

It's not easy being green in Melbourne - Express - FURTHERMORE

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I'd been doing the rounds of the garden with a watering can, checking for chunks of space shuttle and wondering about going native, when it occurred to me that I should ring my old friend the Merri-Maker. I was curious to learn if she'd heard about a proposal being tossed around by the Melbourne City Council that could see European trees and plants in parks gradually phased out in favour of indigenous flora.

"Fantastic!" she responded when I told her. "About bloody time!" It was news to her - she doesn't always buy a paper - but welcome news indeed. From her home in Northcote the Merri-Maker (as she styles herself when sending out Christmas greetings on recycled cards) has been campaigning for 20 years or so to revegetate a stretch of the Merri Creek with indigenous species. Anything not native is dismissed as a weed.

The Merri-Maker, who is also known to answer to the name **Carolyn Lunt**, has turned her home and its garden and the nearby creek banks into a work-in-progress display case for recycling and native plants. When you have native plants, she says, you also get native animals. "Just the other day there were baby galahs in my garden; the next day, rainbow lorikeets; then I had a frogmouth." She races off on another tangent, then forgets exactly where she was heading. "I'm sorry," she says, "I just get so-o excited."

She guesses, correctly, that the councillor raising the indigenous issue is David Risstrom. He lives just a few doors up from Ms Lunt. And while she does not claim credit for his idea - which, like all council matters, will have to pass through innumerable committees and strategy sessions before anything changes - it would be impossible to live in Ms Lunt's corner of Northcote without becoming aware of her ideas about indigenous flora.

I tell her that one suggestion now being tossed around is to think about replacing dying elms with something else; something perhaps better suited to Melbourne's harsh climate. "Amazing!" she responds. "They've finally realised that elms do die." Anyone wanting a lively debate could put Ms Lunt and a representative of Friends of the Elms - passionate people who also love trees; just different ones - on different sides of the same microphone. What followed would illustrate how emotional this issue will become.

Ms Lunt is too seasoned a campaigner to think she's won her war, but I left her sounding as chirpy as one of her birds. Ringing her, I decided, could count as my good deed for the day. Then I headed out for another quick session with the watering can and immediately got depressed. The Merri-Maker might have liked my news, but she would be deeply disappointed in my garden.

It has seen better days, which is not surprising. An ornamental shrub out front has sent forth one-fifth of its usual quota of leaves, which I'm

guessing is all it can cope with in the heat. One of the few recent plantings to have thrived is a native: a bottle brush. There's also a kind of indigenous ground-cover doing well. I forget the name, and I can't find the tag, but I do remember it bore a description: Virtually Drought Resistant. Quite right. Ah well, I still have petunias. Thriving splashes of colour. Good old hardy no-fuss Aussie petunias. Except they're not Aussie at all. I checked: "Native to tropical America." Damn. Watch their space.