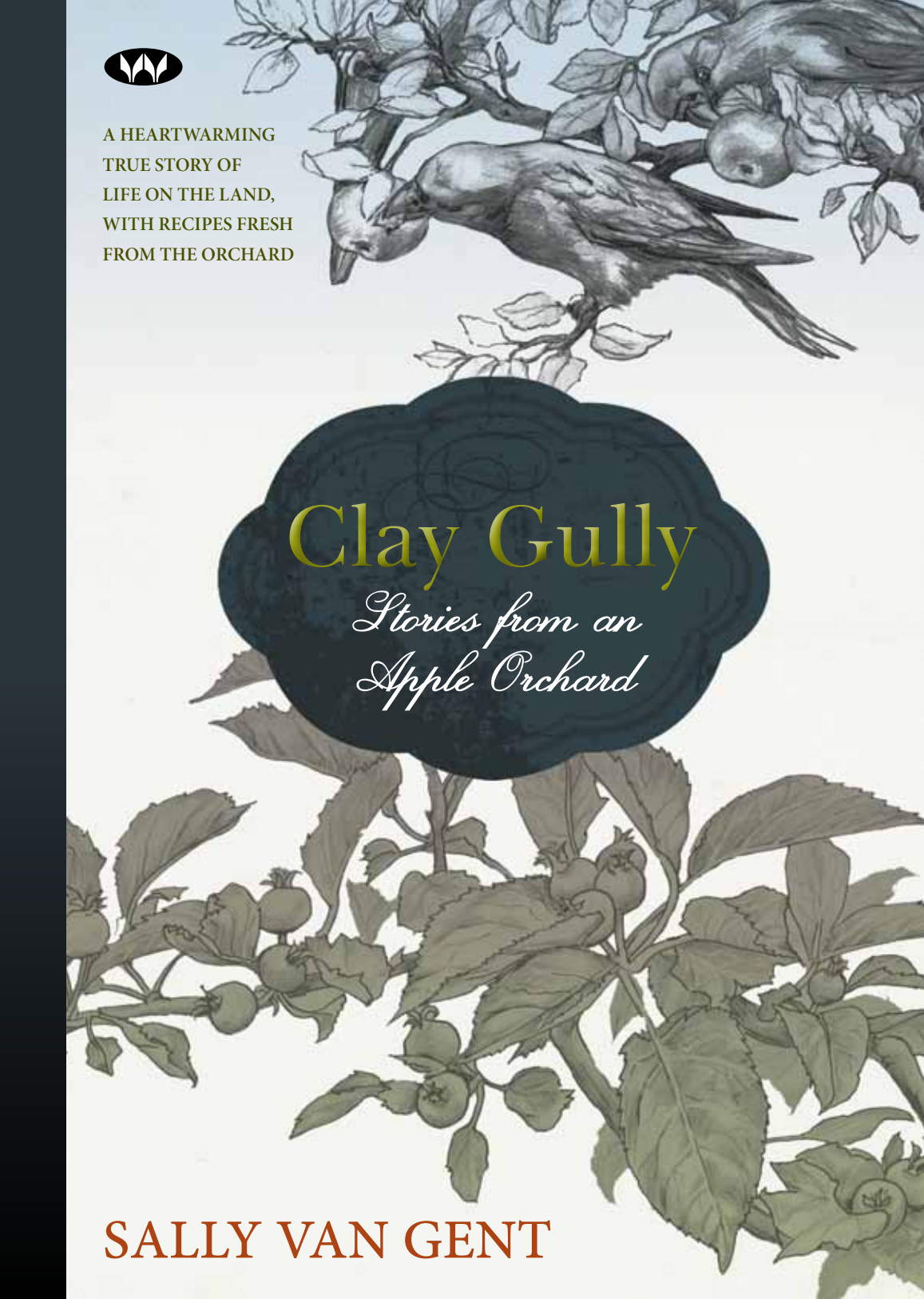


A HEARTWARMING TRUE STORY OF LIFE ON THE LAND, WITH RECIPES FRESH FROM THE ORCHARD

# Clay Gully

## Stories from an Apple Orchard

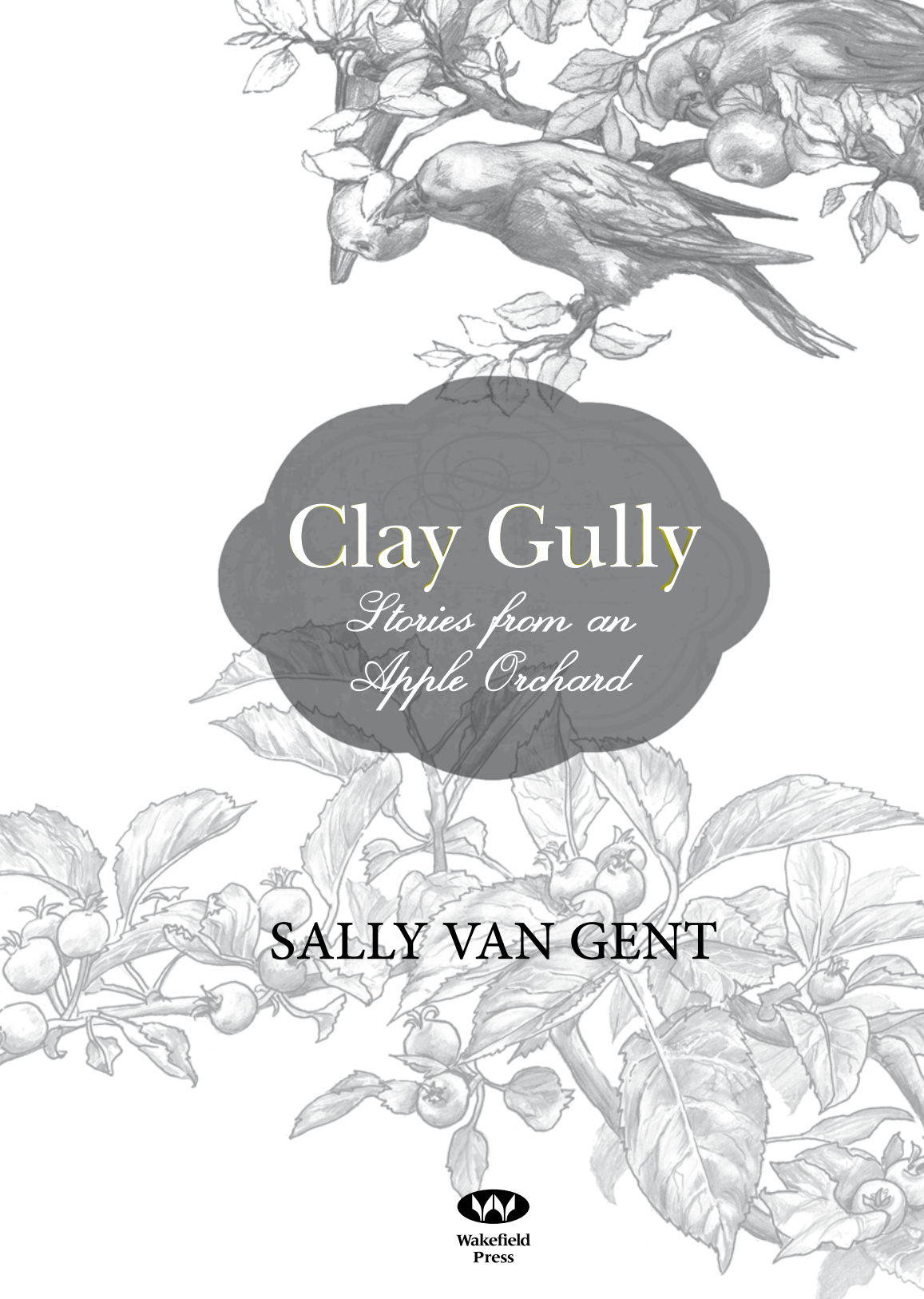
SALLY VAN GENT

Wakefield Press

# CLAY GULLY

Sally van Gent lives in a forest near Bendigo with her husband and their many demanding dogs, fish, tame magpies and visiting kangaroos.

Sally was born in England, where she trained as a teacher at Bretton Hall College for Music, Art and Drama. She has lived in many countries, including Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, Mauritius and Singapore, and has been a longtime birdwatcher and field naturalist. Sally survived breast cancer – helped, she believes, by her affinity with nature.



