



Becky Northey and her partner Peter Cook with a hat stand they grew from a seedling.

A tree shaper's life

A NEW FORM OF ART AND FURNITURE MAKING HAS EMERGED OUT OF THE SOIL NEAR THE MAIN RANGE NATIONAL PARK AS MARTIN VOLZ DISCOVERED.

Words: Martin Volz
Pictures: Richard Waugh

IN a blooming wild plum orchard, Peter Cook and his partner Becky Northey, shape tree branches into delicate patterns.

With time, these wild plum branches will thicken into chairs, tables, and mirror frames.

Using a complex wire design to support and grow the trees into leafy furniture, the pair, have been observing, learning, and observing again what happens to shaped trees – an art form known by few around the world.

Tree shaping, as Peter and Becky call it, is similar to bonsai but super sized and faster growing.

“In 1986, when I first had the idea, I kept looking at different trees,” Peter said.

“There was a big drought and there were all these plum trees in the orchard and that looked like the perfect thing.”

A tough critic, Peter, who is also a jeweller in Warwick, is starting to see the fruits of their labour, 10 years on.

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A voluptuous mirror, a crazy hat stand and some sturdy chairs sum up their range of final products.

Next year, the product range will grow with the release of their book *Knowledge to Grow*, explaining how to shape trees.

With 70 pieces growing at their home in the mountains near Yangan, the pair is documenting the growth of the wild plum while research on black cherries has just started.

Peter's first attempt at a chair involved using willow, a tree which straightens itself from any shaped pattern and continues an upward vertical growth.

Then came the gate, which now stands in the garden as a twisted sprawl of intertwined branches.

After that attempt, the idea of a mirror took hold in Peter's mind.

"He was trying to get me enthused and he said I will grow you a mirror," Becky explained.

The tree that became the mirror was planted in 1998 before being pulled out of the black fertile soil in 2004.

It was dried at the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries and then a mirror was cut and placed inside the frame.

In the meantime Becky created a website, www.pooktre.com, to show the newfangled art form.

John Gathright, a Canadian who has attempted shaping trees, then visited the orchard and asked the pair if they would exhibit their products at the 2005 world expo in Aichi, Japan.

It was there that the tree shapers found immediate interest and admiration for their work.

"They have a real appreciation of how trees grow and what they do and it comes from that bonsai influence over there," Becky said.

In Australia, interest is starting to grow.

"Some people have the imagination, most people have not," Peter explained.

"People can't visualise it because it is so new."

Its newness and greenness is what is going to take tree shaping far into the future.



Two plum trees have been grafted several times to create a stick figure.

Peter and Becky predict that cities will take on tree shaping in an effort to create clean air, showcase new art and get people back to basics.

"People like sitting in the shade of a tree," Becky said.

"I see the potential of other things you can do with the trees."

Before tree shaping takes off in urban areas though, Peter and Becky want to teach the art form properly, and it may take some time.

When a wild plum seedling is planted into the orchard, a design is created, showing the steps involved to produce the end piece of furniture.

Wire and tape are the two tools used to create a furniture frame which is a time consuming and precious exercise.

Designs can take hours and the wire support frame has to be accurate almost to the millimetre.

During the actual growth of furniture, which can take over eight years depending on what is being created, branch and tree size have to be monitored to make sure the frame is even and not growing too fast.

To prevent fast growth that will impact on the final piece, trees are pruned during winter.

After the first prune, once the tree has new shoots, it is cut back to just three leaves so that the furniture continues to grow but at a slower rate.

Light projection has to be even. Peter and Becky use glow lights to encourage growth of certain limbs to catch up to the thickness and length of other more mature branches.

"As soon as it gets a certain number of branches it shades out other branches and they stop growing," Becky said.

"Any given space of light will only grow a certain amount of weight in the timber.

"It is a balancing act."

In the case of creating green furniture, it seems less is more.

Becky said whether one or ten trees are grown in one specific area, the grower will still end up with the same amount of timber.

All of this has been learnt in the orchard or research station as Becky calls it.

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The first product Becky and Peter grew and harvested.

"This is only experimental," Becky said.

"The next trees we do will be out in the world somewhere."

To walk around the twisted, angled furniture, you would think it is anything but experimental, rather a haven of interesting shapes ranging from art to basic furniture.

Becky and Peter's two children, five-year-old Brinshard and three-year-old Sharvana, circle stickfigured human trees.

These stick figures are actually two trees grafted several times and then angled to replicate a spine, limbs and long fingernails.

Peter said all the pieces were like children to him.

His sense of care for the trees stems from a rare



The branches of this growing table support a 65kg table top.



Becky and Peter's daughter Sharvana sits in a living, leafy chair.

experience that has delivered him his home, land and tree shaping skills.

In 1985, Peter and a friend were horse riding on Fraser Island when Peter discovered ambergris – a solid matter ejected from sperm whales.

This smelly, rare substance, which has been used as a fixative in perfume for centuries, was sold to an Indonesian business man.

With that money, Peter bought the forested property where he now lives and works, below three cliff faces, above a clear stream, with fertile soil.

"I never would have found this place without that extra money," Peter said. "I wanted to be in the mountains with some good soil."

Along with patience, belief and dedication, Peter and Becky are now able to harness their energies into teaching the world about the skills and benefits of tree shaping.