



Living on the edge

Despite the immense challenges that come with its location, **Julia Weston** has managed to create a truly gorgeous garden at Seaview Farm near St Marys

words **JENNIFER STACKHOUSE** photography **AMANDA DUCKER**

As I drove up the long, winding gravel road through the forest towards Seaview Farm, I seriously doubted the sat nav's sense of direction. Surely there wasn't a fabulous garden here. I even doubted the promised sea view. There was no sign of water, no level land amid the dense stands of bushland, the soil didn't look much chop and the ocean was nowhere to be seen.

I persevered and it paid off when I finally reached a level spot with a long driveway, inviting stonewalls and the hint of a garden beyond. Julia Weston was there to welcome me.

"Let's start at the front," she said, leading me along a path through shrubs. And there it was: a vast panorama of a view up the East Coast and across the Blue Tiers. It was breathtaking.

The property clings to a level site on the side of the mountain I'd toiled up from St Marys, overlooked by the pinnacles of the volcanic peaks known as South and North Sister. Until 1972, Seaview Farm was a dairy farm. Today, a cluster of outbuildings, an old farm cottage, circa 1895, and dairy surround the original house, which has been home for Julia and husband Frank for 20 years.

This is gardening on the edge. Not just the edge of a forest-clad mountain but on the edge of every passing weather event. That panoramic view comes with a steep price as the property is open to buffeting winds from every direction. Owners have been trying to create shelter here for more than a century when the original settlers planted a row of cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) to shelter the homestead. These trees are now enormous and nearing the end

of their lives. Several have had to be taken down since the couple arrived, a task they describe as massive.

"There was no garden here before I came," Julia says, "just the cypress hedges, some other beautiful old trees, including three walnuts, lots of weeds and the accumulated rubbish of an old farm."

There were no reliable hot-water systems, as well as limited power with all buildings in need of considerable attention.

Julia says to plant a garden on this daunting site has meant first establishing shelter plantings (not cypress, she hastens to add), and embankments of native shrubs and trees along with structures such as her hand-built stonewalls and wooden fences. Without the shelter, she says, plants can literally blow out of the ground and, in some cases, still do.

The routine for starting a new area is to plant a mixture of trees and shrubs to form a shelter-belt and surround them with newspaper and woodchips to keep the weeds at bay. Any weeds that do grow are kept down with regular hoeing. Ground-cover plants such as violets are encouraged to spread.

Twenty years later, the garden sports borders of rhododendron, protea, waratah and a silver tree (*Leucadendron argenteum*). There are lush green lawns, iris, azaleas and hellebores with massed bulbs under deciduous trees. On the northern side, where the view is the centrepiece and the winds are fierce, Julia has created a sunken herb and rose garden that traps the sun and keeps the plants a little below the wind.

As well as the other large trees there is also a vast box tree planted

about 1888. Julia says she can be sure of the date as a descendant of the original family, the Lohreys, had passed on a lot of the early history. After more than 100 years of unfettered growth, the tree had formed a large amorphous shape. About 10 years ago, Julia decided to sculpt it and, with some brave snips of her secateurs, set about cloud pruning. The result is a striking living artwork of gnarled stems in eye-catching sinuous shapes, each topped with balls of green leaves.

"My motivation grew from discovering the beautiful and unique formation of the trunks and branches, some of which had gone underground to form the surrounding hedge," Julia says. "It was only after I began that I discovered this style of pruning is called Japanese cloud pruning."

It is not only the prevailing winds that make this an extreme site. Although the volcanic soil is rich in some minerals, it is deficient in others. "There is," Frank says, "no such thing as perfect soil."

This was a huge challenge for the garden and farm beyond. Frank believes getting the soil right is the key, and Julia echoes this sentiment. Getting the soil right has enabled them to transform the property into a mixed farm that produces chemical-free beef, lamb and blueberries.

Frank has studied and practised biological farming for about 14 years and is concerned about the health and mineral content of soils. For Frank, healthy soil equals healthy plants and animals, which equals healthy humans.

He carries out soil tests throughout the 130ha farm as well as



GREEN OASIS: Clockwise from opposite page, only with established windbreaks can Julia Weston plant new areas; the valley views are framed by sheltering trees; the sprawling box hedge was planted about 1885 and Julia has cloud-pruned it; waratah is one of many special plants; Julia and Frank with two of their dogs, Topaz, right, and Sapphire; and the stunning view north across the sunken garden to the sea.



leaf analyses on the blueberries to show what balance of nutrients is required. This practice also encourages the growth of micro-organisms that help make soil nutrients more available to the plants.

"The program of enriching the soil has been so successful that the blueberries produce large, sweet fruit, which have now achieved a Brix or sugar level of 30-plus when 12 is considered good," Julia says. "The garden soil is nurtured in the same way as the rest of the farm, with foliar sprays, minerals and leaf mulch, while the lawns get additional calcium."

The old cottage and dairy have been transformed into self-catering farm-stay accommodation that also plays home to seasonal workers during blueberry picking time and the occasional "Wwoofer".

Wwoofers - Willing Workers on Organic Farms - are part of an international movement of people who travel and barter their labour for accommodation and meals. Julia and Frank say they have found the help of Wwoofers invaluable, and enjoy teaching visiting Wwoofers about their approach to living and farming organically and sustainably. In return, they have provided Julia and Frank with, as she says, "children all over the world - many of whom keep in regular contact".

This is all a far cry from Julia's career in social work at the Family Court, where she was a counsellor for 19 years, while living in Launceston and raising four sons. Even in the toughest times, however, gardening was always there.

She attributes her passion for gardening to childhood influences and says that elements of her family's garden have resurfaced at Seaview Farm.

"My love of gardening began before I was five, when I lived with my parents and siblings on my grandfather's beautiful property in Yorkshire in the UK," Julia says. "It was a huge detached stone house and the approach was a long, rhododendron-lined drive. It had a small lake, smaller stone cottages and a sunken garden with summer house and pond made by my father, grandfather and uncle.

"This must have been ingrained into my memory as any garden I have made since contains similar elements. Likewise, my love of rocks and stone walls is a Yorkshire heritage."

Whether the passion is in her blood, or she has simply developed a desire to tame the wild elements, Julia has created a garden oasis in a near-impossible location. ●

To find out more about Seaview Farm, or to book a farm stay, visit seaviewfarm.net

MY MOTIVATION GREW FROM DISCOVERING THE BEAUTIFUL AND UNIQUE FORMATION OF THE TRUNKS AND BRANCHES

