

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH



Photo by Kim Woods Rabbidge

Interviewee:	CHRISTINE SWAN
Interviewer:	LIZ CHAPPELL
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This is the second of two interviews conducted at Byron Station with Bill and Christine Swan. Bill's interview was the first recorded.

This is an oral interview with Christine Swan at Byron Station, Inverell. Christine will be speaking with Liz Chappell for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) of the Northern NSW Branch.

0:00

So, when I chatted to Bill we got up to the point where you'd just got married and moved into the cottage. But we got a little bit about his mother's garden but it's probably a good place for us to start, Christine, and talk about the garden that you came to here at Byron Station.

She was a really gifted gardener. If she couldn't get a plant growing, nobody could. The garden was exceptional. She entered the *Sydney Morning Herald* garden, came second a few times but was always beaten by a Bunny Lloyd out at Yoi who, I think, won it 9 or 10 times in a row. So, there was a bit of friendly banter went on there but sometimes got a bit torrid. But the garden was much more than it is now, and she did most of the work herself. She did have an old fellow who lived in the cottage — one of the cottages on the place — who came every now and again, but she really did most of the heavy work, and she pushed a lawn mower really and then, wonder of wonders, got a Victor. But she used to laugh and say it was like painting the Harbour Bridge, you know, she'd just get around it and she'd have to turn around and start again. I can't even imagine that because what we call the inside garden is what she had and there's no way I'm going to push a lawn mower over this.

Roughly what size was that do you think, Christine?

I'm not very good on sizes but, you know, all the internal garden.

Pretty much where the fence is now?

Yes, pretty well.

And trees. Did she plant some of the trees that we see or were they earlier?

No, quite a lot of them were earlier. The Photineas, she would've planted the claret ash, I think. The pine trees, the Photinea, the peace bush. There's quite a lot of really old, 1890, trees. And she planted trees. She was sort of living in the house and doing the garden before it became fashionable to be old. It wasn't a new house when she lived here, and the garden hadn't been cared for at all over the war so she sort of started everything from scratch. But some of the trees and things she planted, for instance out on the old tennis court, which is near the entrance to the house, should never ever been allowed to be put where she did but she didn't know the value of what she was ... where she was planting.

Now, for the sake of people who can't see it, can you tell me what was planted there?

Well, there were two ... what do you call it, apples?

Crab apples?

Crab apples, yes. Two different sorts of crab apples. And her idea, I think, was to have a sort of a bower of crab apples she walked under to get to the house. Now, there was the grapefruit tree, that's very old; the big old pine that's there ...

Is that a Cypress pine?

Yes.

One of the very tall, Italian-type Cypress, I think.

Yes, well there were two of those, one each side of the steps, which I think led onto the tennis court. But there is an old barbecue hidden in the garden that is growing all round that now, and that pine tree – blue spruce sort of thing — that was planted by [Pixie Kye ?] Smith just before Bill and I were married in 1964. So, you can see how long we've been married by the size of that pine tree.

I'm sorry, the lady who planted it — [Pixie Kye ?] Smith. Can you tell us who she was?

She was a Dawson I think. There were four sisters and Pixie was one of them and they lived between Whyalla and Inverell.

So, she was a family friend?

Yes. A bit of an entrepreneur. She considered herself a gardener and I think today she probably would have been a garden designer. She ended up with a very big garden at Tenterfield, just before she died, she lived up there and had an enormous garden up there. Anyway, she planted those things. But to go back to the crab apples, never ever put crab apples where you're going to walk a lot because they lose their apples and they fall down on the ground and then they ferment and the smell is awful. The mush that people walk through and then walk straight into your house is absolutely dreadful. And if it's not little apples, it's leaves in autumn or it's flowers in spring. So, they really ... Very pretty tree but just put them way out in the paddock. And then, the big pine tree that's there ... if ever I win Lotto that'll be the first tree that I will chop down.

5.43

Now, it's not the standard *radiata* pine, is it?

