

## A gardener's roots reflecting on a gardener's heritage

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My maternal grandmother, an attractive lady with skin softened twice a day by moisturiser, proudly displayed *Cymbidium* orchids in her courtyard. To reach these treasures, one had to walk over crunching gravel, uncomfortable to winter-soft bare feet. These plants were carefully collected, like her sideboard's blue and white china. Mostly these willow patterned pieces, remained unused, except occasionally for the gravy jug, which was brought out for Sunday roast lunches. Christened Isabel, she taught me how to cook, encouraged crochet and instilled in me a love of plants. In her Sydney garden, I learnt the names of *Azalea*, fish-bone fern and wandering dew.

Eric, my paternal grandfather managed Woolworth's department store in Sydney's CBD. In his spare day and a half, he 'fooled around' with plants. My insomniac father, described how Eric would work on the verandah at evenings, doing plant things, keeping Dad awake. My grandfather, who I never met, was a good looking thick set man. Strong and fit, unlike my father, he died early of cancer.

Enjoying nothing more than a good read, in a house with few books, my father, John, was made to 'work' in the garden. This turned him away from gardening for life. His older brother, and their father, started a nursery in Sydney's north-west supplying plants for Woolworths. At around 14, father as absolved from garden labour.

My father's experience of my parent's garden probably wasn't enjoyable either. I remember my mother's irritation as Dad regularly mowed over the *Jacandra* she had carefully placed by the carport. In the end, she did all the mowing. As a small child, she and I planted poppies and snapdragons. Though somewhat ungainly, poppies have an irresistible smell which reminds me of my childhood. Mum gave up gardening at that house and gave up on that marriage too, but took me with her. The grass grew long.

Years later, after moving to London with my step-father, my Mum made a new garden. This one thrived and there was no lawn to mow. Hollyhocks jostled for attention amongst rosemary and hyssop. Visiting one Christmas, our young son looked out the French doors to the garden wall and exclaimed, 'rabbit'. It was his first grey squirrel.

Like Dad, I recall a child's resentment of enforced chores. On my ninth birthday, staying at a relative's rural property, I was made to pluck a duck that Dad had shot on a nearby farm dam. No doubt he considered my set task, as character forming.

Sitting by the farm gate near the peppercorn tree in blistering sunshine, I was pressed into service. I have sometimes wondered why my mother didn't intervene. Despite being allowed to sample the meat afterwards, I recall the disappointment of dealing with mouthfuls of lead shot and bones amongst the stringy flesh.

Like my grandmother, I have favourite plants, I like to gather. Hers were the orchids, which hailed from sub-tropical Asia. Succulents are my passion. I marvel at the rosette forms of *Echeveria* and *Sempervivum* — low spreading plants which evolved in tough conditions. The show stopper in my collection, is the bronze-purple of the *Aeonium* 'Schwartzkopf'.

Succulents are tough plants, which thrive on neglect and often produce dazzling flowers, which fade as months pass.

After emergency neurosurgery last year, my father has finally moved to Canberra. I have chosen him a townhouse with north east views to Mt Majura. Friends wonder if in his convalescence he'll turn to gardening. Yesterday, he was diagnosed with leukaemia. It wasn't a particular shock as we have had a warning of this disease about six weeks ago. His life is not necessarily shortened by this diagnosis – he may die like his father of some other cancer. Dad is most unlikely to garden, but I have designs on his outdoor space.

Currently, his front courtyard contains: a patch of browning grass; fold down clothesline; a lemon tree sunning itself against the brick wall and a row of Azalea, lined up like soldiers aside the stencilled concrete path. Also inherited, is a native Dendrobium orchid from the previous owner. I imagine a transformed garden. It has a paved area taking in Mt Majura; raised garden beds, with vegetables and herbs and local plants to encourage small birds, like Fairy Wrens. The grass must go. I have asked him which vegetables he prefers, as he loathes the diced carrots and broccoli served by Meals on Wheels.

This space also needs a small tough tree, perhaps a Medlar, which can cope with drought and produces edible fruit. Against the brick wall, we'll place a comfortable timber bench. There he can read, whilst I potter and carefully plant the vegetables he says he likes — potatoes, peas and tomatoes. And I might slip in a Jerusalem artichoke or two.