# Clay Gully

## *Stories from an Apple Orchard*

SALLY VAN GENT

Wakefield Press

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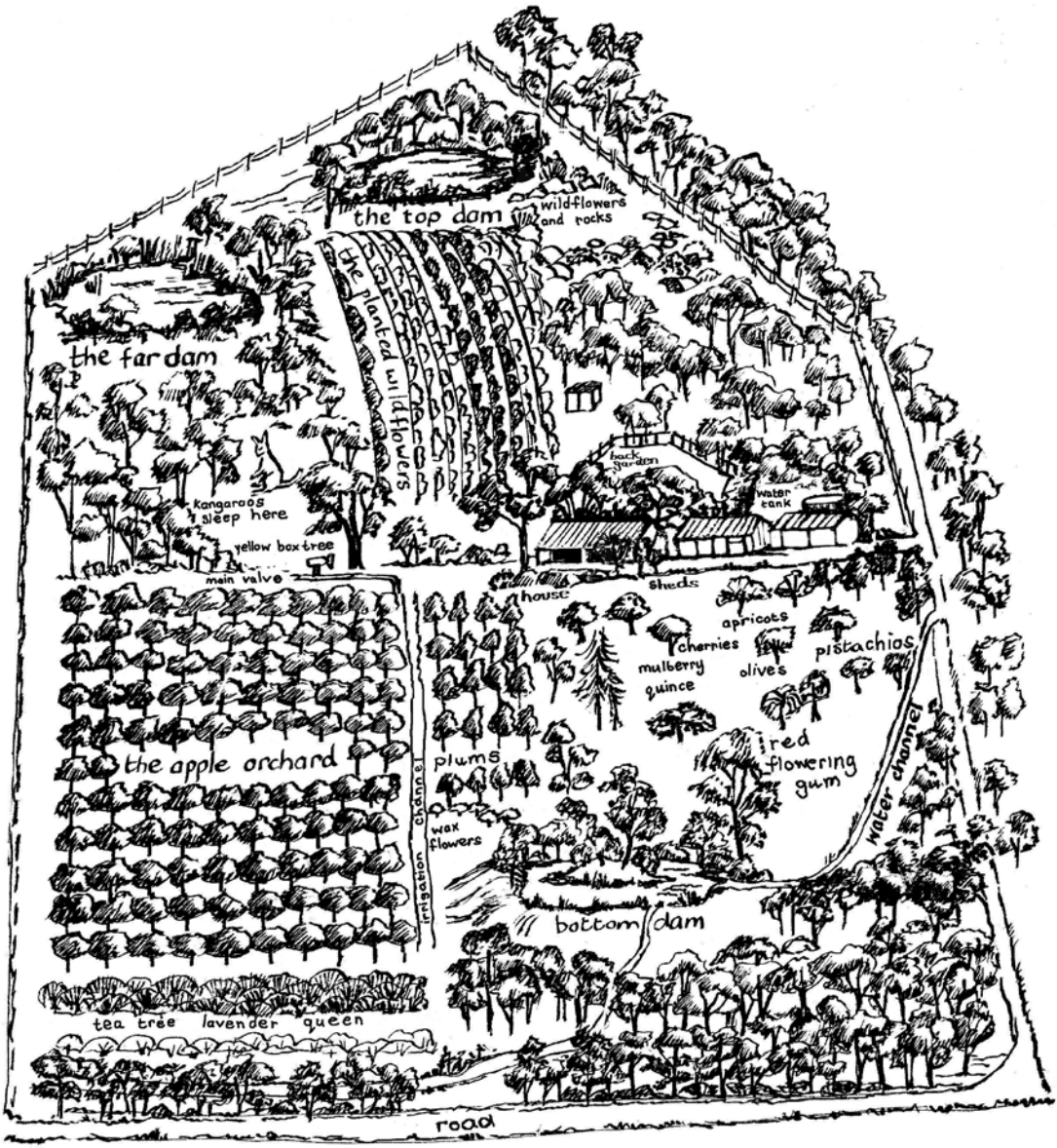
*For my grandchildren*
*Edward, Rose and Ari,*
*Ben and James.*

# Contents


the top dam
wild flowers and rocks
the planted wildflowers
the far dam
kangaroos sleep here
yellow box tree
main valve
back garden
water tank
house
sheds
apricots
cherries
pistachios
mulberry
quince
olives
the apple orchard
plums
red flowering gum
water channel
irrigation channel
wax flowers
bottom dam
tea tree
lavender
queen
road

# PART ONE

# Turning the Soil

After several months of fruitless searching around Bendigo in central Victoria, the agent calls to tell us he has found our perfect home. Apparently the house is in the middle of ten acres of bush and farmland. Right away I know we can't afford a property like that. The agent insists I at least drive past the place.

