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Rise of the Australian Plant Garden

Jo Hambrett

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A Short History of Australian Garden Design

There have always been people fascinated and inspired by the plants and landscape of Australia; from the earliest times of white discovery, Australia's remarkable flora and fauna have been collected, catalogued and researched.

White settlement in Australia occurred at the time of the English Enlightenment. Tim Flannery writes of the learning, compassion and intellect of the best of the early Australian settlers. People like **Phillip**, **Watkin Tench** and **Dawes** shared a great humanism and breadth of mind that was typical of the period.

At this time too the **English Landscaping School** of Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton had reached its zenith. Capability Brown changed the face of 18th century England by transforming the formal, Baroque layouts of avenues and parterres of the grand estates to informal arrangements of clumped trees, curving paths, lakes and sweeping pasture land. On Brown's death in 1783 Repton introduced subtle modifications to the way in which the house was linked to the landscape. Whereas Brown had swept the grass right up to the house, Repton designed terraces, often with balustrades of stone piers or urns carrying flowers to link the house to the park. Forested ravines and exposed cliffs were preferred to Brown's regular clumps and rounded landscapes.

The earliest gardens in the colony developed a method of gardening called "squared" - it was based on the simple geometry of straight walks, shrubberies and hedges. Like the architecture of the period the gardens followed a straight forward, ordered formula made impressive by its simplicity.



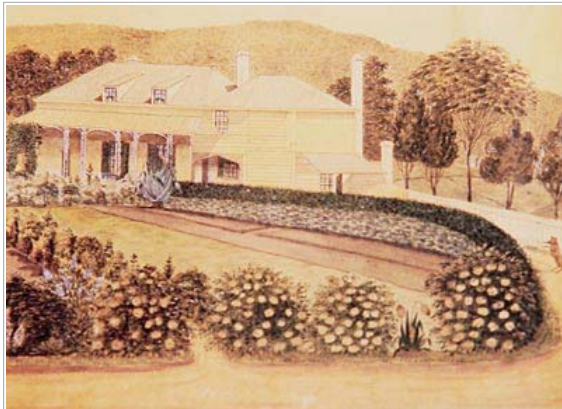
Painting depicting a landscape in the style of the English Landscaping school

As the colony prospered the influence of the Landscape movement grew and the squared layout at the front of the more substantial houses was replaced by a freer landscape planning with wide lawns and clumped trees. The small scale of colonial establishments did not allow for the total removal of flower, fruit and vegetable gardens as demanded by the true landscape tradition. They remained a sizeable and, I would imagine, necessary part of the colonial garden.

Whereas in England the existing landscape was improved and idealized, here large scale use of natural features was uncommon, native trees were retained to frame the

villas at a distance, they were rarely specimens or features, an exception was the use of araucarias noble and magnificent they were suited to the Gothick taste.

The Picturesque movement was a transitional phase bridging the Georgian and Victorian taste. It was taken up very quickly by the colony and its increasing popularity weakened the foundations of the landscape movement. It promoted textures, character and picturesque effects. "Interest" was required at every turn punctuating the soft contours of the landscape style and contrivance replaced pastoral harmony. The Picturesque was admirably suited to the scale of colonial dwellings and their often sublime settings. Examples are Vacluse House, Bronte House, Elizabeth Bay House and the Conservatorium.



Early colonial gardens.

Although the landscape style became diffused and overlaid by the gardenesque in the middle of the 19th century it did not die out completely. **William Guilfoyle** achieved a spectacular compromise between the two conflicting aesthetics of his day when he redesigned The Melbourne Botanic Gardens.

Sydney's Centennial Park shows an early attempt to use native plants as well as a series of lakes and circular driveways to achieve the grand landscape effect of contemporary English and American city parks such as Olmstead's Central Park New York.

Australia's first landscape gardener and nurseryman, **Thomas Shepherd**, a Scot like so many great gardeners and plantsmen of the 18th and 19th centuries, arrived in the colony in 1830. He was well trained in the English Landscaping School and

deplored the wanton destruction of the natural landscape by the early settlers. Whilst setting up the colony's first nursery he wrote, delivered and published a series of lectures on horticulture and wrote a series on landscape gardening which were published following his death after only 8 years in Sydney.