No. We lost one of those early in the piece. I don't remember the two being there but, obviously, the bigger set of steps, you had one each side of the set

of steps. Well, there's only one there now. And the big sort of whatever it is, blue sprucey thing, it's had the side cut out of it because it was growing into the old pine, the Italian-type pine that was there, so it's had the ... because the gardener that was here, the Melbourne tree man, he said, 'No, out of the two trees, this is valuable, this is not.' He said, 'We'll take the side out of the big pine to keep the slender one going.' So that suited me because the big old big old blue spruce thing ... it's just a nightmare tree. It's doing something disgusting just about the whole year, and it does what we call 'smoke'. The pollen from it can happen four or five times a year. Just this yellow powder comes out in great clouds. So much so that sometimes I've been working with Bill in the cattle yards, look down here and thought the house was on fire. And I've come racing over the hill to see whether a log's fallen out of the fire or the stove's caught alight or something, and it's just the powder ... and being an old house, of course the windows don't close properly and the doors don't close properly ... it seeps in that there's no way you can get that off unless you go over it with a damp cloth and you wipe it off knowing full well that in five minutes' time I'll come back in and there it will be again. So, my housekeeping is really hit and miss. I'm a big believer in if it comes in it'll go out. So, I open all the doors and windows on both sides of the house to hope for a windy day.

Sounds reasonable to me.

[laughter]

And the same goes for the tractors that are working around here. I get an awful lot of dirt and dust and things but there's no way I can keep it out because there's nothing that closes properly and we have one, two, three, four, five, six fireplaces and not one of them has a lid over the top so the muck and stuff that comes down them ... when it rains, everything comes down, hits the grill and comes out on the carpet or the flooring around it. And we're never ever going to be killed from asphyxiation because there's so much cold air coming into the house.

8:00

So, I've never dealt with draughts. So, moving around the garden, can we take a little bit of a virtual walk so ...

Yes. Well, we come down into a big Chinese elm, it is a weeping Chinese elm, and again it's far too close to the house but I know Nell planted that. Down there there's a big ... now I don't know the name. I think it is one of those really old plants that's probably had three or four name changes, but it's a big yellow berry. It is really quite valuable, I am told, because the new cultivars of that are not nearly as strong and healthy as the old one. And there's a red one in this corner of this garden over here. And I'm sort of in two minds about whether or not it's going to survive, but we'll get to that later. So, the garden came around there and then she planted various other trees including that huge Parrotia out there, which is enormous and it ... I think she was probably training it into a tree, but it got away from me and now has many trunks and it's really quite pretty. But only one year out of probably 10 do we get the autumn colours it's supposed

to have, but it is an enormous tree, and I believe they're supposed to be six foot fully grown. Well, I don't know how big this one is but, you know, she's a big tree.

They're suitable trees for small gardens, that was the ...

Yes.

Now Bill did explain to me about the soil and the climate to an extent, but I can remember you saying that a visitor came here — and I can't remember who it was — and you said how hot it got and how cold it got here, and they were just amazed at your garden. Can you remember that story?

Yes, we've had a lot of botanical gardeners from Melbourne and Sydney. They keep appearing every now and again. And we've had quite a few city garden designers that just call in to have a look. And one of them ... oh, I don't know ... I left him outside in the garden and he walked around while I went in and got some lunch — and they all want lunch [laughter] — no, but anyway, he came in eventually and he said, 'You're only growing about the same three things over and over again.' And I said, 'Yes, well honestly that's about ... I've found ...' I think I had small children at the time too. I said, 'Well, yes, that's about all I can grow here.' 'Oh,' he said, 'well now you're cold-climate things don't look all that good.' And I said, 'No, I know they don't,' but I said, 'If they survive a summer here, it quite often gets ...' you know, all those years ago we were still getting 102, 103 days temperature, and I said, 'You know, so they've got to be fairly tough to survive that.' And he said, 'Well, you're hot things don't look too good either.' And I said, 'No, they don't either.' And I said, 'We get down to minus 8 and 9 here and it can be minus 8 or 9 for three or four weeks at a time without a break in the middle.' 'Oh heavens,' he said, 'why on earth do you bother.' And I said, 'Well, if it had been left to me I don't think that I would but I inherited when I married so I'm stuck with it.' That set him back, anyway. The three things that I grew at that stage were cat mint, valerian and ... what's the other thing ... oh, that little daisy, a red one. Yes, but what do they make the garden spray out of?

Pyrethrum.

