

tea change

Green tea isn't normally produced in Australia, but for one farming couple living on fertile river flats in central Victoria, it's turned out to be the perfect, aromatic crop.

The homestead is festooned with roses and surrounded by creative arrangements of plants and interesting sculptures.



Photos: Andrew Lloyd Story Karen Shaw

Japanese green tea estates are rare in Australia, but near the junction of the Goulburn and Acheron Rivers in Victoria, the aptly named Two Rivers Green Tea plantation is thriving.

Owner, Will Leckey, is proud of the beautifully manicured rows of *Camellia sinensis* that produce quality green tea for the Japanese market and prestigious stores along Wall Street in the US.

The area's fledgling industry began about 10 years ago when experts from Japanese company Ito En travelled the globe, seeking a place with the perfect conditions for expanding its operation.

Acheron, about two hours' drive north-east of Melbourne, ticked many boxes. It's on the same latitude in the Southern Hemisphere as some of the best tea-growing areas of Japan in the Northern Hemisphere. It also has ideal temperatures, 900mm of rain a year and, to cap it off, 2m of excellent topsoil.

New venture

Since first establishing the venture with his wife, Georgie, Will has grown to love his 12ha tea garden fringed by the river and iconic red gums. He recalls how naive they were, planting 170,000 seedlings and "just expecting them to grow". But while a handful died, most have flourished.

Will grows three varieties of *Camellia sinensis* – 'Sayamakaori', 'Yabukita' and 'Okuhikaori' – for a longer, staggered harvest. Picking the perfect time to start harvesting is an exacting business. The leaves need to be beautifully supple and bursting with high concentrations of the all-important amino acids.

At harvest time, a machine crawls along each 200m row, cutting the top 12cm off the bushes and collecting the tender new leaves in a hopper at the back. The just-cut bushes look like mown lawn and emit the sweet, strong aroma of freshly brewed green tea.

"The secret to good green tea is fresh leaves," says Will. "Left too long on the bush, they become fibrous and tasteless." Once cut, the leaves are tipped into field bins, which are fitted with fans to maintain freshness during transportation to the processing plant in Wangaratta, where they are steamed, rolled and dried.



Will Leckey's manicured rows of *Camellia sinensis* yield top-notch green tea for the Japanese and US markets.

Will is excited because excellent rains in 2011 produced an extra-heavy crop of some seven tonnes of fresh leaves to the hectare which, dry and processed, equals about 650,000 cups of green tea.

There are usually four harvests each year, and it's the first flush of the season that produces the leaves for the highly sought-after shicha tea, which means 'new tea' in Japanese. It's prized because the nutrients stored during winter are poured into the leaves during the spring growth spurt, creating intense flavour. The next flush, harvested in late summer, yields the full-bodied sencha tea.

As with any business, there have been minor hiccups. Early on, late black frosts in spring burnt the precious new green leaf tips. This has been overcome with the installation of a sophisticated system of sensors and automatic overhead sprinklers that prevent frost damage.

Standing beside a huge pile of rotting chicken manure that will be applied after harvest to add a healthy dose of nitrogen to the soil, Will explains how he uses holistic methods to grow and maintain his tea crops. "We don't spray for insects, and the bushes are now so dense that weeds no longer grow between the rows.

"The biggest problem we have is collecting the fallen eucalypt leaves from the bushes before harvest, so they don't taint the taste of the green tea." ➡

