

Sustainable House Day

Clearwind, Glenhope

By John Stuwe

On the 11th September, Clare Claydon and Win Westerhoff kindly opened their house and garden for people interested in renewable technologies and sustainability. Sustainable House Day is sponsored by the Alternative Technology Association, which also publishes relevant material and provides advice on a variety of sustainable technologies, such as solar, wind, microhydro, insulation, appliances, building and refitting.

Clare and Win have gradually built up the house, shed and garden to fit their lifestyle and their principles, as could be seen in the following features....

Double Glazing

Recently retrofitted, this has resulted in a huge increase in home insulation - as so much heat is lost (in winter) and enters (in summer) through traditionally thin, single glazed windows.

Dry Composting Toilet

The lack of any odour due to the ventilation (fan assisted; in through the seat area and out through the external "pong pipe") I think was remarkable. The present model has an internal pan which needs emptying occasionally, but Win would like to install a fancier model which is somehow emptied less often, from outside and underneath the house . Old-fashioned septic tanks (even with fancy sand filters and many metres of aggie pipe) tend to kill off any native vegetation affected by the runoff. The modern (Council Approved) types eg. "Biocycle" are a very complicated engineering and chemical solution to a biological/ecological problem. They involve electric pumps and aerators, chlorine tablets, filters, quarterly servicing and large amounts of water (and the electric pump to drive it) to flush it all through. (The end result is that you can get sprayed if you happen to be standing near an outlet spray when the pump starts.) A lack (in this instance) of adequate Council regulations means that they (all types of Septic Tank) regularly block at the entry point to the tank which invariably involves a "T"-junction.

Flooring

The beautiful floorboards were milled from trees on the block (Red Box, Grey Box and Peppermint).

Garden

Clare and Win have created a native garden utilizing local native trees and shrubs. A local form of *Grevillea rosmarinifolia* was noteworthy. Local forms are threatened by interbreeding with the cultivated varieties which were extremely popular during the 70's/80's.

They also have a very healthy-looking, extensive veggie garden, some of which is dried (in a solar oven) or preserved.

There are also bees and chooks kept on the property to provide honey and eggs.

Seed Collection

Win and Clare collect indigenous seed from the area to grow themselves and also supply to local indigenous plant growers, such as A&B Trees, Heathcote.

Orchard

There is a large and diverse orchard, with many trees multi-grafted. It is very interesting that peaches, nectarines etc - I guess most stone-fruits (but not apples and others) can be grafted onto plum rootstock. Plums grow so well in the area - I want to plant some "wild" plum seed with the idea of grafting other fruits when the vigorous, hardy plum is established.

I noticed (to my surprise) a medium-sized Macadamia tree (covered).

Katie and Hugh Finlay from Mt Alexander Fruit Gardens (www.mafg.com.au) gave a wonderful, very informative talk on growing fruit trees. Worm farms and compost are important in maintaining a good soil ecology full of good microbes and life. They stressed the benefits of diversity and ground cover (even to the extent of tolerating many "weeds", but not the nasty ones, where they increase diversity and ground cover). Mulch is important where there is no ground cover. "Weeds" here includes pasture grasses, clovers etc. Clovers were pointed out as being beneficial in fixing nitrogen. Another tree/shrub grown at Clearwind is the potentially weedy Tagasaste (Tree Lucerne), but strictly confined, for feeding the horses. "***Cytisus proliferus***, tagasaste or tree lucerne, is a small spreading evergreen tree that grows 3-4m high. It is a well known fertilizer tree. It is a member of the Fabaceae (pea) family and is indigenous to the dry volcanic slopes of the Canary Islands but it is now grown in Australia, New Zealand and many other parts of the world as fodder crop." (Wikipedia).

They gave tips on pruning and watering. Watering of the orchard at Clearwind is helped by the grey-water pipes.

Juice from the fruit can be pasteurised for preservation (also done at Clearwind).

Pise (with an acute apostrophe on the "e") or Rammed Earth - Shed

Ben (Clare and Win's son) gave another fabulous talk about their experience building the rammed-earth shed. I was amazed how solid and concrete-like the rammed earth was (although a tiny amount of cement was added, but Ben said was not absolutely necessary). He pointed out that it did need a sealant (just a varnish-like coating) where exposed to weather, as it would erode if rain were directly hitting it - and could be a bit crumbly. It contained no organic matter (as opposed to the softer, mud bricks that I know from Eltham)- just clay and sand and was compressed in-situ in a wooden formwork. It was compressed using a hydraulic ram and the amazing strength and stamina of Ben - although he said it was "easy" once you learnt not to fight it. I had not seen rammed-earth before and was very impressed - but not

inclined to try it at my age. The materials were mixed using a tractor (front end loader) although Ben said he would use a bob-cat next time. A fork-lift was used for moving the formwork up, as the wall was going up, and other tasks.

Alternative Technology Association

Being introduced to the ATA was extremely informative (www.ata.org.au). They seem like a wonderful, sincere organization with a lot to offer, especially the home-owner or builder. They publish two periodical magazines (Sanctuary and Renew) and had copies of the "Bible" of alternative technologies (possibly an Australian Government or joint publication). A very worthwhile organization to be introduced to.

All up, it was a very informative and most pleasant, wonderful day which left Suzy and me exhilarated and enthused.