Pyrethrum daisy. I said, 'Those three things, I can make quite a pretty garden just with those three things.' He went back out and had a look and duly noted it and so anyway ... But basically, I've lost the cat mint now, but that happened over the last 7 years, and I lost a lot of things then, include some of the big trees, which surprised me. They just couldn't handle ... it was very hot for a very long while, months at a time and we were totally away and Ben was flat out feeding and watering stock and things, and he had no time to look after my garden so it wasn't looked after.

Do you think it was drought and heat or age with some of the trees?

Oh, I think probably all three really. Some of the trees were ... some of them came back, interestingly enough. Because I didn't have time and I was over it, you know, so I thought, 'Look, I can't handle this, you know. Do one thing ...' So, I didn't sort of chop anything down and I didn't spray. I don't believe in spraying at all, I don't spray at all. I might go through one small can of pyrethrum in 12 months but otherwise ... Anything that gets sick I feed and if it still stays sick, well I don't want to grow it so I root it out. And if it gets better well that's good luck for the plant. But I was surprised at some of the big maple trees and things. They came back. This year they look a bit sick but maybe next year after the really wet year we've had this time, they may be, you know, vastly improved as a result but ... leaving them well alone. In other words, don't chop things down straightaway. Give them a chance, they may survive. If they don't, well get rid of it then.

14.00

Now, I distracted you on our garden walk. You just about got to the witch hazel, the Parrotia.

The Parrotia. Well yes, then we come to the big old laburnum tree, no it's not, what is it ... the big old one at ... everyone's growing them as hedges this year. There's hedges everywhere of it.

Laburnum tynus.

No, no.

Commonly called Laurustinus.

Yes, Laurustinus. Yes. And that's what happens if you don't prune. And I look at all these little houses with these little hedges around, and then I think, 'Oh my goodness me, be careful, be careful.' But they're pretty. It's disgusting for about three weeks of the year when it's flowering, the smell ... I mean, it's not called the dyke tree for no reason. And the leaves don't compost at all. It's very thick, tough leaves. So, I go around and round with the mower and throw them all into the trunk. It gets very badly affected by mould, but a good friend told me, and she was talking about a tree with one trunk, this one out here has many trunks — and I am worried about the other two in the garden round the other side — this one really did suffer badly from mould. We tried bringing down the big spray that we spray the sheep with and spraying the tops and things like that, nothing worked. So, this friend of mine said, 'Look I put ...' She was doing it around a crepe myrtle, and now they breed crepe myrtles that don't get rust ... mould. So, anyway, out I go with my little borer thing, and I bored holes. But again, as only I can do, I bored them straight in. I should've bored them at an angle ... because when I went out with the spray, well I wasn't spraying I was using it neat, and I had a syringe. So, you put the poison in the trunk, neat. And each trunk I think I put two or three holes in. Well, the first day was funny because it sort of came back straight out at me so then I had to go around with my borer again and put the holes, you know, sink them down at an angle so

that when I squirted the stuff in it stayed in. And the second day, I think I found every two or three hours I had to go out because the tree took it up that quickly.

16:40

And then, sort of, the third and fourth day it got less and less, and then I started to smell it coming out of the leaves of the tree and the next thing I noticed almost all the mould had disappeared. Gone. Totally. So that got rid of that that year then I had to go around and put Blu Tack in all the little holes. Anyway, it only took about three years of that treatment and the tree, touch wood, I haven't had any mould on it since. So, you know, I just keep a jolly good eye on it now. Because it's a very old tree and one of the signature trees and I really don't want to lose it. So, there we are with that one. Then I've got the other berry bush over there, which is looking a bit sick but it had a grapevine ...

Now was that the one we had trouble trying to work out what it was.

No, yes, over there. It had a grapevine, an [indistinct – background noise] and a jasmine growing all up over the whole lot. It took two men a whole day, with me hovering on the edges trying to help and getting in the way. We just ... I started at the bottom, and I cut about a foot up the trunk and just left all ... I thought, 'It's very brittle, if I go hauling that down it would break the branches and I don't want to do that.' Eventually all that dead would fall down but if I cut it a foot up I could see ... I could stop it from growing up the tree again. So, I've worked on that now for 12 months and I've still got mess underneath it. But that was ... I cleared all that away because it was ... It was quite pretty, especially when the jasmine was flowering but it was just full of snakes so with the little dog I couldn't run the risk. He used to go in there pouncing on things and, you know, I, yeah, got concerned about him. And there's all Virginia creeper growing all along that fence too, which is beautiful. Then we get to the peace bush. It took four or five gardeners ...

