

GARDENS

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Photography: Claire Takacs

Withycombe, in the NSW Blue Mountains, was once the childhood holiday home of author Patrick White and has flourished in the hands of Sydney garden designer Barbara Landsberg. Tall Bhutan cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*) lead the way into this garden of grace and beauty.

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MOUNTAIN HEIR

Taking cues from the past, a garden designer has reinvigorated one of the Blue Mountains' most famous landmarks.

STORY: ANDREA JONES ✦ PHOTOGRAPHY: CLAIRE TAKACS

A sharp wind whips through the trees at Withycombe in the NSW Blue Mountains, shaking a shower of red and ochre leaves from the trees and thickening the autumnal carpet below.

"I love the crisp air and the smell of the leaves on the ground. The real romance of a country home comes out in autumn," says owner and garden designer Barbara Landsberg of her magical weekend retreat at Mt Wilson, one of the region's northernmost peaks. The historical property is well known as an elegant former bed and breakfast. It is also legendary among students of Australian literature as the childhood

holiday home of author and Nobel Prize in Literature winner, Patrick White. Barbara and her husband Merrick Howes bought the property a decade ago and it is now a magnificent garden estate, the temperate pocket supporting a European-style garden thick with chestnuts, cedars, redwoods, oaks, azaleas, rhododendrons and magnolia.

Barbara fondly recalls her first visit to Withycombe one windwept winter's night more than 25 years ago. Her former flatmate knew the owners and urged Barbara to drive up from Sydney in her battered old car. "I was terrified the car wouldn't make it," she says. "When we arrived, I could see the lights

of the house shining through the trees. And, when the door opened, the house was warm, with the smell of great food. It felt just like coming home."

Ever since, Barbara has shared an intense bond with Withycombe, becoming good friends with the previous owners, Helen and Gary Ghent. When the Ghents decided to sell in 2009, they offered it to Barbara and Merrick, who've made Withycombe their weekend bolthole.

"The vision we had for this place was as a retreat, a gathering place for family and friends, where everybody's welcome. Withycombe has a big heart. That's why we fell in love with it," says Barbara. >

In front of the homestead Barbara has created a seasonal garden, framed here by a pair of *Juniperus virginiana*. In spring, tulips fill the spaces between the English box. In summer, the area shows roses, peonies, wisteria, phloxes and salvia. With autumn comes flowering liriope and chrysanthemum and in winter hellebores, dwarf camellia and *Leucocorym aestivum*.

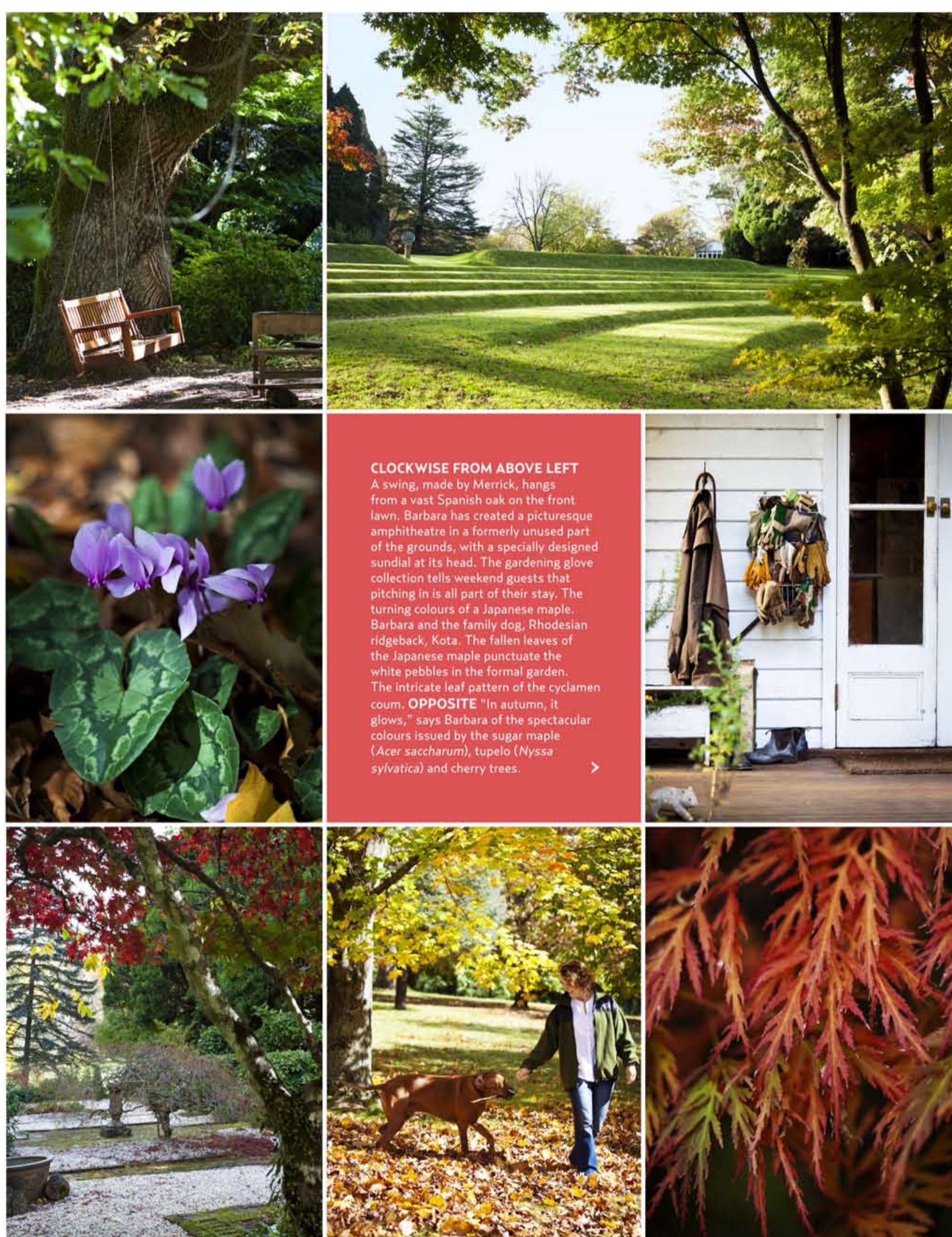
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"I LOVE THE CRISP AIR AND THE SMELL OF THE LEAVES ON THE GROUND. THE REAL ROMANCE OF A COUNTRY HOME COMES OUT IN AUTUMN." BARBARA

