

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
TASMANIAN BRANCH



Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton September 2023

Interviewee:	BOB CHERRY
Interviewer:	Jean Elder
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[JE] This is an interview with Bob Cherry recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking with Bob about his life as a nurseryman and plant breeder. The interview is taking place on Monday the 11th of September 2023 at Gawler, Tasmania. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.

The Australian Garden History Society acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.

So welcome Bob. Thank you for taking part in our Oral History Program. Can I start talking with you about your early life: the year you were born and where you grew up?

[BC] Well, I was fortunate – or unfortunate – to be born on the 1st of September, the first day of spring, 1945.

Why unfortunate?

Well it was important because it was springtime and the first (there you are, I'm confused already). The first of spring has symbolism for me because I just love the plants.

So, fortunate that it was a good time – in looking back in later years – we had a good life, we had no warfare, we had plenty of money, plenty of resources and we lived in the best spot in the world.

Tell me about that. Where did you originally grow up?

I grew up on the Central Coast of New South Wales but was born in the Royal North Shore Hospital and lived in Willoughby for the first five years of my life.

My earliest memories are when I was three years old, I was sucking my dummy [laughs] (which I shouldn't admit to) and it fell out the bedroom window into a blue hydrangea and I can still remember looking down past the blue hydrangea at my dummy sitting on the ground. So, plants are my earliest memories.

The next memory I clearly remember was, at Willoughby we had two old formal double camellia trees. One was probably *Alba Plena* and the other one, possibly William Bull, and my sister and I used to sit there and peel the formal double flowers out and make confetti out of them, and that house, sadly, has been bulldozed for units many years ago.

Then we moved to the Central Coast. Mum was always a gardener, but it was difficult. We lived on a rocky hillside, no town water, just tap water. Typical Sydney sandstone, solid rock, with very little topsoil. So Mum struggled but I can still remember her Crimson Glory rose and some old carnations, a lemon tree and a couple of orange trees.

I was very fortunate that nearby was a five-acre block which was run as a market garden by an old lady – well old at the time – I suppose she

was about 40 [laughs] but she seemed very old (when you're only several years old) and this was alluvial flat ground, it had a creek running through it and it had a well and she also farmed goats. And for some reason or another we got on well together and she encouraged me to garden.

How old were you then?

I was about nine years old, and so it was very fortunate because she had unlimited water, beautiful black soil and a herd of goats which provided her with all the manure. So it was kind of like winning the lottery for a nine-year-old to have all these things and someone who'd help them.

This woman – Mrs Smith – helped me by encouraging me to grow plants from seed and one of my first memories of the seed I grew and sold were coleus plants with coloured leaves, which I grew in old jam jars, and I know the best one I got two shillings for and as the colours – I walked around the neighbourhood – and as the best colours got removed from my tray (of only about a dozen) I only asked for a shilling for the lesser ones. So that was way back ...

4:50 And you'd grow the seeds in cottonwool with water?

Oh no, no, nothing like that, no, no. This is a bushy, it was just done the old-fashioned way, just throwing them on the ground and covering them with soil, and water.

So, we ended up buying that five-acre block of land, but Mum wanted running water and indoor plumbing and other things so, at the age of sixteen we moved to a town block in Gosford.

I was never much good at school, disliked it completely, used to just look out the window at the trees. Scored enough marks to just survive each year [laughs], no more – they couldn't actually put you back. So when I was sixteen, I decided I'd had enough of school and Mum said that if I took up a trade course (which I was only interested in horticulture), so I got myself a job when I was still in school, in a nursery (which was Burbank Seed Farms, in those days) and enrolled at Tech, did a horticulture course at Tech for three years.

That was at the Ryde School?

Ryde School of Horticulture.

So my first job, as I say, was at a nursery called Burbank, which used to import a lot of camellias and azaleas and the owner, George Taylor, used to also do breeding of azaleas, which tickled my fancy, you know, I'd like to do that as well. So, even when I was working there, I started buying azaleas and hybridizing azaleas at the age of sixteen.

So he taught you some of the techniques?

Oh well, it's ... natural.

Explain it a bit more to me.

It was natural in as much that many – I've found that over the years, I've done my crossing, as long as you get the pollen from the flower to the stigma – the other flower – (it doesn't matter how you do it, whether you use a cottonwool brush, camel hair brush I should say) or whether you just use your fingers, anything, it doesn't matter, as long as the job gets done.

So, one thing I learnt from this is that from every cross you did you obtained about 500 seeds and being a good grower of plants, you generally got, you know, 499 out of 500 to grow. But you're alright until you did, you know, 40 or 50 crosses, which you don't realise but then you have to pot up ...

20,000 seeds.

... 25,000 seedlings. So, that was the first lesson I learnt.

Soon after, I chucked that job in after a year and worked as a gardener at, what used to be called the Hawkesbury Inn Restaurant, which was at Mount White, on the old Pacific Highway, and I was the gardener; I'd pick up the meat from the butchers; and I'd look after the dining room (the plants in the dining room) and mow the lawns and altogether a very nice life.

