

02 *weekend*

ROSS BRUNDRETT

# Little spring in my step

**T**HE weather is turning, the earth beneath our feet is warming and my stomach is churning. And that's down to our dog's breakfast of a backyard.

Come springtime, many people — especially people my age — like to invest large amounts of time, labour and disposable income on gardening. And when it comes to our household's gardening needs, clearly the backyard is priority No. 1 now more than ever. It has reached Chernobyl level.

As usual, I blame the times we live in. Back in the day, it was quite acceptable to have a shambolic backyard. The front yard was another story, a showcase of neatly clipped hedges and flourishing rose bushes. But behind the high fences it used to be fair game.

A free-range veggie patch, a challenging cricket pitch, the chassis of a 1958 Ford Consul, a fruit tree with a car tyre swing, and perhaps even a granny flat and compost bin (those last seem strangely aligned).

Sigh. No water features back then. No outdoor spa. No chiminea or pergola or wood-fired pizza oven, a concept I continue to struggle with ... I mean, why spend thousands of dollars building a lumpy thing like a wood-fired oven just so, when you get the urge for a pizza, you can excitedly chop some wood, strike a match and patiently wait until the embers have reached just the right temperature so you can roll out your pizza dough, add all the trimmings and, oh save me. Good luck with all that when you fancy a neapolitan at midnight.

But I'm digressing, if not procrastinating, which are my favourite things to do whenever the prospect of gardening comes up.

This sense of dread comes from bitter experience, because all my past labours in the backyard have ended with naught to show. Plants have been planted, seeds have been sown, lawns trimmed, weeds weeded out, but a couple of days later it looks like a disaster area once more.

And for some reason whenever the wind blows, every loose leaf and anonymous piece of grit in the region lands in our backyard. It really is the neighbourhood plughole.

I've said to my wife more than once that cleaning up the backyard is like painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge: by the time you've finished the job, it needs doing again. But who am I kidding? I just don't have my heart in the garden.

But this time there's nowhere to hide. Literally. Before winter I made the mistake of ripping all the things we didn't like out of the backyard, which meant we were left with a barren wasteland.

And that's where things lay. We have this empty canvas and not many clues about what to do with it. All I know is that I've got to come up with something substantial, involving decking and shade cloth and a new barbecue area and some exotic-looking greenery that isn't made of plastic.

If I don't produce greatness, I fear the worst. A granny flat with my name on it. Or, gulp, a compost bin.



IN THE PICTURE



Full life: Judith Slade has colourful tales to tell of her time as a shearer and as an elder of the LGBTIQ+ community.

PICTURE GREGORY LORENZUTTI

# Shear delight

Judith Slade, a dame of Australian shearing, is coming back out of the retirement home

ANNA BYRNE

**H**ER wild mop of red hair might have faded, but Judith Slade is still as fiery as ever. Ask her to spin you a yarn and there is plenty to regale you with: how she defied chauvinism to become Australia's foremost female shearer, strutting the boards of shearing sheds for more than half a century; how she was imprisoned for her sexuality; and how she is still, at 88, looking for love.

Next month, Slade, an elder of the LGBTIQ+ community will be a special guest of the inaugural Coming Back Out Ball, part of the Victorian Seniors Festival, which celebrates homosexuality within the older community.

"It's a good achievement, the Coming Back Out Ball is going to be a wonderful thing, to be able to socialise, and I bet you the rest of my life there won't be one argument," Slade says.

But the current argument around the marriage equality survey is hurting the community, according to Slade.

"I was sentenced to prison for one month because I was living with a lady, because it

was illegal to consort then. Now, people are happy to see two girls walking around the supermarket with each other. This vote won't stop us being together, they are not gonna break us down.

"It's the changing of the world; it's the modern time. No good being on a dry beach with the tide out there; you've got to go in with it. Also, to separate two people who love each other with a no vote is hurting two hearts. Why should I hurt your heart?"

And Slade, despite being the only open lesbian at her retirement village in Sunshine, is hopeful of finding love.

"Now where I'm staying, and I'm trying to not make it a permanent thing, but where I'm stopping at a rest home, I'm the only lesbian there out of 75 residents," she says. "I'd love to find a friend but I think there's too many ladies out there still hiding."

"Come out. Get out the front door; don't sit in your backyard with your knitting needles, get out there like I have, go dancing still, the young ones will help you."

**COMING BACK OUT BALL, MELBOURNE TOWN HALL, OCTOBER 7, COMINGBACKOUTBALL.COM anna.byrne@news.com.au**



**01 WOOL** I loved the feel and texture of the wool, and I found I could do it with skill, not with muscle. In 1988, *Woman's Day* sponsored me to go to a shearing competition and they had shearers from around the world and I brought the trophy back to Victoria.



**02 SHEARING** I pushed my way into a shearing shed. There were eight machines but only five shearers, so I went to the car and got my handpiece. The boss and owner of the station was not saying a word. I just pulled this sheep in and shored it. Later he said, "Well, you're pretty good, come along with us to the next shed and the next shed."



**03 MUM** That's Mum and me. Our father was a military man and got himself killed in New Guinea in World War II. That's a nice photo. Mum and I had a good relationship.



**04 IDAHOBIT DAY** That's the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia at Government House with Ro Allen (right), the Victorian commissioner for gender and sexual equality.

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