Artists, writers and botanists **Louisa Atkinson**, **Louisa Meredith** and **Georgiana Molloy**, extolled the beauties of Australian flora in the 19th century through their drawings, writing and research though not specifically in the context of garden design.

In the first half of the 20th century, botanists and authors **Thistle Harris** and **Florence Sulman**, and architects **Walter Burley Griffin** and his wife **Marion Mahony** championed the cause of protecting and growing Australian plants.

The Griffins were both students of Frank Lloyd Wright, famous American Modernist architect and a member of the "Chicago Prairie School, which advocated that houses be integrated into the landscape and indigenous species used in landscape design. Their 1921 plan for the suburb of Castlecrag in Sydney - "no fences, no boundaries no red roofs to spoil the Australian landscape - where architecture and landscape are inter related and the inhabitants grouped by common interest" - was sadly never fully realized, however it provided an example for future bushland suburbs.

In Victoria at the same time, **Edna Walling** was embarking on a similar venture with Bickleigh

Vale, envisaging a village of simple cottages and gardens complementing the natural bush landscape. Like Castlecrag it was a Modernist expression - a practical approach to conservation management in a residential environment. To Edna, houses should be simple, comfortable affairs and have an organic affinity with their site. Local materials should be used in the construction and the houses extended into the landscape by the use of walls, terraces, pergolas and the like.



Bickleigh Vale, Victoria. Photo: Jo Hambrett

Edna Walling was one of the earliest advocates of native plants in gardens and parks as well as along the highways. In the 1920s she was observing, identifying, collecting and then propagating them in the nursery at "Sonning". This interest would grow until by the 1950s she would only use native plants in her designs.

Edna met **Ellis Stones** in the early 1930s. Walls, steps and paving were integral to her garden designs and Ellis "Rocky" Stones was, as she said, a natural! She realized she had a real find in Ellis, who in turn absorbed the way she used plants and manipulated space. She wrote in a newspaper column in 1938.... "it is a rare thing this gift for placing stones and strange that a man possessing it should bear the name Stones. Lovely as formal gardens can be, it is these informal schemes of which boulders form so important a part, that appeal so tremendously, for the reason perhaps that they give us the atmosphere of the country and the refreshment of mind derived from such."

Ellis did the rockwork in some of the gardens at Bickleigh Vale over several years, and sometimes his children would accompany him. Daughter, Patricia found Edna's house "Sonning" different to any house she had seen and remembers its owner as "wearing jodhpurs and terribly abrupt."



Ford garden, Victoria (top), designed by Gordon Ford
Photo: Trisha Dixon

Abrupt she may have been but she set Ellis on his feet and their long and productive partnership was to have a major effect on both emerging post war garden designers and the Australian Garden Style.

After the Second World War an upsurge in nationalism and the continuing influence of Modernism helped fuel an intense involvement in this country's history and landscape. The conservation movement, which had been gaining strength in the inter war years, took on a higher public profile. Australian Plants were seen as symbols of this modernity.

The **Society for Growing Australian Plants** or SGAP came into being in Melbourne in 1957, following a response to writer Arthur Swaby's suggestion in "Your Garden" magazine that a society for the growers of Australian plants be formed. "Preservation by Cultivation" was one of the phrases often used to describe the Society's aims and objectives.

Seeking a spiritual haven and a simple lifestyle in rural Eltham near Melbourne, **Gordon Ford**, Alastair and **Margot Knox**, Clifton Pugh and many others came to build their mud brick houses amongst the

bush. The nearby artists colony at Montsalvat contributed to the culture of post war bohemia and creativity.

An eighteen year old art student at the time Margot Knox, known now for her famous mosaic garden in inner Melbourne, worked part time for Ellis Stones. He told her women have an instinctive feeling for working with stone and taught her the rudiments of stonework and paving. He explained once to her future husband Alastair that he always liked to employ women, they were easier to hire part time, were uncomplaining, cost less and were often superior to men at the work, in particular, they were more careful with the planting.!!

