

Words Ben Kelly

Photographs Italo Vardaro

Riverland oasis

With the Riverland Rose and Garden Festival to showcase dozens of private home gardens later this year, the event's president Michelle Dominic invites *SALIFE* into her own magnificent oasis to discover how she has defied the drought.







The garden is my happy place. You can forget all your worries and woes, potter around and just tune out from everything else

“Gardening helps with my mental and physical health; it’s where I go to unwind, forget about the business of life and just be in the moment of what is around me – the sounds, the smells, the chatter of birds.”

So says Michelle Dominic, president of the Riverland Rose and Garden Festival. But Michelle wasn’t always a gardener; it was while growing up in Berri that she developed fond childhood memories of her grandma’s country garden.

“Grandma’s garden was in the town of Berri, where she made the most of the area around the house,” Michelle says. “The front garden was always flowering with different annuals all year-round, while the winter gladiolus were a stand out with their bright orange flowers. There were iceberg roses under-planted with violets and old-fashioned perennials.

“It was only once I was settled somewhere that I thought I would give gardening a crack. I loved my grandma’s garden, I used to love just sitting and walking around it without appreciating the amount of work and knowledge that goes into it.”

After growing up in Berri, Michelle moved to Adelaide to study

and work in dentistry, before returning to the Riverland where she married fellow Berri local Brian Dominic – a vineyard owner and real estate agent. Michelle then worked as a dental therapist treating children throughout the region.

For the past 32 years, Michelle and Brian have lived at the same property in the small town of Glossop, located between Berri and Barmera. When Michelle first came on the scene, there was no established garden – mostly just lawn and trees – and she had no experience as a gardener.

When putting in her first plants, Michelle sought advice from the local garden centre.

“That was back in about 1995. I really didn’t know too much about gardening and plants at that time. I knew what a lavender plant and a daisy bush looked like, but that was about it. I knew roses, but I didn’t know the different varieties,” says Michelle.

“I’ve also worked one day-a-week at The Earth Works garden centre here in Berri, on and off for about 15 years, so I’ve grown my knowledge base through working with some great colleagues there and applying it to the garden.”



Michelle Dominic particularly loves David Austin roses, and grows some beauties in her Riverland garden including this Princess Alexandra of Kent rose. **Opposite page** Pierre de Ronsard roses climb over the garden's entryway. **Opening pages** With their gorgeous papery bark, Michelle's river birch trees have proven more tolerant of the dry conditions than the more popular silver birch, which did not fare as well in her garden.



Left Michelle grew up in Berri where she developed fond childhood memories of her grandmother's garden, but it wasn't until settling in Glossop with her husband Brian that she started her own. **Opposite page** Old farm machinery is re-purposed as rustic garden features.

Gardening has become such a consuming passion that Michelle is now president of the Riverland Rose and Garden Festival. The 2025 festival will be held from October 10 to 19, seeing dozens of gardens opening throughout the region. Last year's festival saw 32 private Riverland gardens open their gates to the public, a bumper number for the festival's 30th anniversary.

"We go around knocking on peoples' doors, asking if they would like to participate. A lot of gardeners will say, 'I'm not quite ready, because we haven't quite finished working on an area'. But visitors appreciate viewing any garden, at any stage and understand the work that goes in behind the scenes," says Michelle.

During this year's festival, Michelle will showcase her and Brian's own property – an English-style country garden of just

under one acre (0.4 hectares), with a focus on David Austin roses. The garden is located on the couple's vineyard of about six hectares.

The garden, which is situated entirely in front of the house, is laid out into four garden rooms. There's a garden directly in front of the home, a sweeping horseshoe driveway and expanse of lawn, and gardens to the left and right. Many plants have been chosen for their ability to tolerate the Riverland's hot and dry summers.

The location can be challenging for gardening, particularly during drought, and over three decades Michelle has learnt how to best set up the garden for dry conditions.

"It'd be lovely if it could remember how to rain again. It's been very dry, and most times we do tend to be on the drier side, so irrigating is essential," says Michelle.



"Luckily, because we're on a farm, we're able to use the water that comes off the property. Otherwise, I couldn't afford to have a garden like I have here. It's imperative that we do mulch up here, and that we do apply some sort of cover to the soil, because otherwise water will quickly evaporate."

Pea straw is Michelle's preferred choice of mulch. She could easily access the leftover grape marc from the nearby wineries, but its dark colour means it is a magnet for the sun's heat, unlike the cooler pea straw.

It was years ago during a particularly bad drought that Michelle made some major changes to make the garden more water efficient. What was previously a large area of garden beds, Michelle transformed into a parkland of lawn and trees.

"It's become quite a lovely spot for wedding photos and our fundraising events. It's beautifully shaded at certain times of the day and just provides a really nice ambience," she says.

Michelle has also planted antique perennials, partly as a homage to her grandma's garden. But what is often of most interest to visitors are the pretty river birch trees: a less thirsty alternative to the silver birch.

"I always get asked about the river birches when people visit, because they look so lovely, and they've got an unusual paper

bark trunk. I had previously planted some silver birch and of course, they failed. Somehow, I came across this particular version of the birch and was told they'd fare better out here, so I decided to plant some. They've done really well," says Michelle.

Michelle is proud of what her garden has evolved into today and is looking forward to again sharing it with the public this October. In addition, she will also host a fundraising event for the Women's and Children's Hospital.

"People comment that it's quite a peaceful-feeling garden that you can just relax in. I think that's thanks to the mature trees, and then you've got the prettiness of the English-style cottage garden," she says.

"It's become a passion, and I find it to be a real stress release. It's my happy place. You can forget all your worries and woes, potter around and just tune out from everything else."

The best of Adelaide and South Australia
Subscribe to SA LIFE at salife.com.au