Now, which is the peace bush?

That's this dead looking one in the front here.

Straight here with the lovely, gnarled branches.

Yes. That's [indistinct – background noise] every year. I'll get into that shortly. Well, I might have to get a man to help this year.

Now, we were curious about what that was when we were here with the garden trip.

Yes, we still aren't terribly sure of what it is but various gardeners have been here from the both botanical gardens and a guy from Canberra, who ... I can't think of his name, but he was a lovely young man and we became quite friendly ... they took cuttings and they burnt it and they tried growing it and they ... we couldn't find out anything. It's very like a buddleia but it doesn't bend. It's very straight and it has terrible little bullet-like seeds on it that when I'm cutting it

back they're all down your front and everywhere and it's like ... underneath it builds up always in the seed pod things ... it's slippery like little baby marbles. It's not terribly pretty. I much prefer it in the winter when it's all the interesting bark, and twist and turns on them. I think it's lovely then. It's a sculpture in the garden.

So, you don't have any records of where Bill's mother might have sourced her plants?

No, I don't, know. And I'm not even sure. It might be under the because it's got a stump down on the ground like that on it and I don't think it'll grow ... It doesn't seem to get any bigger. But I'd say it's a very old tree. Finally, I think they decided that it was a peace bush. But I don't know why they sort of talk about that. I do know a woman that says that she had a peace bush that she bought at a nursery but I haven't been to see if it's the same tree and I don't think it is. I think hers might be more of a buddleia than this. So, it'll be interesting to see anyway.

Stewart Reid, no doubt, has been amongst the people who have been here.

Yes, yes. He's been here a couple of times.

He's not often beaten.

No, I think that might've been him. He decided he'd take the seeds home and see if he ... you know, like rocket trees, they all ... they like a burn and fire, and I think he was going to take them home and see. He kept shoving them into a back ... I said, 'Take what you like, I don't want them. I don't want them to seed.' Then, there's not a lot of roses left in the garden. Nell had roses. I do not like roses. I don't like roses much. You know, they're not my go-to flower. They're beautiful to look at in pictures and I sit down and I think, 'Oh, they're beautiful,' but I'm not willing to put the work in.

They are hard work.

And then I've had a couple of ... one very good friend who's a gardener. His name is ... he's been here, he grew up here, spent a lot of time here as a kid and he came over one day to have a look and do things and photograph and things. And he said, 'So no roses.' And I said, 'No,' I said, 'I think they're very expensive. It's really too hot here for them,' and I said, 'They're such hard work.' He laughed, he said, 'Well, in Sydney,' he said, 'all my ladies want roses. That's the first plant they want is roses. They've got to have roses.' And he said, 'If only I could tell them that if they went to the most expensive florist in Double Bay every week for the whole year, they could buy as many roses as they liked to put in their house,' and he said, 'without all the expensive black spot and, you know, all the other rose diseases and prunings and worrying about whether you're doing it right or wrong and all the rest of it.' He said, 'They would be far better off if they just went down to Double Bay and bought a bloody bunch of roses every week.' And I laughed and I said, 'Yes,' I said, 'well, I could add a

bit extra to that too, I said, 'They'd really have to buy another big bag of Elastoplast, you know, sticking plaster ...' He said, 'What do you need that for?' And I said, 'Because when I touch my roses, I end up with sticking plaster all up and down my arms . . .' And he laughed and said, 'Yes, I must add that to my list of Do Not Plant Roses.'

23.19

Well, he tried to get his mother to get rid of hers when they were out on the farm. I think she kept about three.

Well, I've still got one, two, three, four, five, six. Probably six roses left from Nell and, you know, I get ... there's one in particular round this side. The only reason I keep it is it's one of the few roses that does have lovely perfume. But every year I look at it and think, 'Oh, I can't stand you, I'll dig you up before you [indistinct].' Then I come around to the front hedge, which is a lovely mixture of elm and privet and hawthorn all mixed in together and it's always been like that, ever since the year dot. It had a whole heap of big pines along the front of that, between the hedge and the paddock. But I'd say they were 1890 probably. Full trees then, you know, in 1890. The garden actually ran in a half circle with fences a half circle but, of course, it fell down, the timber fell down and Bill, being a good country boy, the fence had to be in straight lines, so I now have straight lines there.