He tells me, 'If you wait a bit the price will come down. I've heard the owners are about to go bankrupt.'

How would you like to pay this man to sell your house, I wonder.

Out of curiosity I drive down the winding dirt road. To the left are green paddocks where a horse is grazing. On the other side there is forest, all the way down the hill. At the bottom, where there is a wide curve in the road, I spot the house through the gum trees. It stands in the centre of a lightly treed paddock and to the side is open bush land. The agent persuades us to have a look

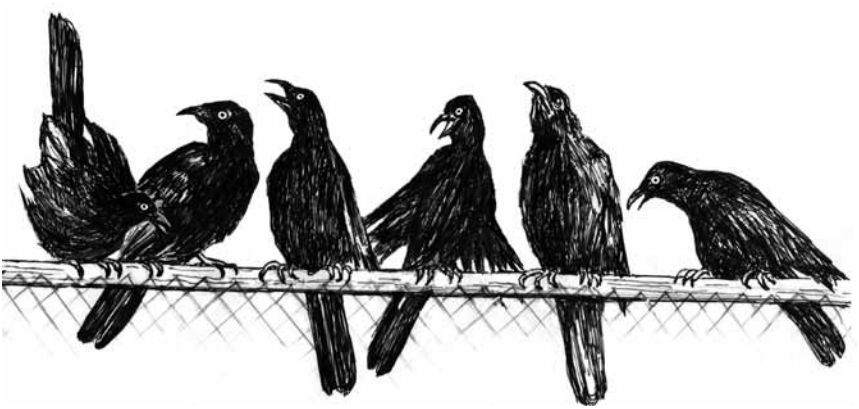
inside. The house, though adequate, is unimpressive. It has a dingy seventies-style kitchen and worse, there is ghastly brown and cream shag-pile carpet almost everywhere. I look at the view through the living-room window and I don't care.


It's been a wet spring and water cascades over the paddocks, draining from the bush higher up the hill. The agent sends us off to walk around the property unaccompanied as he doesn't want to get his feet soaked. Above the house the gum trees lean out over two dams. Up here the rich soil of the paddocks gives way to stony ground, and a patchwork of wildflowers grows between the grey, lichen-coated boulders.

Three months later we receive another call from the agent. 'The owners have gone broke, are you still interested in the house?'

Yes, definitely.

I walk into the back garden the first morning after we have moved in and confront a scene straight from the classic Hitchcock horror movie, *The Birds*. Along the top of the fence a row of strange, black birds with hooked beaks stare down at me through glowing red



eyes. They don't attempt to fly away when I move towards them. Instead they begin to rock back and forth in unison, all the time letting out weird, breathy whistles. When they finally fly off I see they have white wing feathers.

Beside the house there's a large shed with an earth floor where the previous owners conducted their business of making concrete garden ornaments. A giraffe with a broken neck sits near the side gate and on the back verandah there's a whole farmyard of concrete chickens, ducks and small animals. My mother, who lives in a nearby retirement village, suggests the elderly people there might like them. Soon the animals have all found new homes and one old man, who's been a farmer all his life, is absolutely delighted to have chickens and ducks in his backyard again.

At night a dozen large spiders with red-striped legs construct huge webs across the verandah. They catch a multitude of tiny moths, attracted by the kitchen light. These same moths provide a welcome dinner for two small frogs lying in wait on the window.

The front of the property is divided by a broad irrigation channel, used to flood the paddocks in the days when they were part of a dairy farm. Contemplating the grassy, treeless area farthest from the house, we discuss its possible uses. In this, our first year at Clay Gully, our dams fill with water in the spring and thunderstorms replenish them in the summer. Good rains are predicted for next year offering us the opportunity to establish an agricultural enterprise. I think of goats and chickens but my husband, Nick, vetoes all my suggestions. He knows only too well that I can't kill anything and is already anticipating the vet bills involved in keeping alive aging hens, well past their egg-laying days.