I got sick of that after – I didn't get sick of it after a year – but moved on to working in a wholesale nursery for 12 months.

Is that the one near Gosford?

This was one which no longer runs. It used to be at East Gosford – called Robin Crest Nursery and the gentleman's name was Len Stone.

So by this time I was nineteen, or getting on for twenty, and I was more or less running this small nursery. Well I thought that I was running it and asked for a pay increase and I was getting nine pound a week at the time and the truck drivers were getting 17 pound a week [laughs] and I thought I was worth more money and got offered another ten shillings a week which I didn't think was adequate so I said goodbye.

And, learnt a lesson. Went to the employment people, government employment agency, to see whether they had some part-time work I could do and all I got was a rousing, 'Oh you shouldn't leave your job. You had a good job, why did you leave it?' and what not. So they were pretty useless but I managed to get casual work where I earned as much in a day as I'd earned in a week.

In gardening, still?

Yeah, doing gardening and working in another nursery – an orchid nursery.

So I worked for a couple of years, a few days a week. Meanwhile I'd built myself a heated greenhouse in my parents' backyard.

To continue your seed propagation, or ...?

Well, actually I built the greenhouse during this three-year-period and it was heated with an old coal boiler and sometimes you'd wake up in the middle of the night, the safety valve would stick open and you'd walk outside and there'd be steam going 40 foot up in the air and this great roaring noise and you had to throw a bucket of water onto the old coke boiler to cool her down.

10.28 What did the neighbours think?

[Laughs] Well the neighbours didn't seem to mind. They probably didn't know what it was. And there were no neighbours at the back at the time. There was a new subdivision adjoining the parents so I'd started a little nursery in the parents' backyard and from the greenhouse I expanded a bit and then I decided I'd start selling plants, so I put a little sign up and advertised in the classified ads in the local papers and worked up from humble beginnings and then brought the two blocks of land adjoining and expanded the nursery.

As typical of my life, I got sick of that after a while as well [laughs]. The public was very good but I was too good (not too good for the public) the public liked my advice and I gave a very good service and offering good advice and then I decided I'd start a wholesale nursery, mainly to provide my own retail outlet. But when I started the wholesale I said I didn't really need the retail, so I closed the retail down. Which in hindsight was probably not the best thing to have done but then I started growing wholesale. I bought a 200-acre block of land at Kulnura, 50 miles north of Sydney, and built a house and started the wholesale nursery and closed the retail nursery down.

That was in 1972?

Yes, '71, '72.

Did you get help and advice doing that or you did this on you own?

Well, I always just wanted to grow plants and you just outgrew. It's easy to propagate from seed or cutting plants but they take up room as they grow and our nursery ended up at Kulnura, covering 25 acres of nursery area, employing 35 people, which became ...

And that was over a 40-year-period?

That was over a 40-year-period. I brought the land at Kulnura; it was a government auction. The land had been surrendered and it was usually marginal land. In this case it was a dirty (200-acre block) with a dirty great big canyon through the middle of it, 300 foot deep, but at the bottom of the canyon was unlimited spring water, tree ferns, stag horns, birds' nests on the trees. To me it was ideal.

What I didn't realise – once again, hindsight's a lovely thing – is that the Sydney sandstone area is so shallow in soil, it's so patchy, and suffering from hot, dry, westerly winds, it was very hard to keep the water up to a garden. But we persevered and we ended up with 25 acres of garden.

And it was called Paradise?

Well, we just called it Paradise: the nursery name used to be Paradise Plants.

And from the photographs and descriptions in Derelie's book, *Two Dogs and a Garden*, you built a magnificent, absolutely magnificent property, working with stone, working with plants?

Yes, I've always loved stonework. I always used to envy the drystone walls at the Everglades and around the Blue Mountains and always wanted a stone wall, so I started off with a modest stone wall and was quite pleased with my results and did a bigger one and a bigger one and a bigger one and finally left many unfinished jobs around the property [laughs]. But during this time, I used over 600,000 bricks in the garden and many, many truckloads of stone.

As usual in my life, there's something left unfinished. I seem to never quite finish things until I move on to something else, and then ...

Forty years is a long time. So you had a chance to do ... gardening?

Oh you do a lot of gardening, so you got a mature garden. [brief pause]

14.45 What, for you, looking back over that 40 years were the highlights? It must have been busy with 35 staff but were there some highlights, working in that garden?

No. [Laughs] Life was one big highlight. The fact is I was doing exactly what I wanted to do. I was enjoying every minute of it, I was reasonably successful most of the time, except when the bank manager knocked on my door and wanted some money back and things like that, which happened on occasion.

You had your normal ups and downs with economic cycles but basically, I was doing exactly what I wanted to do.

I got interested in camellias when I was still retailing and I put together a collection of camellias. We probably had one and a half thousand camellias in our old garden. We had probably – I used to go to China twice a year collecting plants and seeds (we'll get to that at a later date perhaps) – and so we had a very large collection of wild-collected plants in the garden: magnolias and michelias, rhododendrons, and particularly camellias, were our interest.