Is there a photograph of the curved one?

Well, the curve's still there.

Oh right.

You know, the hedge is still curved.

Oh right, so the hedge is where the fence was.

Yes. But now, the gardener, she ... any bulbs and things she dug up — and if she didn't like them or she didn't know what they were, she planted them over the other side of the hedge. And the cattle, of course, couldn't get at it because the fence was there, and it is just the most wondrous garbage tip I've ever seen in my life. I don't add any fertiliser or anything, it just gets leaf mulch and I mow a path, you know, woodland-like down the side. But the same bulbs don't pop up every year. Some years it's a mass of daffodils and then I mightn't see daffodils there for 10 years. Now, at the moment, it's got jonquils and I'm not awfully fond of jonquils, they're OK, sort of paddock-like out there. They're coming up. Other years it might be full of English bluebells or, you know ... just nothing ever comes ... just every now and again. You'll go out and there'll be a mass of these bulbs all the same, except for one little weeny weeny bulb that might grow two inches, you know, the whole plant is about two inches, and it's thick and it has a little tiny bell-like flower on it that has got a blue rim on it. No perfume or anything, and it just sits there looking like a little dead head until about half past four in the afternoon when it's got the western sun — it's had

the heat on it all day — it's got the western sun shining on it at that hour and all of a sudden all these little heads open up and they stay there till about half past seven or eight at night. And you go out to have a look and say, 'Aren't you pretty,' and they've all gone to sleep again.

And you don't know what it is?

I don't know what they are, no, no. I've tried photographing them and I probably could find a photo in my thing of what they are, but I don't know, I don't know. This is just the fact that they open so late and close so early and, you know, the same little head will open and close, probably, you know, every day for a week or two weeks. And it's just fascinating. And they come every year, you know, I do seem to have them every year.

Well, that's one for Stewart Reid too.

Yeah, well, I didn't think about him when he was here but anyway ...

They've got to be here at the right time to see them . . .

Yeah, yeah, well they're not flowering now. The only thing out there, and I only know that because we walked around this morning, is a couple of bunches of jonquils. See, it's had such a hammering in the last, well three years particularly, since Bill's been so ill, but I don't, you know, I don't know what's going to survive and what isn't. So, it'll be interesting to see.

But that bulb section has always got by without any extra water or fertiliser.

Yes. She never even covered the bulbs up, she just would carry a shovelful over, heave them over and not go near them again. I suppose every now and again she'd go and pick a bunch of, say, daffodils if they were there or whatever but, I don't know. They grew for her. They don't grow for me, but they did for her. She probably spat on them as she put them over or something.

It's the climate. It's the climate change.

28.17

So anyway, she planted the grapefruit tree and the liquid amber, which I nearly lost — this big one here — because of the heat and no water. I lost a big one down near the old stables. I've saved one down there, I thought it was going to go, and I'm not sure whether it might still go. And another big one outside there, it's just hanging on too. But I think that's climate. I think it's just too tough for it. The elms ... well, we had a real thicket growing out there. That was where the cattle ... until we started farming this paddock underneath the house here, we always had stock in there and the cattle used to like to come up and lie in the elms. And, of course, they kept all the suckers under control. Then we started farming and all of a sudden, I had ... well, you couldn't see through it even ... so I had a very good friend who sprays for the shire, and I said to him one day,

'You know, look I just can't get rid of these elm suckers. I don't want to hurt the big trees, I want them to stay if they can but I'd like to get rid of the suckers.' So, he looked at me and he said, 'Oh, leave it to me,' he said, 'I'll think about it.' And he came out about a month later and he sprayed all these things with something, and he has done a wonderful job. The big trees are still there and the suckers are just sticks now. They've totally disappeared. But, again, we have had no stock in there to eat them as they're coming back. Probably, well, I don't know, about another ten years I might have to get him back to re-spray. So, whatever it was he used was wondrous.

A lot of people would love to know what that was.

Yes. 'Cause the base tree is still there.

That's what frightens most of us. To spray the suckers that it's going to be taken up by the main tree.