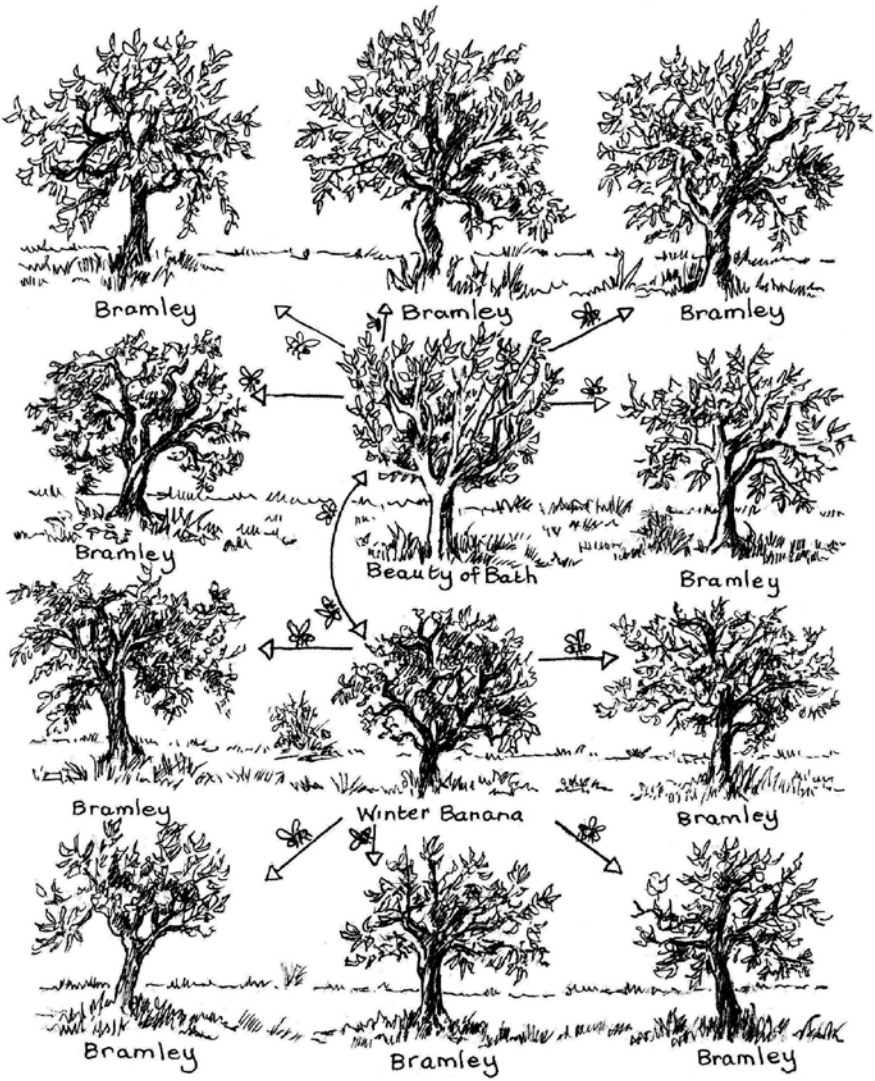
A lover of good wine, his thoughts turn naturally to planting a vineyard, but I can see problems with this suggestion. Not having the necessary knowledge or equipment to process the grapes ourselves, we would be dependent on large wineries to take our fruit and set the price. Instead I think of the beautiful apples my grandfather grew in England – Bramley's Seedling, Lord Lambourne and Red Astrachan. There must be a market for these delicious, forgotten varieties. My grandfather grew them without artificial fertilisers or pesticides. We decide to follow the long path leading to full organic certification of the orchard.

