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From little things **big things grow**

Glenys and Graham Matthews have transformed their Riverland patch from overgrown bushland to an exquisitely landscaped garden, which will once again be showcased as part of the Riverland Rose and Garden Festival in October this year.





Graham and Glenys Matthews were looking “for something to do” when they booked an appointment in 2017 to inspect their now home at Barmera, but they quickly fell in love with the Federation-style dwelling on the property, built in 2001.

Eight years on, and Graham and Glenys have created a diverse garden with plants ranging from natives to traditional English roses.

“We made an appointment to come and have a look and one of our twin girls came to look with us. She basically said, ‘Mum, this is your house,’ so that’s what we did,” says Graham, a semi-retired administration manager with a former large transport company.

The couple now live on their two-and-a-half-acre Barmera property with their African Grey parrot, Arnold, keeping them company and Glenys’s mother, Vi Johnson, who this year will celebrate her 97th birthday, living a kilometre down the road.

“Grandma Vi” has two green thumbs, obviously where Glenys acquired the passion, and has assisted the growth of the garden by supplying many plants along the way.

Graham says when they bought the house, the elderly couple who previously lived there had let the garden go. Native bushes and lavenders had taken over, so Graham and Glenys decided to start with a blank page,

Throughout the garden, there is also a wisteria arbour, an *Acer negundo* Sensation tree, Japanese box hedge, dahlias, hakeas, proteas, banksias, elkhorn ferns, bromeliads, star jasmine, clematis and expansive Madonna Kikuyu lawns



Glenys always tries to source plants locally, but she finds that some varieties are only available online.





Graham and Glenys love spending time in their garden, generally Graham will spend 15 hours gardening, while Glenys can work upwards of 30 hours keeping everything in tip top condition.

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bringing in a bobcat to clear the entire yard. They also put in a new irrigation system and brought in 80 tonnes of large stones to create different terrace levels.

"People who have come to look at the garden have said, 'How can you do all this in the time you have?', and basically, a good thing is to be able to start with a clean page, because then you can plan," says Graham.

Graham says he is responsible for most of the manual labour, while Glenys takes charge of sourcing plants. "Outside of construction time," Graham typically spends an average of 15 hours a week in the garden, and Glenys 30 hours per week. "Our problem is that we're so busy doing the gardening that we don't get time to sit in it," Glenys says.

Graham adds: "Glen and I, we've always worked together. We worked together even though we had jobs ... so we just sit and talk and, 'Oh, that'd be a good idea and let's do that'. I guess it was in our blood to a degree, to develop a garden, if that's the way you would put it." Glenys tells *SALIFE Gardens & Outdoor Living* that she tries to research before choosing plants, but there is a lot of trial and error finding out what grows well in the Riverland.

"When we find there's a particular type that doesn't grow well here, we'll look at other types that are similar to grow," she says.

These days, the garden is separated into different sections, which Graham and Glenys call "rooms", intersected by several pathways. You will also find numerous aviaries dotted throughout the garden.





From garden sculptural art to special spaces to sit, there are different dimensions to the garden. At every turn of the garden, you will find something unique, from wisteria arbour to hydrangeas, frangipanis, magnolias, camellias and more.

Prior to moving, the couple had been running their exotic bird business, Bimbimbi Birds, out of their previous property, with around 200 aviaries. Graham says he was sad to sell many of their birds when they moved and decided to put in 20 aviaries as a compromise.

"I couldn't live in town in suburbia and I couldn't do without my birds because it was affecting me a little bit, the fact I had to get rid of them all, so Glen agreed to put in a dozen aviaries in amongst the garden and I actually stretched that to 20 aviaries," he says.

You will also find a series of large sheds, where Graham keeps his classic car collection. At the front of the house is a formal/cottage style garden, landscaped to complement the Federation-style of the house. This room of the

garden includes plants such as Gold Bunny floribunda roses, salvias and miniature crepe myrtles.

A nearby "rose garden room" features a large velvet ash, as well as bearded irises and Crimson Spire Prunus. Another area at the back of the property, dubbed "the jungle", includes native trees, frangipanis, magnolias, camellias and gingers.

Graham and Glenys say they hope to one day transform this into a semi-tropical microclimate. Among the other highlights of the garden, there is an orchid house, a smaller fern house and an orchard where the couple grow dwarf and miniature stone and "pome" fruit trees.

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The garden is named after Nookamka Terrace, where Graham and Glenys live. Nookamka derives from the local Aboriginal word for Lake Bonney Riverland.



tree, Japanese box hedge, dahlias, hakeas, proteas, banksias, elkhorn ferns, bromeliads, star jasmine, clematis and expansive Madonna Kikuyu lawns.

One of the hardest challenges for Graham and Glenys has been the poor soil quality on the property, which they have broken up with gypsum and "a truckload" of pig manure applied every year.

"It hasn't been an easy task because we're actually on soil that is not very good," says Glenys, a retired school teacher and school librarian. "We brought in tonnes of red sand. We've got clay underneath, so quite often

we've had problems with clay and we've had to virtually re-establish a good growing base for a lot of the plants," says Glenys.

Graham and Glenys are hoping to finish a large pond, in time for the Riverland Rose and Garden Festival later this year, which will be home to fish and water lilies, with a wooden bridge across the causeway.

Every year since 2019 (except 2020), the couple has opened their garden to the public for the annual festival, raising around \$2000 for the Royal Flying Doctor Service last year.

"We had 580 people through our property last year, so it's a pretty big deal ... and as I said,

Glen does morning tea and Grandma's got a plant stand and we had some quilters here last year with a quilting display," says Graham.

"We did re-potting with the orchids as well, so we have put in a fair effort for the Rose and Garden Festival."

The 2025 Riverland Rose and Garden Festival runs from October 10-19. For more information see: riverlandrosesandgardens.com.au. 🛒