



Gardening on the edge.

Business woman and artist Winnie Pelz says 'I get a huge satisfaction out of sitting here watching the changing views and the birds. There are the most wonderful sunsets and sea mists ... and the ships going through ...

Story by **Heather Millar**. Photographs by **Robert Geh**.

'Just head towards the wind farm', says Winnie Pelz, as she gives me directions to her coastal home near Starfish Hill Wind Farm, just above Cape Jervis. But on the day I visit, the countryside is thick with fog and there's nary a windmill to be seen. As I turn into her road, two enquiring heads peek over the fence to greet me – Espresso the black llama and Chico the white llama. Bristle the labrador/mastiff-cross races alongside my car, and just as I pull up to Winnie's rammed earth home the sun breaks through the clouds and I can see all the way down to the ocean. Later that morning I will be able to see across to Kangaroo Island.

Winnie tells me this place involves 'gardening on the edge', and she means it in more ways than one: her property is quite literally on the edge of the southern Fleurieu coastline – while gardening here is 'on the edge of insanity'.

Winnie began looking for a place where she could get her hands in the earth in 2004 – as a counterbalance to the life she leads in the city.

'I worked in a succession of senior management roles and felt very burned out. It was very much about just finding a haven where I could scratch in the garden'.

'I was looking at land over at Parawa and I had time to kill and I drove down here and turned into the street, which I didn't know existed, and saw the view and went "Oh, this is stunning".'

Although Winnie had always been a gardener she had no idea of what it would be like trying to establish a home – and particularly a garden – here.

'I built the studio first with almost entirely recycled materials, using local trades-people. I wanted the studio to look like it had been here for 50 years. It was formed around four trusses that I got from Tony Parkinson (from Penny's Hill Winery). Parky had got them from Greg Trott' (the now-deceased owner of Wirra Wirra Winery). >



Image left: Winnie's earthy collections are simply a pleasure to behold. Minimal art direction was required for this photo shoot!
Image above: Chico and Espresso living the good life.



‘I had always believed in the old Glenn Murcutt philosophy of “touch the earth lightly” – but this is something more like an impacted molar’.

‘Trotty had built an extension onto his place using these wonderful trusses and these were leftover ones. So the trusses – which were seven feet long – determined the size of the studio’.

Winnie started building the house in 2007: ‘It’s a very simple one-bedroom cottage: a rectangle with a gable roof’.

‘I had always believed in the old Glenn Murcutt philosophy of “touch the earth lightly” – but this is something more like an impacted molar’, laughs Winnie.

‘It’s got this huge concrete slab so it doesn’t touch the earth lightly – but I think it fits into the landscape. I wanted it to be subtle, to just blend in; not be a big architectural statement. And I think it achieves that’. Dave Roberts of the Stabilised Earth company in Willunga did the rammed earth building. ‘The place is soundproof’, says Winnie. ‘It can be howling out there and yet peaceful and serene in here’.

Winnie’s interest in visual art and her travels are reflected in all the rooms: from the rocking horse in the corner ‘actually made by Claude Monet’s great grandnephew, Jason Monet’, which she found at Distelfink Gallery in Melbourne; to the pebbled floor of the shower – a collection of pebbles from beaches all over the world; to the bathroom walls which feature old newspaper pages. One old piece is from The Lutheran Times dated 1951, the year her family migrated to Australia from Germany.

Winnie herself trained in the visual arts, but ‘didn’t do much with it other than puddle around’. She exhibited for a few years, taught high school, then went into arts management and marketing: at age

33 she found herself managing the JamFactory. This led her into more management roles in organisations as diverse as Santos, The Women’s and Children’s Hospital and Guide Dogs SA.NT.

She has again picked up the paintbrush in recent years. ‘The work that’s emerging links the garden and the landscape. There’s a very strong sense of big sky and distance, and then elements in the garden that are right in the foreground’.

There was no garden here though when Winnie first arrived.