And were there – just in terms of being a nurseryman – were there particular criteria for selecting plants for commercial propagation? Were there criteria you used?

Well, the nursery trade has changed over the years. When I was growing up, every town, every suburb, had a nursery, just about. They were all run by mums and dads, or retired butchers or bakers. Very few of them were there for the love of plants, they were there because they could make some money. In the '60s, most of these nurseries closed down and were replaced with garden centres where they stocked a very good range of plants.

When the nurseries were local it was much better for the outsider, the customer, the retail customer to buy plants, even though there wasn't a great range, but every local nursery grew and knew what grew well in that suburb. And usually they grew their own cuttings – they went out and got the cuttings themselves, planted themselves, potted themselves, they knew where their stock plant came from and they knew that was a good variety, like, a particular rose might have done well, say, in Sydney, but the same rose might not have done well in Hobart, or different suburbs of Sydney. So the retailer more or less grew a lot of his plants himself, sourced locally, and offered good advice for local ...

The same applied to bedding plants and seedlings. Up till the '80s or '90s, but particularly when I was growing up in the '50s and '60s, people planted lots of annuals, lots of bedding plants. The front fence usually had a bed with 50 poppies or 50 stock, beds of cinerarias, and once again, these were grown, we'll say, semi-locally in as much that Yates (a seed company, had a branch in Sydney, they had another branch in Hobart), Andersons Seeds, and they produced the seed in their own growing areas for sale in that same conditions.

This day and age, it's one plant suits all. It might be raised in California or Chile or the UK and is marketed worldwide and it doesn't necessarily do well in Sydney, as it would in London or Amsterdam or somewhere like that.

So that's a bad thing with horticulture these days is that you can buy a very good range of product at the supermarket or the Bunnings, in particular, you get a very good range, very diverse range of plants, from tropical plants in the middle of winter, to fruit trees and everything else. But they're produced basically for Australia-wide or worldwide markets, and a lot of people nowadays get very irate that a lot of the plants they buy are not good for their climate, not good for their suburb. And unfortunately, I think this is a bad thing.

Was that change part of the ... I'm just interested, after 40 years with the nursery, was that change happening, was that partly driving your decision to leave?

Well it changed that from an owner/operator growing their own plants, to garden centres which got more involved and had gift shops and coffee shops. So it was a money-making venture more than a plant-growing venture and, as I say, half the time it was a retired banker or butcher or baker or someone who run it. Didn't care about the plants. They might have had staff there that was knowledgeable, but they only wanted to make money out of it.

And with the improvement in transportation, the nurseries could stock plants sourced from Cairns or Hobart or anywhere, which were eagerly awaited by the customers, but quite often ...

20.59 Didn't do well.

Proved to be disappointing.

So this is a problem these days.

And it's probably partly, (I'm moving now on to talking about your plant breeding) which is probably quite important that the plant breeding leads to much more genetic diversity, which is a good thing across the world? I mean, it's a different issue from what you've been talking about just now.

Yes, well it's a good thing in two regards: a good thing and a bad thing. I've always bred ... I started off breeding azaleas and then I started breeding camellias and, of course camellias suit the Sydney climate, so I was growing things that were good for the area. We learnt of course, when you try and market things overseas – you try and get your product grown in other countries – and basically learnt how fortunate we were to be on the east coast of Australia, with the good climate and that not all the world was the same.

The other thing, with breeding, if you want to make money out of plant breeding, you've got to breed things which sell worldwide. And most of the population in the world live in home units or flats and home units, don't have the quarter-acre block or the acreage that we have and so the plants what are in vogue overseas basically just had to look pretty in the pot, bushy. From an economical point of view, they've got to be small, because you can fit twice as many in a trolley, which means twice as many in the truck which means half the freight cost.

So these are the kind of criteria that ...?

Yes, so, with things like marguerites, common old marguerites, you go to a garden centre these days and see a beautiful range of marguerites, most of which were bred in Sydney by the way. But they're bred for the world market, and they're bred just to look good at the point of sale when you walk into a Bunnings or a supermarket, you see it 'Oh isn't that beautiful.' It's got a lot of flower. You take it home and half the time it dies as well and you wonder why, I feed it and I feed it and it won't grow bigger than six inches, you know, because it was bred to be six inches high, whereas people wanted a marguerite a metre high.

So we learnt from breeding plants. You either breed things for peoples' gardens which are going to be good garden plants around the east coast of Australia or like climates around the world, or you have to produce mass-produced plants which can be grown quickly and easily and have a wow factor. So the plant with a wow factor is not necessarily a good tree thirty years on.

So did you end up doing a mix of those?

Oh we ended up doing a mix, of course. Yes, we started breeding lavenders, and we sold many millions of those around the world. It sounds good but you only make a few cents royalty on each plant, so you don't get rich doing it. But you get to meet some nice people and travelling, in the profession.

Just while we're talking about ... as part of that you also developed a seed, was that Paradise Seed, a company with John Robb. Is that still going?