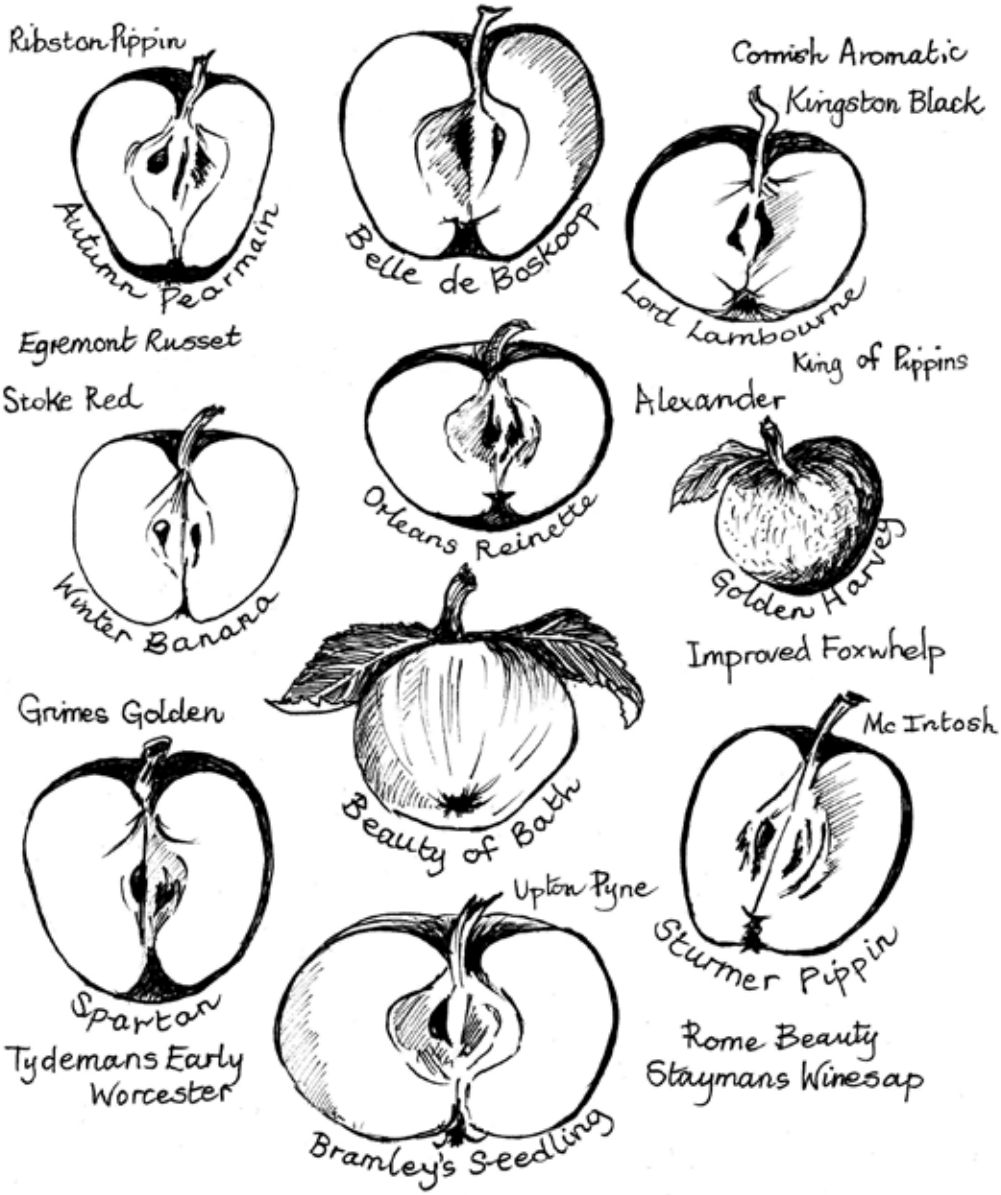
It's necessary to have a third dam dug in front of the house and to purchase additional rural water. The contractor isn't pleased with me when I insist on having an island in the middle of the dam. It makes his job more difficult but I know it'll look beautiful and will be a refuge for water birds.

Then we discover Badgers Keep, a wonderful heritage apple nursery with over 500 different cultivars. With so many to choose from, I spend many hours poring over their descriptions. One apple we should definitely grow is the Bramley's Seedling. The population of the UK eats millions of Bramleys every year and I'm convinced that once Australians try them they will love them too. The variety has stood the test of time. The original tree, growing in a garden in Nottinghamshire, is still bearing fruit after 200 years.