Gordon Ford was introduced to Ellis by Margot and began to work for him. Ford later said that he knew immediately he had found his Life's Work.

Much later, designer **Bev Hanson** would also work with Ellis Stones.

A meeting place of the Who's Who of the emerging Australian Garden Style was **Schubert's Nursery** in Melbourne, famous in the 50s and 60s for its display garden. It was here the young **Glen Wilson** heard that Walling was keen to take on paying students as work was short - he had read many of her books, knew the type of work she did and jumped at the chance to learn more - he became the only paying pupil she ever took on learning about the use of voids and space in the landscape was a priceless legacy imparted through her teaching.

A founding member of SGAP, Glen Wilson's career in landscape design and construction, as a nurseryman, lecturer and author has spanned nearly 50 years. He pioneered the concept of on site water harvesting and has a keen academic interest in Dryland and Arid Zone planting.

Twenty years ago in an article for "Landscape Australia " he wrote; "this vast dry continent with its unique flora is in sore need of sensitive, understanding landscape designers who love and respect the land. After 200 years our poor efforts in this direction are tragic; now softened in the view of some by the use of a few Australian plants, with little change in our philosophy. That we should be developing a philosophy based largely on dryland planting must now be apparent."

Another young admirer of Schubert's Nursery in the 1960s was Melbourne landscape designer, Paul Thompson. He acknowledges the influence of Glen Wilson's highly refined views on planting and design upon his own work; some of which includes Monash University, the Australian Garden at Cranbourne and the Forest Gallery at Melbourne Museum (designed by Taylor Cullity Lethlean with Paul being involved with broad design and the planting design).



Ford garden, Victoria (top). Adams' garden, Victoria (bottom), both designed by Gordon Ford.
Photos: Trisha Dixon

Development of an Australian Garden Style

Debate about the development of an **Australian garden style** is ongoing.

Paul Thompson believes that gardens with Australian plants are the only gardens we can call Australian but that there is not an apparent style that rises above the plants. He sees the bush garden as "having an informal haphazard approach" but concedes that "in its most refined state, whilst informal, it can be intricate, complex and considered as it needs to be if it is to be tranquil."

Whilst Architect Graeme Law states that: "The development of the **natural garden style** in Australia has nothing to do with style or fashion, it has to do with regional appropriateness and proud expression of our heritage. Once we become aware of our role as stewards of this earth then regional appropriateness of garden style is not a choice but a responsibility."

The Natural Garden Style in Australia, according to Gordon Ford, has been influenced by three movements - all based on the principles of asymmetrical design.

- The 18th century English Landscaping School
- The work of Edwardians Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson.
- Japanese garden culture.

We've looked at the principles of the English Landscaping School at the beginning of the lecture so we'll move on to those great Edwardians, Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson, from whom Australian designers learnt to plant in free form design --"nature improved by the artifice of man".

Asymmetrical balance is a subtle art, often far more difficult to achieve than symmetrical balance. As the indomitable Gertrude Jekyll said when writing about **line, form and group**... "if these qualities are secured, the result in after years will be a poem; if they are neglected they will be nothing but a crop!"

The creation of simulated rock outcrops and the arrangement of boulders, either on flat ground or around ponds and waterfalls, can often [but not always] reflect a Japanese influence. Japanese design did have a strong influence on Modernism throughout the 20th century.

However as Thistle Harris advised in her book in the early 1950s "rock gardening is an important aspect of Australian landscape architecture as so many of our plants grow naturally in rocky formations." I quite agree, and in my opinion the development of rock gardening in Australian design is largely independent of Japanese influence.

The design concept of the bush garden follows that of the natural garden. The bush garden is idealized bush, an aromatic and visual artifice evoking a love of the real bush. A well designed bush garden is timeless. It is a garden with a sense of region, and a sense of place.

In the 1960s Gordon Ford, Glen Wilson and others pioneered the concept of the bush garden in Victoria and **Betty Maloney** and her sister **Jean Walker** did the same in Sydney, albeit on a smaller scale. Their now seminal works "Designing Australian Bush Gardens." and "More about Bush Gardens." helped stimulate a wider interest both in the preservation of native flora and the use and value of indigenous plants in suburban gardens.