It is still going, although I sold my share back to John Robb only last week.

It come about in a strange manner – we'll regress here and go backwards. When I moved to Kulnura, I found myself a wife, a dear lady called Barbara and had three nice daughters. She was keen on the garden, particularly growing vegetables and living in the bush but she didn't discourage me from travelling and in the early '80s I was a member of the Australian Rhododendron Society and in their magazine there was a proposed trip to New Guinea to look at rhododendrons growing in the wild. I thought 'Oh gee, wouldn't it be nice to do that.' Something I'd always wished to do. So I rang up and 'Oh, yes, you're welcome to come along.' I thought they'd have hundreds of people wanting to go along but managed to scratch up half a dozen people. So we had three weeks going through the highlands of New Guinea looking and collecting Vireya rhododendrons, with people with similar interests. There was a member from Adelaide Botanical Gardens who imported plants to Australia and we sent plants to New Zealand. And so, all in all, it was very successful and I thought 'Oh this is lovely, I'd love to do this.' And a few months later, low and behold, in the Camellia Society journal they were advertising a trip for a month to China, to Western Yunnan, which up to that time had been closed to the West, since the 1940s. So I thought 'Oh, I'll see if I can go there.' Yes, I was allowed to go along on that trip. It was run by Mr Harold Fraser who was a retired government agronomist from Wagga Wagga who was also a keen camellia fellow. So there were 40 key camellia people from around the world, from the UK and America and New Zealand and ...

27:11 You would have been in heaven

Going around. So my wife, thankfully, let me go along (probably very glad to get rid of me for a month). And even though conditions were crude and the roads were crude, we went down the old Burma Road, right down to Burma and saw camellias in the wild. We weren't allowed to collect plants 'Oh no you can't collect anything, but you can look at them,' and so over the next few years I went back to China with Harold on three or four more occasions and each trip we were sponsored by the Kunming Botanical Institute or Botanical Gardens, who, basically were looking for friends and foreign currency so they run a few trips. So I got to know the Director there and the Shanghai Botanical Gardens.

Anyway, as a result of this, we had a visit to my garden by the Director and his interpreter – from Shanghai and Kunming Botanical Institutes – and they said ... they're organising a trip for the Sydney Botanical Gardens to go plant collecting in China and they could collect what they wanted and they were going for six weeks and they're going all round Yunnan and I said, 'Oh gee, I'd like to go on that'. 'Oh, just check with the Director,' said Guan, of the Sydney Botanical Gardens. 'He wouldn't

mind you going, and we'd love to have you come along.' So I got on to the Director of the Sydney Botanical Gardens and he said 'Well, you know the people at the Institute, we'd welcome your addition to our group.'

This was in '88 or '87 when it was getting organised - it was going to be in October – and in September '88 you had the Tiananmen Square massacre and the Sydney Botanical Gardens backed out. Everyone who was going to go from the Gardens was keen on going but the unions, at that time, there were two factions of the Labor party – you had one what favoured China and one what favoured Russia – and the staff at the Sydney Botanical Gardens was covered by the Russian part of the trade union movement, or the Russian [indistinct] and they wouldn't let the members go.

So, the first I heard of this the Director of the Kunming Botanical Gardens rang me up and said 'Would you like to come? If you can find half a dozen friends, we'd love to take you around, you can do this trip for six weeks and collect all the plants you'd like.' So I thought that was pretty good. We'd had a quarantine house for several years before this. So for six weeks I travelled around with other keen horticulturalists from Australia, who were all friends of mine and we collected plants which we brought in legally, through Quarantine to our own quarantine house.

The next year, Sydney Botanical Gardens was allowed to go but they wanted me along. They said, 'You can organise it for us.' [Laughs] So, they went along, and I went with them a second time. And after that I used to take a group of – a small group – of garden tourists, only people who loved the garden. We'd go on mystery tours, I'd say – they'd ring up and say, 'Where are we going?' and I'd say 'We're going to look for plants, if you want to come, come. If you want to know where we're going, don't come. Wherever they take us where there's plants, suitable for the Sydney climate, that'll suit me admirably.

31:21 So how many times did you do that? What size group?

I'd only ever take 10 or 12 people because we had a 24-seater bus and that'd mean that everyone had two seats – room for their camera, room for their collecting bags and whatnot [laughs]. So they didn't mind. Usually I had repeat people coming back. In the end I had an Irish man who'd come; I had a New Zealander that lived in England; a New Zealander would come; an American would come quite consistently. So we never made it that there were too many people.

I went back in the autumn, when you could collect seed (as well as plants, of course), but seed in the northern autumn, and in the springtime (or various times) camellias flower in January/February (it's quite early); roses and blossom trees in China, like England, May/June is summertime or flowering time. So we varied our times when we went and for ten years went back twice a year, till roughly the year 2000.

Meanwhile, back in my private life I'd got divorced and later on met my present wife, Derelie, who's sitting there. [Indicates his wife sitting nearby] 'Hello dear' [laughs].