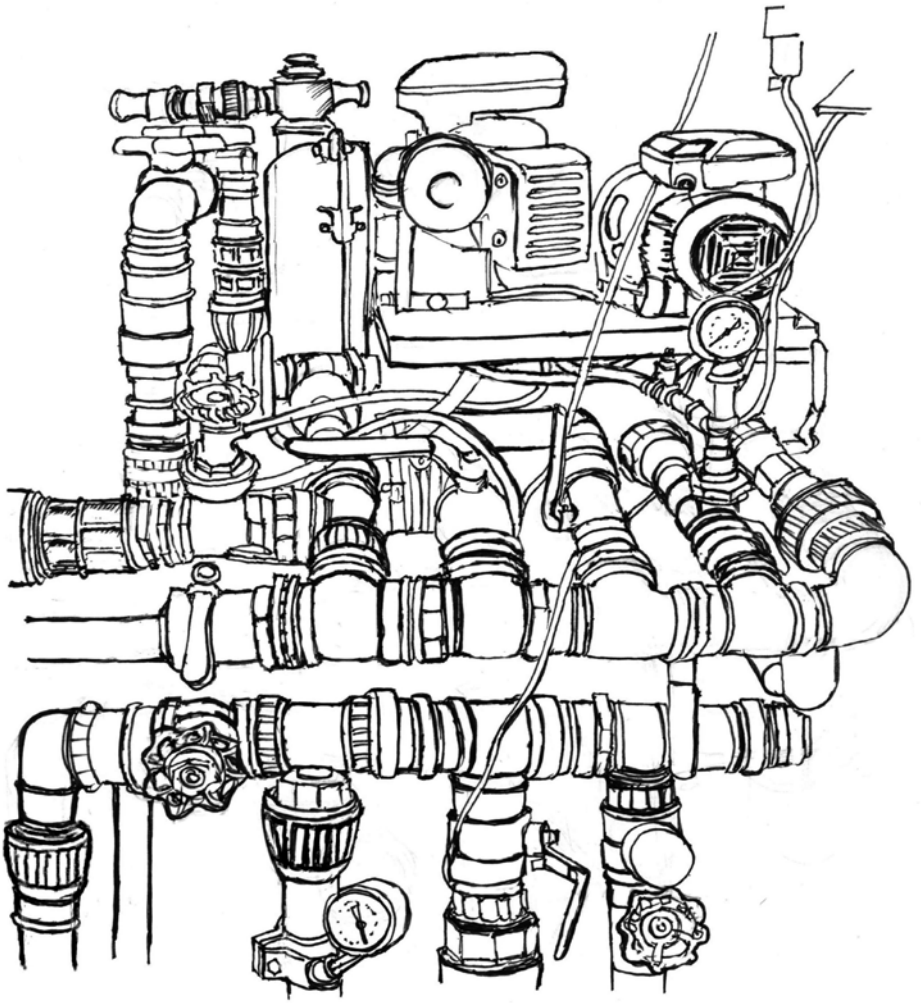
Next I select Autumn Pearmain, striped and perfumed, and grown since the late 1500s. Then there is the Orleans Reinette, yellow, sweet and nutty, and the soft and juicy Beauty of Bath. My husband Nick, being Dutch, has his own favourite apple much loved on the continent. This is the Belle de Boskoop, sometimes known as Goudreinet. It has a strong flavour making it excellent for cooking. If left longer on the tree it turns into a fragrant, soft-pink dessert apple. We order the Bramley's Seedling and Belle de Boskoop and by the time we've selected enough cultivars for their pollination, we have twenty-four different varieties. In all there will be 300 trees.

For every tree there needs to be another which flowers at the same time, since apples are not normally self-fertile. There's a particular problem with both the Bramleys and Belle de Boskoop. They are triploid varieties, meaning their pollen is too weak to fertilise other trees. Therefore we must plant two pollinators together so they can impregnate each other as well as the Bramleys and Belles.

