



## It's us, stupid!

If we want to continue our profligate lifestyle, only technology can save us. And that's a pretty big ask, says Paul Dann

**W**HEN I FIRST TOOK ON my place at Mongarlowe, some four decades ago, I probably thought I knew a bit. After a career in agronomy research and extension, that might have been a reasonable expectation — but I wonder.

LaTreen had all the attributes for production, such as a north-easterly aspect, permanent creek with fish and eels, good average annual rainfall, and so on. Yet increasingly I am telling those who come here for workshops — over the years there have been several thousand attendees — the goal of sustainability and self sufficiency is great, but it ain't easy. The set-backs can be many, though on a positive note, the rewards worthwhile.

Challenges like late spring frosts don't make it easy for many food crops here, and yields from stone fruits are the exception rather than the rule. For years I have tried avocados, but even under the verandah late frosts knock off the young trees. Maybe I've the worst micro-environment in the district; in retrospect I could have done better by getting down off the escarpment but I wasn't to know at the time. And anyhow, it's been heaps of fun.

Not wishing to indulge in too much technology (going back to this article's heading) I tried wanky things like floating gardens, moat gardens, sunpits, overhanging native trees, plastic (a concession to technology) greenhouses, doona deprivation (I think, after twenty years, I

might have successfully established a bunya bunya pine by wrapping it in my doona for ten winters or so. And the bloody thing will probably thank me by dropping a ten kilo nut-food-laden cone on my head) and so on.

Anyhow the floating gardens sank, the moat gardens desiccated, wallabies jumped into the sunpits, the overhanging trees dropped limbs on what I wanted, and so on, and finally I realised I should only grow things that grow here unaided. But it's been fun.

Actually one of the main problems has been native fauna. It's all very well to be touchy-feely and plant enough to feed both yourself and the birds; my bloody birds want it all for themselves. So, to get anything, a tree has to be bird-netted — more technology. There can be compromises, of course; bower birds, particularly the females, have an uncanny knack of turning up just as the grapes ripen. They get so greedy, stuffing themselves on grapes, it's possible to sneak up and grab them; and a couple of grape-fed bower birds make a nice casserole, so it is said. And the wombats! For some years I was growing good crops of sweet corn, to supply markets in Canberra and latterly in Braidwood. Finally the wombats heard about it. They would break into the paddock, saunter along the rows and straddle the ten-foot high plants until they came to the cobs (each worth fifty cents or so); and good-bye fifty cents. Don't talk to me about electric fences for wombats (anyhow, that's technology) or touchy-feely approaches like tins of urine or a bag of instant cement in the hole.

Another unwelcome example of native fauna is a longicorn beetle. A borer, it has a habit of neatly sawing off the trunks of productive twenty-year old hazel nut trees — disappointing, as hazels are one of the more successful crops here. But let's look after the natives, eh.

For ten years I had a great self-sustaining poultry system. Teaching fowls to roost at nighttime on top of a netted vegetable garden meant that they could forage out in the bush, (no purchased feed) return in the evening and deposit bush-sourced nutrients on the vegetables and at the same time be safe from foxes. Finding the eggs could be a problem, though. However, I have happy memories and charming photos of my chooks enjoying the company of native fauna like wallabies, wood ducks, and rosellas, all on the front lawn. But nothing succeeds for ever here — eventually foxes woke up to the potential free feeds in the bush, and gradually knocked off the livestock during daylight.

What has all this to do with the title of the article?

Well, to get back to those workshops. Increasingly I find myself pointing out to people that few of them arrive by horse or bicycle. I tell them of how I thought I might help save the world by riding a bike into town, until, as I was sweating up the Six-mile hill, further-out locals glided past in their 4-wheel drives on their way to a Braidwood coffee. I realised that sustainability is a bit of myth — that is, if people want to continue anything like their current comfortable, often profligate, lifestyles. For that, I suggest, technology is the only hope.

But isn't life great! As I sit out on the balcony in the evening, flagon of wine at one hand and a favorite dog at the other, and gaze at out my favorite mountain — Currockbilly, scene of many memorable walks with lots of good people - I realise that my parting words to the workshop attendees are probably appropriate: "Forget about being sustainable, folks. Just try to be a bit less unsustainable; and enjoy the lifestyle while you're at it".

## GREAT MONUMENTS IN HISTORY

by ROD McCLURE

### The Basilica Cistern: Istanbul, Turkey

**O**NE OF THE MOST remarkable structures in Istanbul, and there are many, is the Basilica Cistern. It was built by Justinian (527-565 A.D.) an Eastern Roman Emperor whose capital was Constantinople, now modern day Istanbul. The cistern is truly remarkable. It is 70 metres wide by 140 metres long. The ceiling is composed of a series of vaulted brick arches supported by 336 columns each of which is 9 metres high. The cistern can hold 80,000 cubic metres of water. Justinian may have rebuilt a cistern begun by Constantine. Prior to that, it may have been a basilica that served as a market place. The columns come from many different structures from many parts of the empire. There are 98 Corinthian columns, the rest are Ionic with a few Doric examples.

The cistern was surrounded by a 4 metre thick fire brick wall covered with waterproof mortar. Water travelled from what is now the Belgrade Forest, 19 kilometres away, to fill the cistern.

The south western corner of the cistern contains two medusa heads used as pedestals for columns. They date from the Roman period and there are claims that they were used to ward off evil and so forth but they were more likely used because they gave the correct height for a base to the columns being used. One is sideways, again almost certainly because it gave the correct height of a base for the column it supported.

The cistern supplied the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire until its fall with water during sieges. (But it was not the only cistern.)

The cistern was used to water the gardens of the Topaki Palace after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. At some point the Sultans piped tap water into the palace and the cistern faded from memory as the pipes feeding it clogged up with mud. In the 1500's Peter Gyllius, a Dutch traveller heard that locals were getting their water and even catching catfish from holes dug in their basements. He was able to break into the cistern and travel on its surface by boat.

The cistern has been restored several times but comprehensive renovation took place between 1985-1987 when 50,000 tons of mud was removed and several decaying pillars were encased in concrete. Walkways were put in place and the area became a tourist attraction. There is still about a half a metre of water in the cistern, seeping in from rainfall. There are fish still swimming in the water.

Also notable is a pillar called the 'Pillar of Tears'. It has raised pictures of a hen's eyes and branches dripping tears. The pillar may have come from



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:  
ONE OF THE MEDUSA PEDESTALS,  
A SECOND MEDUSA PEDESTAL,  
COLUMNS REFLECTED IN THE WATER,  
THE PILLAR OF TEARS.



the triumphal arch of Theodosius. Ancient texts hint that the tears were for the hundreds of slaves that died during the construction of the cistern. The cistern may be familiar to some as it was used as a location in the 1963 Bond film 'From Russia with Love'.

