



In the old orchard at Ellerslie,  
massed daffodils flourish either  
side of the path to the creek.

Come spring, daffodils and other delights





GARDEN OF THE MONTH

# as good as gold

transform this well-worked, historic property into high-country heaven ►





Gardener  
Alison Miller

What's the style of  
the garden?

An informal garden, with  
rambling beds displaying  
roses, shrubs, specimen trees  
and massed spring bulbs.

What size is the garden?  
Approximately 1ha.

What's the soil like?  
Deep, black basalt, with red  
alluvial soils along the creek.

How long has it taken  
to make the garden?  
More than 30 years (and the  
large specimen trees were  
planted over 100 years ago).

Why is the garden  
so special?  
It has been a labour of love,  
and it builds on the work  
of previous generations.

What are your  
favourite plants?  
Daffodils, of course, fragrant  
wintersweet, and snowdrops.

When is the garden open?  
18–19 September 2004,  
10am–4.30pm. Ellerslie is at  
Watchbox Rd, Barfold (near  
Kyneton), Vic. Entry: \$5.

#### Climatic conditions

Place: Barfold, Vic.

#### Specific conditions:

Freezing winters; long, cold  
springs; hot, dry summers.

Most rainfall in July–August.



As you leave the historic gold town of Kyneton in the central Victorian Highlands, you come across the old road to Redesdale. Not much happens on that road these days. The Calder Highway soaks up the busy traffic, and there is scarcely a trace of the frenetic activity that would have greeted the traveller during the heady gold-rush days. Nowadays, local farmers often have the road to themselves—as well as some of the prettiest scenery in the country.

It is here, amid the lush, rolling hills and rich basalt soils, that the mighty Barfold Estate once stretched to the horizon. And it was from this estate that the property known as Ellerslie was carved when it was purchased in 1897, by the estate's coachman, Alexander Clark. Ellerslie became a grazing property and dairy, and the Clarks would set the cream in the old bluestone cottage—which still stands—before transporting it to the creamery at Barfold.

Clark's son, Dan, an enthusiastic plantsman, set to work planting magnificent cork oaks, deodar cedars, oaks, planes, poplars, spruces and a giant sequoia, which can still be seen today. Some may have come from the celebrated botanist Baron von Mueller, who helped populate the Kyneton Botanic Gardens with similar specimens at the turn of the century. Dan probably built the house near the banks of Pipers Creek, now inhabited by the Miller family.

When Graeme Miller's father purchased Ellerslie, in 1944, it was a working farm of

approximately 405ha on the banks of the swift-flowing Pipers Creek. The farmhouse was situated in a sheltered gully between the hills, and the gardens were fed from underground soaks. As a boy, Graeme helped his stepmother plant daffodil bulbs she had received as gifts from her friend, Evelyn Murray, who lived at nearby Langley Vale. Eve was a protégé of the noted rose-breeder Alister Clark of Bulla, near Tullamarine. Despite this pedigree, Graeme's knowledge of daffodils was highly suspect. As the locals will tell you, on at least one occasion he cooked the bulbs, thinking they were onions.

#### new beginnings

Graeme and his wife, Alison, took over Ellerslie in 1967 and continued to run it as a working property, with an old orchard full of apple and pear trees by the creek and a vegie garden beside it. But in 1985, their paradise was shattered. A heart attack rendered Graeme unable to work the farm. The property was subdivided and only the house block remained—about 162ha, including the extensive gardens, the old orchard and vegie patch, and the frontage to Pipers Creek. It was then that Graeme began to take a closer look at those daffodil bulbs.


With the keen assistance of Mrs Murray, he soon became a competitive grower and shower of daffodils at the local Kyneton Daffodil Show. Following the example of Mrs Murray and Alister Clark, he also began to breed new daffodil cultivars by crossing one cultivar with another. Soon, daffodils ►





*Narcissus 'Smasher', Magnolia  
soulangeana and M. stellata*





*Nourished by the moist  
conditions, daffodils soon  
popped up everywhere*

Creamy *Narcissus* 'Liberty Bells' captured through a fence in the old orchard. **Opposite page:** Jonquils mix elegantly with grape hyacinths near the little stone bridge.





The rolling hills of Ellerslie. Below: creamy-white daffodils thrive in the wet conditions below one of the watertanks.

## The air is fragrant with the scent of prunus blossom



◀ occupied the old orchard, the seedlings carefully laid out in rows and fanned each spring by the waving branches of ancient fruit trees, thick with frothy white blossom. Nourished by the moist conditions—not without human assistance—daffodils soon popped up along the creek, between mossy rocks and around the watertanks. Eventually, even the vegetable patch gave way to Graeme's own daffodil creations, which he and Alison tended delicately each year.