Yes, that sounds an amazing couple, well decades, really – for ten years you did that in terms of tours, bringing back many seeds and plants.

Yes.

So the plant breeding took off at that point, with the camellias?

Well, we used different species. Plant breeding is basically a slow process. When you're growing a camellia, you do your pollinating, you don't collect the ripe seed for six months, you sow it the next spring and three or four years later it will bless you with a bloom, when you, nine times out of ten, throw it straight out. Then, if you thought it was reasonable, you'd grow it for another few years, then you might throw it out. And it's usually about ten years before you get one on the market, built up in quantity to be able to sell.

Patience and perseverance.

Yes. Once you got the first year's crop flowering the others just followed behind, sort of thing, but you need patience, you need perseverance and you need a big purse because it costs money. So that's why there's not as much of it done as there should be done because the rewards are very poor.

And I understand you have a camellia named after you? *Camellia cherryana* – is that correct?

No, no, never heard of the rotten thing, no [laughs]. Cherryana? That means it comes from Cherry, the name – Cherryana means it comes from the source of cherry.ⁱ

Oh, perhaps we've got that incorrect. Have you got any camellias named after you?

No.

Not that you know of.

I've got one I've picked out which I'm calling Bob's Best or Cherry's Choice, named after me, which isn't on the market yet, which is my favourite camellia – not everyone's cup of tea but we'll show it to you later.

And are there some camellias named for Derelie?

Ah [laughs]. Well camellias ... the Paradise strain of camellias, in the sasanquas, were named generally female names. I'd started with my Mum and my sisters and then went to my daughters and nieces and then workers in the nursery and their friends, and Derelie picked out one she wanted named but it got named something else in our moving. But she now has one that she's picked out that is going to be named but it's not

on the market yet: very pretty, frilly, pink. Because Derelie's always a pink person.

Great.

35:48 Now Bob, you talked about Derelie and, as we've mentioned Derelie published the book *Two Dogs and a Garden*, about Kulnura but can you give me – and Derelie's travelled with you extensively in China and other parts of the world – but first of all tell me how did you and Derelie meet?

Well, by coincidence, we were having a display of plants – staging a display of plants – at the Melbourne Flower Festival, which we did for several years. I'd been divorced for five or six years and had these thoughts that 'Oh, I wouldn't mind getting married again.' And you'd look at the thousands of people wandering around through the flower festival and couldn't find anyone, and no one wanted me, and I was standing in the tent looking out at the passing parade and behind me I heard a cough, a gentle cough, and I looked around and there was a short, slight, lady in pink, pink from head to toe. (Yes, you had your pink thing on) [laughs]. And she introduced herself and said she'd been trying to catch up with me. It turned out she'd been at the garden, two years in a row, at our Open Weekend and brought plants from the garden or flowers, particularly poppy flowers and I'd never got to know her and, in fact, in hindsight it turned out that she'd opened the door to the house and walked in thinking it was a restroom and checked the house out first of course. So I hadn't met her before when we met at the Melbourne Flower Festival. She was there to interview Clive Blazey and she said would I be interested in writing a book. She was a publishing editor for a book company and would I be interested in writing a book on my travels to China, and I said 'Well I'm not very good at writing and what not, but if you'd like to come up and look around the garden (because I liked what I saw – the pink floosie or whatever) [laughs].

Two weeks later, up comes Derelie (late as usual) and I got sick of waiting, and I had my 20-year-old daughter, or 18-year-old daughter, who was going to university but was having a little episode with over-abundance of drugs, cannabis, so she was at home. So I was wandering around the garden, sick of waiting for Derelie to turn up and Derelie goes to the house and thinks the 18-year-old is my young wife and said 'Where's Mr Cherry?'

'He's out in the garden.'

So she was sent out in the garden to look for me by my daughter and we were wandering around and Derelie had been rushing of course, (and it wasn't easy to find our nursery, I must admit), so she was a bit flustered, so I said 'Let's have a look around the garden first, and then we'll go and have a cup of tea.' (Don't laugh, sorry you'll have to delete some of this).

I said to Derelie 'Well let's go for a walk', and she said 'What a good idea.' And she said 'Oh, you've got a young wife in there', and I said 'No, that's not my wife, that's my daughter.' I said, 'I'm not married, I was

married once but I'm divorced now, and she said (in quite a shrill voice), 'I've never been married, I've never been married before.'

'Oh' I said to myself 'there's hopes here.' So we proceeded to wander around the garden and we had a lovely dam full of water lilies (in fact, a friend in England called it the 10th Wonder of the World), because at the right time of the day – about 11.00am – you had the morning water lilies and the afternoon water lilies all flowering together and there was this acres of water lily flowers, and it was absolutely spectacular. So Derelie was admiring these water lilies and – being a nasty fellow – I happened to stop next to an ant heap and she didn't see it, she was busy looking at the water lilies. Before long she had ants climbing up her trousers.

40:32 Not kind!

Not kind. So I'm afraid I laughed [laughs] I haven't improved over the years but she's still with me (only just!).