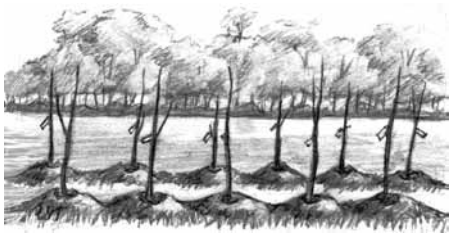



Ribston Pippin
Autumn Pearmain
Egremont Russet
Belle de Boskoop
Cornish Aromatic
Kingston Black
Lord Lambourne
King of Pippins
Stoke Red
Winter Banana
Orleans Reinette
Alexander
Golden Harvey
Improved Foxwhelp
Grimes Golden
Beauty of Bath
Mc Intosh
Sturmer Pippin
Spartan
Tydemans Early Worcester
Upton Pyne
Bramley's Seedling
Rome Beauty
Staymans Winesap

Nick, who was a marine engineer, prepares an amazing array of pumps and pipes. They can move the water from the three dams to wherever it's needed on the block. He draws me a diagram that I follow when I'm watering, but the system is so complex I feel as if I need marine training too.



As my husband's other business becomes increasingly demanding, I find myself left with full responsibility for the orchard. Rightly described by Nick as a technical moron, I need to learn how to drive a tractor, cope with the irrigation system and become efficient with spray equipment. Fortunately he comes to my rescue when everything goes wrong, machinery breaks down or the pipes belch out water.



We decide to plant the orchard in stages, putting in 100 trees each year. This will allow enough time for us to prepare the land and for Clive and Margaret at Badgers Keep to graft the trees.

Behind the house the hillside is rocky with only a thin layer of soil; the pearly quartz is near the surface here. Although there's never been mining on our property, this white rock carries gold and the signs of digging and sluicing can be seen all through the surrounding bush. In some places in the forest there are hidden shafts, long since abandoned. It's best to keep to one of the many tracks left by the goldminers when you walk there.

Over the years rainwater has carried the soil from the hill and deposited it in the paddocks below the house, and here it's rich and deep. Our main concern at planting time is to ensure the trees don't get wet feet when rainwater floods down the hillside in the winter. For that reason we decide to plant them on raised beds.

The extra water needed for the trees is to be delivered through a water race. It runs for many kilometres through the

bush, servicing farms and villages along the way. After the bailiff opens the gate in the race, the water takes a whole day to run down the hill into our dam. Along the way it dislodges fallen leaves and branches. For the first two days we need to be ready with a spade to remove any blockages before the water overflows into the adjoining paddocks.

The spring rains continue and I decide to take advantage of them. Along the side of the orchard I dig in a row of native plants: bottlebrushes with fluffy red flowers, pale yellow melaleucas and purple kunzeas. In between I add a few small ornamental gum trees with curly grey, overlapping leaves. Hopefully these plants will encourage useful predatory insects to settle in the orchard and protect the apple trees.

Between the rows of apples I scatter subterranean clover seed which soon forms a thick green carpet. Although it dies back in the summer heat, it reappears when the rains return in the autumn. The nectar-rich flowers attract the bees and the roots improve the soil.

We plant a mixed orchard in front of the house. There are apricots, pears, greengage plums and a loquat tree. When the pistachios split open I bake them in the oven on beds of salt. After a while there are big bowls of red cherries to put on the table at Christmas.

I buy two olive trees from a Greek farmer at the market. He gives me a funny look when in my ignorance I ask him for black olive trees, not realising that olives change colour as they ripen. Italian friends show me how to cure the green ones, and some I leave to swell and turn shiny black. We serve them with drinks, sliced on pizzas and in a tuna tart. At the end of summer I pick the quinces and make a deep amber quince paste.

## Quince Paste

*When I make this the whole house fills with the delicate smell of the fruit. I don't recommend cooking too many quinces at a time because of the amount of stirring involved.*

quinces
white sugar

Wash the quinces and wipe off the fur. Place them on a baking sheet. Roast in a slow oven until soft. Allow to cool. Then take out the cores and carefully remove any remaining seeds or stalk, but leave the skin on. Use a blender to turn the flesh into a smooth paste. Weigh it and measure out half that amount in white sugar. Combine the sugar and quince and stir well.

Put the mixture into a heavy bottomed pan and cook over a low heat. Stir frequently, especially towards the end of cooking to prevent burning. Depending on the quantity, this may take 2 hours or more.

When the mixture is very thick and pulls away from the sides and bottom of the pan, remove from the heat. Spread the mixture onto a baking tray lined with nonstick paper.

Slice and serve with cheese or dust with icing sugar and serve as a sweet.

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