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT A swing, made by Merrick, hangs from a vast Spanish oak on the front lawn. Barbara has created a picturesque amphitheatre in a formerly unused part of the grounds, with a specially designed sundial at its head. The gardening glove collection tells weekend guests that pitching in is all part of their stay. The turning colours of a Japanese maple, Barbara and the family dog, Rhodesian ridgeback, Kota. The fallen leaves of the Japanese maple punctuate the white pebbles in the formal garden. The intricate leaf pattern of the cyclamen corm. OPPOSITE In autumn, it glows," says Barbara of the spectacular colours issued by the sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*) and cherry trees. >

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< Withycombe had quite a hold on Patrick White too: he spent a great deal of time here, and roaming the surrounding terrain. In his book, *Flaws in the Glass*, White recalls Mt Wilson as "gullies crackling with smoky silence, rocks threatening to explode, pools so cold that the breath was cut off inside your ribs..."

Barbara's parents run the property and live in a charming cottage on the grounds, while her children, Yasmin, 18, and Daniel, 16, share a vast dorm above the garage.

Barbara and Merrick lived in the UK for the first few years after buying Withycombe so it was her parents, Joe and Diana Landsberg, who did the early work on the garden, directed from afar.

"They spent their first four years here with a chainsaw," she says. They hacked out overgrown rhododendrons that were crowding the front lawn, cleared paths and removed thickets and hedges to allow sunlight into the lawn. In the process they made wonderful

discoveries – a large, circular paved area outside the front door, and a walled meditation garden, which Barbara has brought back to life.

"We uncovered the bones of the old garden under years of overgrown shrubberies and weeds," says Barbara. "We pruned shrubs down, so they were no longer leggy and lax."

Barbara has enormous appreciation for the landscape's historical treasures... the century-old Spanish oak that bows its vast limbs across the front lawn and the show-stopping *Magnolia grandiflora*, also 100, that produces great challenges of flowers with the most wonderful fragrance."

Barbara and a team of horticulturists have identified 70 species of trees in the garden. "We have used that to guide us in the thousands of new plants we have planted; we have replaced species of rhododendrons, camellia and magnolia with the same or similar. "Wisteria and bulbs love it here... Hellebores and jasmine, abelia, still ...

bulbs, particularly daffodils and jonquils, cherry tree for spring blossom, and buxus – English and Japanese box hedges, balls and topiary – all thrive.

"In the new areas of the garden, I have planted new species of the same plants found in the old parts, to keep the garden cohesive and harmonious."

Prized among the old areas are the woodlands, which are home to many of the garden's oldest trees, leading to an original ornamental pond. Here, Barbara is reintroducing the native beowang tree ferns the property was originally named after. (Patrick White's mother Ruth ripped out all 700 of them and gave the property her maiden name, Withycombe.)

"This garden has the bones of a grand old garden that's now been allowed to become one," says Barbara. "It's almost like it's breathing again. I think it knows it's being loved." **H&G** Landsberg Garden Design, Bronte, NSW; (02) 9387 1155 or www.landsberggardens.com.au.

Black and white photograph of the front lawn of Withycombe circa 1919 (then known as Browning) courtesy of the Mt Wilson & Mt Irvine Historical Society.



Revival mission

Barbara Landsberg shares advice on restoring a historical garden:

- ✦ Sit with it for a year and get to know it through all the seasons.
- ✦ Create an overall plan for the garden. Look at it as a whole and then analyse each section as part of the big picture.
- ✦ See what's performing in other gardens in the neighbourhood. It's a guide to what's going to work for you.
- ✦ Question whether plants really contribute and don't be afraid to cut them out or remove them.

Tourists regularly stop to admire the imposing gates Barbara designed. They were made by local artist Henryk Topolnicki. OPPOSITE FROM LEFT The meditation garden, where a water bowl catches the colours of the sun. The woodland connects the seasonal garden to the amphitheatre.

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