And I gather you've done lots of travelling in other parts of the world? Apart from China where else have you been travelling with Derelie collecting?

We've been, well with Derelie, mainly England. Derelie would much prefer that we travel and look at gardens than look at plants in the wild – no, that's not right really because she loves looking at plants in the wild – but most of my Chinese collecting had been done when Derelie come. We did collecting in Vietnam – it opened up in 1990, to the West – and we had some nice collections from there. Generally speaking, Derelie and I travelled extensively throughout Australia looking at flower shows; New Zealand; and many times to the UK, looking at roses.

America?

To go back a bit here, I started saying that when Derelie had got bitten by the ant, we adjourned for lunch and she brought out this mangled ant that she'd killed and so I gave it a decent burial later. But anyway, my daughter had prepared a nice lunch for us, we were sitting at the table and Derelie said 'I'm going to France next week to look at roses. I'm going to Meilland's Nursery.' And I said 'Well, I've never been there. I don't like French people', which is a silly thing to say, but at the time I hadn't met many French people and I said 'Oh, you'd better take me along, I'd better come along and look after you.' And I said 'Well, I'm going next month to England to look at a garden belonging to the Vice-President of the Rose Society and a few good friends I've got over there.'

And so, Derelie thought about it and thought 'Oh, maybe we could go together?'

So, we got together and we had a lovely month, looking at roses in the UK and France and meeting lovely people, and on our return Derelie found that she'd been made redundant. So she thought, well there's no reason I can't move into Kulnura. She's been in my life ever since. So that's an old story but ...

That's a lovely story, thank you.

Except for the ants.

And – Kulnura coming to an end – what were the drivers of making that decision and the move to Tasmania? How did that come about?

I'd always had a desire to live in Tasmania because of the climate. We had an extensive garden at Kulnura and we had a large nursery but the problem was the climate at Kulnura was not congenial for gardening. It was a lovely climate to grow plants in, but it was difficult to maintain them.

Every year you got hot, dry, winds from August to November, which made it very difficult to plant plants out and you had to have time to water, so it was difficult gardening in Kulnura. It was hard work gardening in Kulnura.

My family – my children – had grown up. They weren't interested in the nursery and from the age of 60 I decided I'd move to Tasmania, and I'd tried to sell the place, which took six years to sell it but we finally sold it and moved to Tasmania, because of the better climate.

Where we live at Gawler, which is in the north-west of Tasmania, it's an absolutely delightful climate. If you pull up a weed in the winter and put it on top of the ground it says 'Oh thank you. Come back and pull me out again in six months time' – they just won't die. You can't kill a weed; therefore you can't kill a tree.

So, on limited means, you can do a lot more gardening than you can at Kulnura.

45:07 And can you grow different plants than you did in Kulnura?

We can't grow frangipanis or poinsettias or hibiscus here, but we can grow a range of plants which are, shall we say, more traditional plants. And if we go back here to when I was a child, when I was 12 years old I used to borrow gardening books from the local library (and many of these on great gardens of the UK and great gardens of Europe) and I'd look at the bushland around me and I could picture it covered with azaleas and rhododendrons and cherry blossom, and all the pictures we saw in these books of rhododendrons would grow well in England and the cherry blossom will grow well in England, and the lilacs and all these things that we were brought up to be, on your diet of gardening books, you found that it didn't grow in Sydney, although you could grow their relatives. You mightn't be able to grow the English ones, but you could grow other tropical forms of cherry tree and lilac, and just about everything, but they weren't available. That's why we did our plant collecting, we collected from areas where the climate was similar to the Sydney climate, because, as I say, you'd look at a garden book or a notable passage from Kingdon-Ward, who's a native plant collector, and he's wandering around the lower hills in Burma and said 'Oh, there's beautiful gordonia here but we won't collect it because it's not hardy in the UK.'

And my attitude you read such a sentence, you know, 'You bastard, you could have sent it to Kulnura', but of course they didn't. They got sent to Europe and the plants for early Australian gardens were imported from Europe, and not from the wild in China.

So, a lot of the plants that we were brought up to love and adore, I couldn't grow, but you could grow in Tasmania and, anyway ...

And I understand that the reading of those books, way back when you were 12 and 13, also started your thoughts about landscaping? You had – as you talked about it – you could imagine all these camellias and azaleas, so those ideas, well certainly in Kulnura you did lots of landscaping and here in Gawler you're doing the same. Tell me, how does that work? How do you get the ideas?

Well, it's like any garden, it starts, grows like topsy, you start saying oh okay I've got camellias, where am I going to plant them. So you plant the first ten, twenty, thirty, forty or fifty, whatever the case may be, and each year you collected more and more and then you had to find room to plant them. So you started getting a bigger garden and a bigger garden and meanwhile you had this love of looking at other peoples' gardens and you'd go to England and you'd look at these beautiful stone walls what were built when the lord of the manor could employ a stonemason for a two shillings a week or something and then you'd go home and think 'Oh, I could build a stone wall there.' And you'd admire stone walls at the Blue Mountains and some of the better gardens and thought well if I build a stone wall there, it'd improve things. Well I built this or I built that, so you'd start building a stone wall. Stonemasons aren't readily available so you had to do it yourself and I found I had a (not an affinity for stone), but I loved working with stone and building stone walls and so I started using the local sandstone and ironstone around Kulnura and building stone walls, using lots of bricks as well.

