Banongill's owners, the most influential was the Fairbairn family, two generations of whom lived here from 1897 to 1975, starting with Charles Fairbairn who, in the early 20th century extended the house and grounds. >



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### Dabbling in daffodils

Daffodils have a long history at Banongill. Charles Fairbairn's son, Charles, and his wife Irene, developed a keen interest in daffodils, aiming to perfect pink, red and yellow varieties by cross breeding. Charles and Irene were respected growers, hybridisers and show judges in Australia and overseas. Between the wars, they built a series of bluestone terraces at Banongill to showcase the individual daffodils they had bred, establishing this property as one of Australia's premier daffodil gardens.

< Garden historians believe that William Guilfoyle, the architect of Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens, designed the front garden. The vast lawn sweeping from the front of the house down to the creek is characteristic of his style, as are several palms on the lawn. There is an uninterrupted view across the lawn to the paddocks beyond. Charles' son - also named Charles - inherited the property and his father's love of the garden. Charles and his wife Irene were avid breeders and hybridisers of daffodils and they created numerous cultivars.

Over the decades, the daffodils have multiplied and naturalised and, just like favourite relatives, they return year after year.

The garden surrounding the house has retained its Edwardian character, especially in its scale and proportions. There's the rose garden to the east, beds filled with hellebores and lilies, a wisteria-draped pergola adjacent to the lawn and a croquet lawn at its rear. Colour is the critical element blending house and garden in a picture of harmony. The terracotta shade used on the house >

A wide view of the stone terraces that sit to the east of the lawn. This is where Charles and Irene Fairbairn bred their daffodils in the 1920s and '30s. Many of their plantings remain in the garden.



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The 'wild garden' is a counterpoint to the immaculate house garden. The grass is allowed to grow and the area is dotted with crabapples and old fruit trees.

< is found in the paths made of dusty-red local ironstone; the rough dark-green foliage of escallonia hedges is reflected in the home's shutters, on the paintwork on the gardeners' shed and again in the little bathing hut by the creek.

The 'wild garden' is a counterpoint to the immaculate house garden. Here, the grass is allowed to grow and the area is dotted with crabapples and old fruit trees. This part of the garden has been in existence since Charles Fairbairn's time and it thrives without attention.

The house and garden are kept in pristine condition, despite challenges from nature. "The floods of September 2010 and January 2011 were devastating," Sue says. "Mt Emu Creek became a swiftly flowing river. This is hard to believe, looking at the languid creek, until I notice an old bathhouse, located several metres above the creek, which bears a floodmark that is above average

adult head height. "The force of the water was incredible. Somewhere downstream is an entire outdoor setting," says Sue.

"The predators seem to have loved the effect of the rain, too. Possums and foxes have multiplied. After the second flood, we removed 100 trailer loads of rubbish; for weeks, it was too wet to get in equipment to start cleaning up."

The floods changed the creek's banks, stripping away dead trees and decades of accumulated debris. This has had an unexpected upside: "In many ways, the vistas through the garden are better now," says Sue. "And, even though the wild garden was a mess, the daffodils came back last spring with renewed vigour."

In spring, the drama lies in the colour of the daffodils and the unforgettable sight of great drifts of them beneath the river red gums. Ask to this the blossoms of the many fruit trees and springtime at Banongill is a dream. **H&G**

On the walkway next to the lawn, standard hornbeams tower over gazanias and irises. Visitors pass through a clipped cypress archway to reach the elevated terraces. **OPPOSITE** The comparatively relaxed 'wild garden'.