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A brand new adventure

Life threw Barbara a curve ball, but recreating a famous French garden helped her adjust and thrive

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Pictures: **Renae Droop/Halcyon**

If you asked Barbara Wickes five years ago if she would ever downsize to a smaller property the answer would have been an emphatic ‘no’. The passionate gardener was living in a five-bedroom French Provincial-style home on a leafy acre-and-a-half in Queensland’s Buderim, a home she’d lived in for some 22 years and where she regularly opened her Monet-inspired garden to

the public as part of the Open Gardens scheme.

Designed in a picturesque cottage style – and successfully thriving, despite the subtropical heat of the Sunshine Coast – it was often compared to the Giverny garden in France, resplendent with a natural creek that filled a lily-covered lake, and complete with a small bridge and sailboat at the edge. Tended with love and surrounded by established trees, its dry stone walls, gravel paths, willowy plants and soft-pastel toned perennials were Barbara’s pride and joy, especially as cottage gardens and

the Queensland climate don’t usually go hand-in-hand. But Barbara thought differently and has championed the style to prominence in the tropical state.

Her love of cottage gardens is not without journey, having grown up in South Australia (with its Mediterranean climate) where she met husband Rex, before living in cool-climate Victoria, then Wellington, New Zealand, before moving to Brisbane, and later Buderim, where she adapted the cottage style to the subtropics. But as is so often the case, life had plans for

Barbara and they did not involve a sprawling cottage garden. What they did involve, however, was moving into an over 50s lifestyle estate meaning a farewell to her 5500sqm property to a brand new home on a mere 500sqm.

“It’s not something I would have thought I would have done, but I’m quite happy,” says Barbara, 77, who moved into B by Halcyon, a gated community when her husband Rex’s health started to deteriorate. There’s been a significant adjustment period but Barbara has



Barbara’s previous large-scale cottage garden at Buderim had been compared to Monet’s garden at Giverny, France.



surprised herself by adapting quickly, thanks, in part to her love of creating and tending to her garden, an adventure she has begun yet again, only this time with a new look and feel.

LIFESTYLE CHOICES

But first, a look at over 50s lifestyle estates, or gated community villages aimed at retirees and those nearing retirement such as the one Barbara and Rex are now residing in. These are an increasing trend as developers target an age bracket where many are still in full-time employment, and others have already settled into a leisurely low-maintenance lifestyle.

An Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute survey, commissioned in late 2021 found 26 per cent of Australians over the age of 55 had downsized their homes and a further 29 per cent were considering it in the future.

The 2021 Federal budget encouraged retirement-aged citizens to downsize from the family home to free up housing stock availability by extending access to the superannuation contribution scheme to those aged from 60 (previously 65), from July 1, 2022.

While financial reasons, pre- and during Covid, have been driving the downsizing moves by retirees, so too has the attraction of a new lifestyle and community. Future-proofed designer homes with gardens, as well as resort-like facilities, including pools, spas, and a bar with happy hour are part of the allure.

Staying within the local area, being close the family and friends, and wanting less maintenance of a smaller property were all influences that made sense, says Barbara.

While she would have happily stayed at their

vast property, Rex had been looking into downsizing for years when the lifestyle development, 'just over the other side of Buderim mountain', was announced.

"My husband had back issues and it reached a point when he couldn't do any garden work any more and the penny dropped," says Barbara. Wasting no time, they were among the first to sign up. "That's something that as you get older, you have friends here and you don't want to move. It's about the community."

Of course, with gardening being such a big part of her life, signing up for a new estate meant certain things were clear, like choosing a block that was big enough to establish a garden and one with the right aspect to do so. Barbara also has plans to share her expertise and be involved in the communal gardens at Halcyon once the development nears completion.

"Because I'm a gardener I couldn't be here if it wasn't for the block, it's a 500sqm block, the house was a special and we've got everything here that we need and we treasure.

"It became home very, very quickly," she says. (After we moved in) it took a month or so to get the garden started, but I took about 300 plants with me, potting up for about a year before we left our previous home. I have a shade house and a cedar garden shed too."

'I took about 300 plants with me, potting up for about a year'

SMALL GARDEN SUCCESS

Barbara acknowledges many people wouldn't think you could create such a busy cottage garden within a highly regulated estate, and while front gardens are kept uniform, she had free rein of the backyard where she has recreated her previous Monet-style garden on a smaller scale.

Rambling gravel paths, pastel colours and perennials such as salvias, asters, society garlic and daylilies flourish filling every inch of her 500sqm, together with heritage tea and China roses 'that don't mind humidity', even camellia and hydrangeas.

Dwarf grasses, edible herbs and veggies, and a weeping tropical birch have been carefully added although Barbara is still waiting to see if it overgrows the available space.

She says a more regular prune of the garden is an upkeep she has had to stay on top of, especially after the drenching rain in recent months.

"I'm looking at things that are getting a bit big, and talking to the landscaper here, to dig it up, pot it and put it in the community garden."

Another open garden also is a possibility. "We'd love to open this up down the track, next October or maybe a year after this one."

Best tips for downsizing your garden

- Make a list of your favourite plants.
- Then be selective with what you pick and know what type of soil you have at the new property. Build the soil with organic matter and organic fertilisers – make sure the soil doesn't pack down and thus not absorb water.
- Consider compact forms or smaller growing versions of plants, veggies and herbs you love. In limited spaces, add plants in pots.
- Look for a garden with a good aspect.
- Consider the scale of the garden in advance, and plan it before you plant it.
- Pick shrubs with future pruning in mind. Source plants that can be hedged or trimmed to fit the space.
- Allocate space for storage, like a small shed or a shade house.
- Allow space for growing some edibles – raised garden beds are suitable.