And then, when we come to Tasmania, we were looking at the fact that our previous garden was 25 acres and much too big, we decided to come to Tasmania to live so we could grow the plants I wished to grow. By the time I come to Tasmania I was 70 years old and I said 'I don't want another 25-acre garden. I don't want a five-acre garden, I don't want a two-acre garden. I'm going to buy an acre block of land in a town, with town water and red soil.'

And we were travelling around Tasmania looking, and what the wife would like I didn't like, and what she'd like and vice versa, so we had trouble finding a site. And when our sale at Kulnura finally came through, we were actually in Tasmania at the time visiting another native garden, Kaydale Gardens, where we had lunch, and talking to the owner Kay, and she said 'Why don't you go and see Mr Mott, he's got a nice garden in Gawler and he'd sell you his garden. He's been trying to sell it for years.'

And I said I didn't know the garden, didn't know where it was so we had lunch at Kaydale and then we were heading back to the ferry that evening to go back to Sydney, so we had half an hour to spare so we

went and looked at Mr Mott's garden, which was a 14-acre lot with about three acres of garden. But the garden was mature, it was 50 years old, so we've got 50-year-old deodars and 50-year-old ginkgoes and some other trees (unfortunately, what I call supermarket trees, ones what everyone can buy, not wild-collected, not unique) but nevertheless a few acres of mature trees. The garden was very overgrown but it was well-stocked with bulbs, particularly fritillarias, daffodils, blue bells, and not many camellias.

We had a look around the garden and my dear wife loved flowers (as she still does) and there was a patch of Palma violets in full flower – a double blue and double white – Palma violets, which smelt divine. So I started picking them. I always feel that I'm entitled to pick anything in anyone's garden, I don't ask, I just do it, out of compulsion. So we started picking some of Mr Mott's violets and he bent down and picked some too, so we soon had a wonderful bunch of Palma violets and I said to Derelie 'Oh I wouldn't mind living there', and she said 'I wouldn't mind living there,' as well. Well, it blew me over that we both – the house was built in the '70s of dirty white brick, with a dirty grey tiled roof waving in the wind, and bits falling off. The house hadn't had any work done on it for 50 years but the garden was quite – had potential.

So on the ferry that night we discussed the matter and rang Mr Mott up and said we'd take it. So that was in September and we moved down in the January of the next year. All because of a bunch of Palma violets.

[Laughs] Another great story.

And you've created another paradise here?

Yes. When I first came, I missed my stone and down here the predominant stone round here is basalt and all the old gardens have lines of basalt and farmers have heaps in their paddocks, so I started remodelling the garden that we had. We rebuilt the house completely, pulled it down to the slab, added to the house and built the house.

Meanwhile we'd bought another two acres next door which had some old camellia trees and added that to our garden, so we now had 16 or 18 acres of land with a lovely river through it and we thought 'Well we can plant a few more trees.' When we came down, we brought a container load of camellias with us and michelias and planted those and one just couldn't help oneself, one just kept planting and building.

And building.

And I recall that in Derelie's book *Two Dogs and a Garden*, she mentions that whenever you're starting out on a landscape or a stone wall, she wonders what image is going to arise and it might have been something related to the travelling: whether it be the Eiffel Tower or other stuff. Is it suddenly they come to mind and you're building and before you know it an Eiffel Tower? So I'm wondering what's going to happen down here.

Well all my life I've been wandering around and you'll see a valley which might be a couple of miles long and you think 'Oh wouldn't it be lovely if

we dammed that valley and had a 50-acre lake and put trees all around it', so I've always landscaped blocks of land in my imagination and always wished for a big garden.

Anyway, so we bought this 16-acre block and we just kept growing like topsy and we still keep growing.

And you started plant breeding as well?

Well we had the plant breeding business which we called Paradise Seed Company which provided all the plants that we sold at our company called Paradise Plants. Most of these plants have plant patents, plant breeders' rights and some we sell worldwide and some we sell around Australia but we don't do the growing, we just do the breeding, other people do the growing.

55:14 And tell me why are you breeding michelias?

Michelias are one of these things, they're evergreen magnolias and you could always only buy *Michelia doltsopa*, *compressa* – anyway a few species. In our collections in China we found superior forms of all these species – we imported them. We had a magnificent magnolia called *Magnolia maudiae*, Golden Temple, which we obtained from a garden in China called the Golden Temple Garden in Kunming and we'd had yellow forms and green forms and red forms and we had this germplasm of michelias and we thought well we'll start breeding some michelias.