That's right, yes. Well, he did tell me, 'Be prepared,' he said, 'It might work or you might lose the lot.' And I said, 'Well, I can't bear what was happening anyway, I'd rather lose the lot than put up with the screen, really.' So, people couldn't walk through out there. Then there's a big ... at each end of the hedge, there's a big oleander with a stump the size of this house. And I would really like to ... I know they're full of rabbits. The two of them are home to every feral animal that ever lived on the earth. But, of course, with cattle, any ... even if I break a tiny branch of oleander off, I have to cart it around and put it over the fence on what we call the internal garden so that the stock can't eat it.

Yes. 'Cause they're toxic aren't they?

Yes. We lost a beautiful heifer out the front here and Bill opened her up and she had one leaf of oleander in her, and they said that's what killed her. So, you know, it's not worth the effort.

No, it would be an expensive bill for sure if anything happened to anything.

That's right, yes. And it's difficult to get the truck in. You know, I keep thinking, 'Bring the truck round and chainsaws and, you know, hack it down, hack the two of them down and they would look terrible for a couple of years but OK, that's alright, you know. They'll come back again.' Anyway, we can't get the truck in so those two things are still there. With all the little animals in there so ... Then we come around the other side and there's a big Chinese elm round there. And they're a nightmare in the house because all the ... every little leaflet is going to come down. And quite often it's still losing its leaves when the new ones are coming and that sort of thing. The lawn is growing underneath it. I've got a paddock of beautiful bush orchids round there and I was going to get in and clean them out because they're really taking over but then I look and I thought, 'Oh, nothing else is going to grow in there, leave them.' So, I do it ... every now and then I run the mower over them and just chop off the tops; it looks a bit crook for a while. A couple of big may bushes and, you know, filled

up with everyday shrubs. But the thing with this house is the age of the house sort of has to fit the age of the flowers and plants and garden furniture that you've got. You can't put any of this modern garden furniture out in the garden. It looks silly in a house that's 180 years old. And the plants are the same. I've found it's easier to grow the same plant over and over again, just vary the sizings and that sort of thing. I can't get sucked in by the latest fad, which, at the moment, I think is having all your little shrubs cut into little bowls, you know.

That's right.

The sizes and things. Charming but it looks silly in this house.

Now you mentioned this was a garden that you inherited. Has that limited you, do you feel, in what you can do?

No, no. My mother-in-law ... I know not long after we moved here I lost something and I was very upset about it and she came down and she said, 'Look, dear,' she said, 'plants get old and die.' She said, 'Don't worry, if you really want it plant it again.' I thought, 'Oh, how sensible is that.' So no, it hasn't, and the fact that so many people really have come here and enjoyed it. All the open days we've had and the open garden, but it's been open a lot for local people and things like that. You know, they just walk around. And one lady sat down in a heap down there ... she died not long after, and I sort of knew her and she was just sitting down under a tree and I went down and sat beside her and ... 'Oh, I do enjoy this,' she said. 'It has a very nice feel about it, this garden.' She said, 'It's unfussy.' She said, 'You don't mind me saying that.' And I said, 'That's one of the nicest compliments I've ever been told,' you know, been mentioned to me. Because they talk about me as being the untidy gardener but I like it neat and tidy, but I'm not particularly fussed about bits popping up where they shouldn't and, you know ... And also, I don't spray at all, and I try to let things seed themselves in what we now call the ring garden because that's where my daughter ... she was married out in the sort of outside section out there.

That's where the second tennis court was, is that ...?

No, the second tennis court's here.

Oh, I've lost my bearings.

Yes, it's out there. North. Northern side.

Yes.

Probably twice a year, the big gardens out there — and they're quite wide gardens — they look absolutely shocking because everything's dead. I'm waiting for the seeds to drop off then I can go in and clean it up and, you know, just pat it all down and leave it and see what happens next year. Nearly always everything comes up again. Occasionally ... I lost all the cornflowers two years

ago, and I think that was heat and no water because we were away, but it'll be interesting to see what comes back this year.

36.05

Do you mulch or fertilise that?