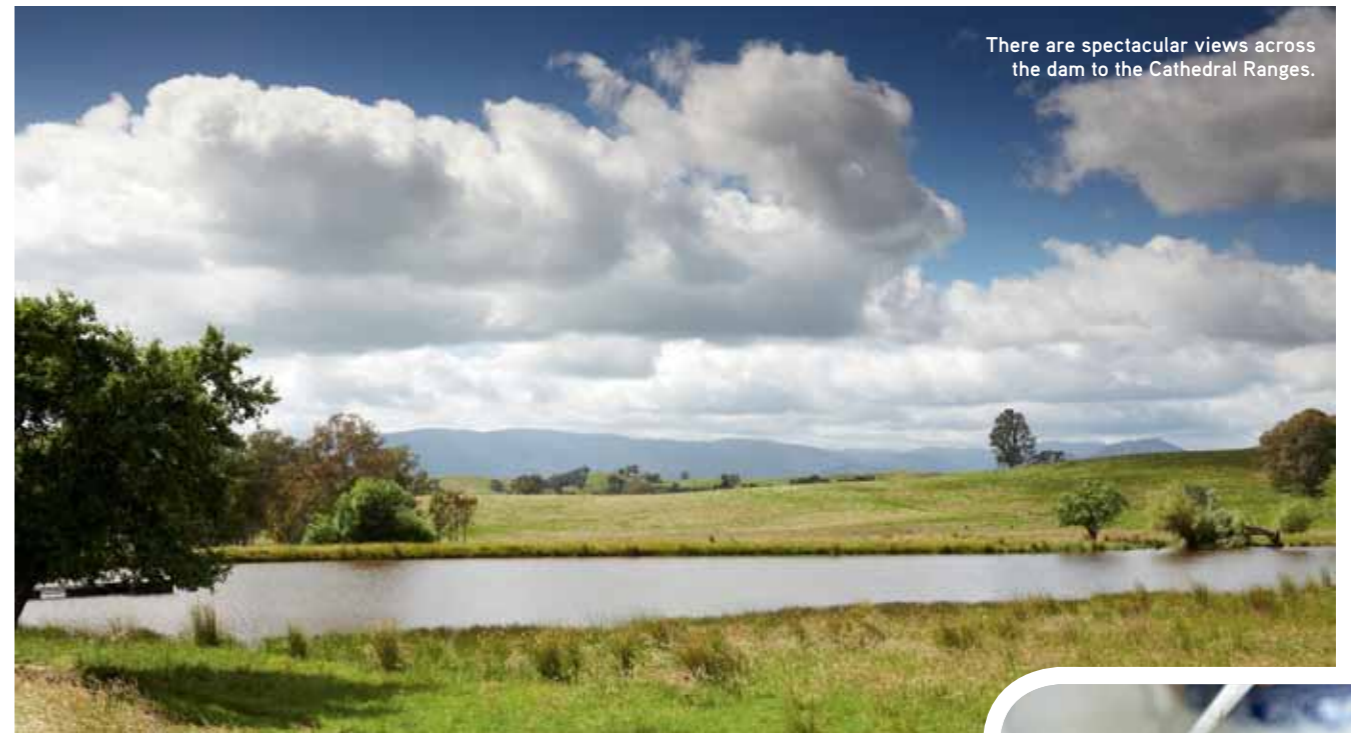


Growing tea at home

- ✘ You can grow tea plants at home too. Like other camellias, they prefer an acidic soil. Keep your plants well watered, and fertilise regularly with organic matter.
- ✘ *Camellia sinensis* plants produce tiny, pretty, white flowers. However, it's their spring leaf tips that are valued the most. With a little experimentation, the leaves can be dried effectively at home in the oven or microwave.
- ✘ These are great plants to use in hedging as they respond well to regular trims. If left, though, they can grow into large shrubs.
- ✘ Tea plants can be found at camellia nurseries in Australia.



Clockwise from above Will Leckey mows the tea fields during harvesting, snipping off the top 12cm of the tea bush; in the garden, the Indian bean tree features masses of white flowers in summer and interesting seed pods; the garden has a wild, rambling feel close to the house and becomes more formal towards the boundary fence; Georgie has a cuppa beneath the rustic, grapevine-covered pergola; the beautiful 'Lamarque' rose, a heritage specimen that featured in Georgie's wedding bouquet when she and Will were married in the garden; Will created this water sculpture using discs from an old plough; the garden is a wonderful playground for Heidi and pup Billy; another fine heritage rose, 'Cardinal de Richelieu'.



There are spectacular views across the dam to the Cathedral Ranges.

Home on the farm

Before setting up the green tea business, Will and Georgie relied on fodder crops, and grazed cattle on their 360ha farm, Heatherly, about 10 minutes from the plantation. The property, with its 1920s Victorian-style weatherboard homestead, was bought by Will's parents, Barbara and John, as a country retreat for the family. They went there almost every weekend, the boys looking forward to playing cricket on the expanse of lawn, which is now a perfect playground for Will and Georgie's children, Eliza, 10, and Hugh, 8.

A grapevine drapes the verandah of the homestead, its leaves providing much-needed shade in summer. But it's the flamboyant roses, many of which climb the trees, that add striking colour.

A *Camellia sinensis* hedge lends some formality to the garden's boundary. Behind it stands a row of silver pear trees (*Pyrus salicifolia*), sheds and open farmland.

One of the couple's favourite spots is an outdoor pergola, made from milled red gum from the property. It supports wisteria and grapevines which, in spring, are heady with pollen. Wooden deckchairs and an upturned clay pot provide the perfect rustic setting for afternoon tea.

Personal touches


The garden holds special memories for Will and Georgie, as they were married here. She points out the rambling beauty of the fragrant heritage rose 'Lamarque',

which featured in her wedding bouquet. Although Georgie is adding her own touches, it's clear that she is the second generation to labour with love in the garden. There are 150 heritage roses planted by her mother-in-law, Barbara.

Will has helped out in the garden too. He has built timber supports for the rambling roses and sculpted a water feature using discs from an old plough, which fits beautifully with the farming story of the surrounding landscape.

Georgie brings her interior design skills of working with colour and texture to her home business, Heatherly Design, and to the outdoor landscape. She likes using sculpture as focal points within the garden and believes that sometimes it's important to remove plants. "We've taken out some of the larger trees and that's opened up areas, creating much-needed light and space for other things to grow," she says. A feature is a specimen Indian bean tree (*Catalpa bignonioides*) with its interesting bounty of leguminous fruit.

Friends have also contributed to the garden. They are remembered through plants such as the handsome white watsonias, which started as one small clump, and the society garlic (*Tulbaghia violacea*) that edges the central garden. And beneath a group of silver birch, a tiny gold plaque carries a poignant message: "Red: Will's loyal kelpie of 15 years".

Visit tworiversgreentea.com.au for more about Will's tea and the plantation. 



Tea-making tips

- ✘ To make perfect Japanese green tea, the water temperature needs to be right. If it's too hot, the tea is likely to be bitter and lose its delicate aroma. For example, the perfect temperature for a good cup of shicha is 60–70°C.
- ✘ Boil the water, then allow it to cool a little by pouring it into the cups, then back into the pot. This will warm the cups too.
- ✘ Remember to put your tea into the pot before pouring in the water. Allow one teaspoon of tea per person and one for the pot.
- ✘ Let the tea steep for a couple of minutes, then pour and enjoy.