Michelias are a bit worse than camellias, they take several years to flower and are not easy to propagate so they don't get around but the fact that we had the finest collection of michelias in the world (or some of the finest forms which weren't commonly available) which we crossed with old-fashioned Port Wine magnolia and yellow Port Wine magnolia etc – and we come up with some beautiful michelias, some with small flowers, some with large flowers (I had thirty or forty of them).

The drawback with the michelias is they're not readily propagated from cuttings; they can be propagated with difficulty; they're difficult for tissue-culture. So they've been slow to bring on the market. We do sell a few varieties but we have a lot more in the garden that we haven't put on the market yet.

And ... cut flowers, are they a big part of your life now?

Yeah well, in moving to Tasmania, as we've stated with camellias and michelias, it's a several-year crop to get from the time you decide to fertilise the plant, to the time you flower a plant. So, at age 70 I said, look, I haven't got trees left in me, I can only breed annuals and perennials [laughs]. So we started working on diascias and plants what you can see the results from your crossing in one year.

Right, so that's – hence the cut flowers and ...?

Yeah, well we grow Iceland poppy – a strain called Matilda – which was called by Yates (we used to supply the seed to Yates in Sydney, who distributed it). We've also grown seed which we sell to cut-flower growers

and other bedding-plant growers and I've been growing poppies since I've been at Kulnura: fifty years. And every so often, I get in and hand-pollinate and improve the colours and – although usually we just open-pollinate – collect the seed off the better few plants each year.

Where to from now, at Gawler? What are your future plans?

[Laughs] Well, at age 78 I don't know that there's much future left but we hope we've got another 10 or 12 years. At the moment we're working on a lily pond and a little lake system (or a series of ponds), which'll be finished in a week or two. I've still got a wall or two in me, but not big ones.

No Eiffel Towers?

Ah, when we were digging the dam the other day we found a nice outcrop of shale, so we found that it's very good shale for building walls, and I've always wanted to build a shale wall, so now I've got my own source of shale, so now I have a little quarry producing my own rock [laughs].

I can feel a few more walls coming on.

Definitely.

Finally, I'd just like to (we're getting to close the interview) but what are your thoughts about climate change and impact? Are you noticing this here at Gawler yet?

From my travels, with plants growing in different parts of the world, and travelling around I don't think climate change is a recent phenomena – it's been going on for thousands or millions of years.

If you fly over the Himalayas and Mt Everest you can see where the glaciers – there's five different cycles of glaciation – which have well passed. It's just another part of life, it just goes on, the world gets a bit warmer and it gets a bit cooler.

Also with the plants, when we were growing our michelias in our Kulnura property I always thought they were a semi-tropical plant, more for the tropics. We brought some to Tasmania with us which I expected to get frosted the first year but they just loved the frost (we get a very severe frosts here), michelias just love it. It's made me think that a lot of South China and Vietnam, and semi-tropical parts of the world that we think of now, did in the past have a colder climate. But it didn't happen overnight, it's happened over millions of years. So, in some regards you could say you could welcome climate change – it gives you a few more challenges in life.

Certainly. Are there any other areas you'd like to comment on Bob? We've covered a wide range but are there any last thoughts you'd like to add?

Yeah, well the only thing I'd like to add – touched on earlier – that modern-day plants are bred for world consumption and the big plant

breeders breed for where the market is and the retail trade follows suit, so half the plants you buy are not suited for the area you live in.

There should be more accountability. People really don't care – nurseries don't care. They just want to sell as many plants as they can and make as much money as they can, which is understandable, but – as I mentioned earlier as well – that you used to have local nurseries that grew plants for the local climate. This no longer happens. It should happen, there should be more dialogue, there should be more spreading of information of what goes well in your area.

Plant collectors – there aren't any plant collectors/nurseries anymore – well, very few. In my youth, Sydney for example, had three or four carnation nurseries, it had chrysanthemum nurseries, it had dahlia nurseries, it had water lily nurseries, camellia nurseries, rhododendron nurseries, people who specialised in one thing.

In the nursery trade these days plants like camellias, rhododendrons – which take you a year and a half to get a saleable plant – are frowned upon by sensible wholesale nurserymen who's growing, because they can grow a petunia in six weeks and market it and they get the same money. So, people aren't paid enough for the rarer plants.

And in the long-term that's going to impact on our gardens of the future?

Yes, impacting gardens for the future, yes.

Yes.

I think on that note we'll end and thank you so much Bob for contributing to our Oral History. You've made a remarkable contribution to our plant breeding, cultivation of rare plants, and I think encouraging people to think around gardens and gardens of the future.

Thank you.

Well, we always try to teach people, show people how to grow things and encourage people to grow what we like people to grow. Thank you.

Wonderful, thank you.

Interview ends: 63 minutes 46 seconds.

ⁱ Orel, George & Wilson, Peter. (2012). *Camellia cherryana* (Theaceae), a new Species from China. *Annales Botanici Fennici*. 49. 248-254. 10.5735/085.049.0405.

The naming of this new species in Bob's honour was a surprise to him. The paper describes a distinctive specimen found by Cherry whilst collecting in China under the auspices of the Kunming Institute in the Sichuan-Yunnan border region.