Also in Sydney, from the late sixties on, **Bruce Mackenzie**, **Harry Howard** and **Allen Correy** used indigenous planting in many large scale Public works and Parks. One of the first examples of the creation of a bushland setting on public land was associated with the redevelopment of Taronga Zoo. Apart from using only Australian plant species throughout the Australian section, the overall policy was predominantly to use species native to the Hawkesbury sandstone geology throughout the zoo.



Cockburn garden, Dural, New South Wales. Designed by Bruce McKenzie
Photos: Jo Hambrett

In Australia in the 1980s, conservation and the environment remained relevant and gardening with native plants did not. Possibly plant and garden design choice was affected by the Postmodern influences of nostalgia and retro design. The "native gardens are a jumble of dry sticks" school of thought gained popularity, as the Australian plant gardens of the 70s often failed to thrive and look suitably gardenesque, due in the main to the misguided perception that a native garden meant no maintenance.

A garden is Nature Controlled after all. It is the amount of maintenance that will dictate the look of the garden far more than the plant choice.

It was then with a sense of déjà vu that I read two books by North American designers published in the late 1980s. "The Natural Garden" by Ken Druse and "Bold Romantic Gardens" by Oehme and Van Sweden. The front flap of the former asks "What is a natural garden? It is a garden planned and designed to work with, rather than against nature. Natural gardeners take their inspiration from the environment using native plants.... they turn potential problems such as rock outcrops, steep slopes or wild trees into assets".

The front flap of the latter calls Wolfgang Oehme and James Van Sweden "revolutionary leaders of the new American Styleinspired by a natural untamed spontaneity, their gardens harmonize with the natural environment."

Australian landscape designers had begun the natural garden at least 30 years earlier - deservedly earning high praise from eminent American landscape architect Garrett Eckbo, who wrote in his book "Home Landscape", - "the Australian movement called bush gardening has probably captured the spirit of the ecological/environmental movement more completely than any work done in North America or Europe. "

It is my opinion that the **Australian Natural Garden Style**, the bush garden if you like, is a modern vernacular garden developed in response to the landscape and the needs of a community, in the tradition of all vernacular styles.

The Bush Garden, no matter how "refined, intricate, complex and considered" it may or may not be, helps to provide a practical solution to many of our current environmental challenges- threatened species, soil and water degradation and preservation, cyclic drought and salinity. As well, it is a symbolic and aesthetic expression of our wish to live harmoniously and sustainably on this planet.

It is truly a garden for the 21st century and deserves acknowledgment as such.



Jacob garden, Victoria. Photo: Pam Renouff

References

A List of recommended books and magazines, tracing the development of the Australian plant garden, appear below. Some of the early ones are out of print and are collector's items. I have used some extensively in the preparation of this talk and am indebted to the authors.

Gardens in Australia; Their Design and Care. Edna Walling 1943

Shrubs and Trees for Australian Gardens. Ernest Lord 1948

Australian Plants for the Garden. Thistle Harris 1953

Designing Australian Bush Gardens. Maloney And Walker 1966

Australian Garden Design. Ellis Stones 1971

Landscaping with Australian Plants. Glen Wilson 1975

The Great Gardens of Australia. Howard Tanner 1976

Towards an Australian Garden. Howard Tanner 1983

The Natural Garden. Ellis Stones. Anne Latreille 1990

Edna Walling and Her Gardens. Peter Watts 1991

Australian Native Gardens. Diana Snape 1992

The New Native Garden. Paul Urquhart 1999

The Natural Australian Garden. Gordon Ford 1999

New Conversations With An Old Landscape. Catherin Bull 2002

The Australian Garden. Diana Snape 2002

Australian Planting Design. Paul Thompson 2002

Australian Garden History. Vol 13 No 6 2002

And whilst not strictly garden design anything written by scientist and cultural commentator George Seddon will make you think and reflect deeply about the wide brown land.

Webmaster's Note: Additional photographs relating to this article can be found in the [Australian Garden Design Photo Gallery](#).

Jo Hambrett is the leader of ASGAP's Australian Garden Design Study Group. This is the text of a talk to the Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney (28 July 2004).

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