Graeme's first success was a white-and-pink trumpeted daffodil, named after their daughter, Sally. 'Helen Henderson' was a lovely white-petalled daffodil, with a fiery red cup, and 'Baby Clare'—named after their granddaughter—was another pristine white flower, with a delicate primrose cup.

In his retirement, Graeme liked nothing better than to travel overseas with Alison and visit the great gardens of Europe. It was there that he first saw how block plantings of a single colour of bulb could be so effective. He quickly reflected this idea in his own mass plantings along the broad brow of the hills stretching down towards Pipers Creek. Yellow daffodils were teamed with

others of the same colour, white with white, and massed bluebells and grape hyacinths sprung up in garden beds everywhere.

He was so impressed with the dry-stone walls in the north of England that he created his own stone bridge over a small rivulet at Ellerslie, built a four-walled enclosure for his croquet lawn and engaged local artisan Huntly Barton to build a stone entrance to the property. Near the little stone bridge, Graeme erected a low stone wall and underplanted it with 'Charity May', a rare kind of English daffodil. It is called a cyclamineus variety because it was bred from the rare Portuguese species *Narcissus cyclamineus*. Like the species, 'Charity May' has plenty of personality, with its rich gold colouring, protuberant trumpet and swept-back petals. The collection beneath the old stone wall must be one of the world's finest.

Alison, on the other hand, was a gardener of general interest. She increased the size of the gardens near the creek and introduced Alister Clark's roses—probably from cuttings obtained from Eve Murray. She also populated the garden beds with beautiful shrubs: pink *Chaenomeles japonica* cultivars, ▶





This page, clockwise from above: *Narcissus* 'Helen Henderson'; a fine planting of *N.* 'Charity May' beneath a dry-stone wall; *N.* 'Sally' was named after Graeme and Alison's daughter.



## This garden has its moods...

◀ the red-stemmed dogwood (*Cornus alba* 'Sibirica'), all manner of hellebores, *Magnolia soulangeana*, star magnolias (*M. stellata*) and fragrant wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*). Alison battled to keep the bulbs out of her garden beds, but to no avail. While she slept, Graeme delighted in getting up early and surreptitiously transplanting bluebells into her garden beds then, with a wicked gleam in his eye and a self-satisfied smile, he would appear at breakfast denying all.

### battle of the bulbs

As Alison fought to keep her garden beds free of bulbs, every year Graeme imported more from Tasmania, where some of the best are grown. In the summer of 2000, he imported a record number and achieved considerable success in the Kyneton Show that spring. But on 16 November 2000, his heart condition finally claimed his life. He is survived by Alison and their two children, who every spring rush to the old vegetable garden to see what new blooms of Graeme's breeding have come to light.

Thanks to the work of the Miller family and their predecessors, the garden at Ellerslie is one of the most extensive and mature in Australia. It centres around the rippling waters of Pipers Creek, from which it takes vital nourishment, then it extends in vast sweeps up the hills about the creek: beginning at the old orchard, riotous with thousands of daffodils and other spring bulbs; continuing round the farmhouse, with all manner of roses and exotic shrubs; then over a little creek with its stone bridge, past the bluestone cottage to the daffodil lawn,

which sweeps from the long drive down to the banks of Pipers Creek. Here, visitors can stand agog at one of the country's most spectacular displays of massed daffodils.

Like all great gardens, this one has its moods. In the brooding calm of early morning, when all is still, and the light soft and glowing, one can almost hear the dewdrops falling from the pristine blossoms, as the air is made fragrant by the scent of nectar from the prunus blossom. By midday, the roar of cockatoos, the rush of Pipers Creek and the brilliant light reflected off thousands of daffodil petals all serve to remind you that you are in country Australia, and not some centuries-old European garden.

Early evening is the best time. In late spring, the warm air of impending summer wafts up from the creek, carrying with it the delicious scent of daffodils at their peak, while the deafening croak of frogs along the water's edge, and the gurgle of the creek itself, invite one last look before the dying of the light, reminding you of the peace of the countryside and the comforts of home.

Gardens like Ellerslie form part of our cultural heritage as Australians. They reflect a pioneering past, and the present struggle and joy of the families who tend them. The Millers proudly carry on their strong family tradition of high-country gardening, considering the gardens of Ellerslie to be a part of their family history, as well as part of the history of the district. For anyone wishing to see Australian high-country gardening at its best, a trip to Ellerslie in the spring is a worthy pilgrimage.

Story and photography: Richard Perrignon





*Narcissus 'Trevithian'*  
by the gate that leads  
to the croquet lawn.