‘The first night I came up here to plant the windbreak, I was sleeping in the studio and I had brought up a tray of melaleuca plugs. I got up in the morning to plant them and they had disappeared – the rabbits had had a feast.

‘So I had to put cages around everything. I built kangaroo fences for the two windbreaks to keep the kangaroos out. Stuff would just start to grow, and then the jolly white cockatoos would bite off the ends of things. So it’s been a battle’.

Slowly over time Winnie has come to know what will withstand the elements, the animals and the birds. >

Image above: The house was built using rammed earth by David Roberts of ‘Stabilised Earth’ in Willunga.

Image right: Winnie’s collection of bird houses and feeders serves both aesthetic and functional purposes. Her studio can also be seen in the background.





Image top left: The main open plan living area is home to many works of art, including paintings by Winnie's daughter and a rocking horse by Jason Monet (great grand nephew of the famous Claude Monet).
 Image below left: Even the kitchen is not without many found objects and artwork sourced from Winnie's travels.
 Image right and bottom right: The garden attracts much spectacular bird life.
 Image above: The inside of the studio. (The outside can be seen on this issue's front cover.)

'Correa alba are tough – they're a great little windbreak, great for birds and bees. Westringias. Saltbush – the little wrens have built dozens of nests in there. And I've got this gorgeous display of irises in spring, that blue, tough iris that grows by the roadside. Grevilleas. Rosemary. Pelargoniums and succulents. Stuff that is really tough'.

Then there's the lack of water. She has five water tanks and still ran out of water last summer. 'I had to buy water in, and it's not cheap. So I'm sticking to a more limited palette of plants now!'

The garden at the back of the house was 'a bit of a folly', says Winnie. 'I wanted to do a Celtic cross in stone on the ground and then I would make it into four quadrants of garden. But I don't have enough water to keep four quadrants of garden going. In summer it pretty much looks after itself; I only water the roses about every 10 days, unless it's stinking hot. I've been mulching heavily and gradually the soil's improving'. >

Winnie loves birds – and plants with them in mind. 'The Black Cockatoos that come here – they really love the casuarina nuts. We get everything from eagles that circle over this valley to hundreds of tiny Blue Wrens and Yellow-tailed Thornbills.'



She also has a loquat and a fig tree, Kalamata olives, and a pistachio and mulberry tree in this part of the garden.

I ask Winnie about the Celtic connection – she also has a beautiful white stone spiral in the garden. ‘I have a Scottish great-grandmother and I’ve always had this very strong emotional link with Scotland. I studied textile design in Edinburgh – so whenever I had a weekend free, I’d go over to the west coast and out to the islands. I think wanting to be here has a lot to do with Scotland – high land overlooking the sea, being in touch with the sky and the sea and the landscapes’.

Years ago when she was at the JamFactory after her return from Edinburgh, Winnie did a series of woven tapestries that dealt with Celtic imagery. ‘Scottish and Celtic history has always fascinated me, so the Celtic cross and spiral date back to then’, says Winnie. She also has plans to put in a labyrinth in stones on the ground.

Winnie loves birds – and plants with them in mind. ‘The Black Cockatoos that come here – they really love the casuarina nuts. We get everything from eagles that circle over this valley to hundreds of tiny Blue Wrens and Yellow-tailed Thornbills. I’ve been planting the garden very deliberately with grevilleas and correas and westringias and all the stuff that little birds like’.

Then she invites me back inside to her table. The floor-to-ceiling windows frame the earth, sea and sky – nature’s own work of art.

‘I get a huge satisfaction out of sitting here watching the changing views and the birds. There are the most wonderful sunsets and sea mists, and the ships going through. Then there are some nights it’s just so calm that I can hear the water breaking down on Morgan’s Beach and you can hear the waves lapping – it’s wonderful’. [FLM](#)



*Image top left: The bathroom features wallpaper from vintage newspapers and pebbles on the floor in the shower come from beaches all over the world.
Image below left: The Celtic, white stone spiral in the garden.*