Not in a huge way. I don't ... I'm too lazy to do it too much. I do put down hay but it's straw, not good hay. It's straw from the barley, usually. Before we get a frost because I think that might just, sort of, help roots and things like that. And if I think it's getting very hot in the summer, I'll try to put down something around the roots of anything new that I've put in. I don't really fertilise. I used to bring down a lot of manure from Paradise — it was beautiful manure, but it was also beautifully full of blackberries and briars and things, and they used to get a good hold before I realised they were there. And then once they were there they were very difficult to get out of so I stopped that. Occasionally ... I've nearly always got a bag of fertiliser here so if something looks crook it'll get a couple of handfuls of ... then I forget, you know, I go somewhere and do something and I forget all about it. 'Oh look, it's getting better,' you know, 'that's good isn't it. So here, have another feed.' And I'll probably overfeed it but ... We're having rabbit trouble at the moment, and round the trees, even the quite big trees, they're ringbarking the trees. So, the best thing I have found is to go to town, to one of the building supply places, and they've always got sheets of that blue ... blue on one side and silver on the other — and I think it's insulation stuff.

Yes.

Chop that up into chunks, and wrap that around and tie it with a piece of string, and you can go quite high so the hares and things can't ... and I just put those around. After the tree or the shrub, or whatever it is you're trying to protect has been in for a couple of years, the rabbits leave it alone so you don't, sort of, have to keep at that but that blue stuff stays on really well. I've tried magazines and things like that but they rot away too quickly before I go out, you know. There's other things to do besides gardening.

Exactly.

Busy life at the moment.

And how do you fare for water supply?

I've got good water but — there's always a but — I have no way of putting it on the garden apart from moving hoses. And I have very long hoses, which take some hauling around the garden. And we've got pressure, so I've got reasonable pressure. But I doubt here, the set up we've got here, that I could ever have an underground watering thing. It's too dirty. We've tried, you know, on tree lines and things going up to the cattle yards from here up to the cattle yards, but we just can't keep ... you know, the little holes block up with pebbles and bugs and all the other things so it is easier to drag the hoses. And then the other day — and this is how stupid you can be — with all this rain, and I was

looking at things and they were starting to get waterlogged and looking a bit sick and, 'Oh, I think the drought was better when I could choose how much water everything got.' Rather than this, 'God,' you know, 'here it comes again,' and having to dig a trench to drain things.

Yes. And anything with grey leaves ...

Yes.

... goes to heaven.

Yes. So, you know, I'm never satisfied. That's what it comes down to.

You did mention that the driveway had changed from the original layout to where you drive in at the back now. Was that something that you and Bill did or was it done before?

No, no, Nell would've ... well, probably before Nell's day even, down there at the T-junction, halfway along that flat, which is underwater, the road branched off and came across the paddocks up to this gate that's just out here.

Yeah.

And then they came in around the drive, round the drive, and then back out, I presume. This was the back gate out here where you ...

Where we now park.

I suppose they got sick of the black soil, the heavy black soil and the stones and things like that coming across there, so they brought the road up to where the mailbox is now, down past the cattle yards and we pull up here. The front of the house is round here, which when you walk in the front gate there, between the hole in the hedges, it's positioned exactly ... there's a set of steps each side but the door's off centre because there's another door down at the other thing but they didn't think about that in those days. But the front gate then turned around from being this side of the house to being this side of the house. But everybody used to come and they would — I don't know how — come through the gate and find themselves at that back kitchen door across the back verandah, which is interesting in itself because ... anyway, I'll come back to that. This landing, where you sort of walk in, with the two pillars inside it — we had to have the pillars because the roofline ... the shingles come down to about within an inch above where that is. I mean, there's no way they were going to be able to hold the roof up because it's so big and it's so heavy, and it's all shingled, that we had to have those two pillars, which upset my plans for that verandah. But anyway, beggars can't be choosers. So, we turned that into the little porch, hoping that people would come in the gate, across the courtyard, across the tennis court, into the courtyard and lead to the front door. Sometimes it works, mostly it doesn't. They still go around onto the back verandah, which is where ... When Nell lived here, without fail, if it rained on the western hill, over here on the other side of the river, she would say, 'Shut up the western side of

the house. You're going to get rain here.' Well very rarely these days because the rain coming this way. The rain goes right around over Inverell and comes in over the rubbish dump and that area over there, and comes in so it gets the back verandah, which was, of course, where everyone hung their raincoats and you leave your gumboots and, you know, all that stuff. Well now all that gets wet, continual. And I think the difference there is the catchment dam has made ... it's sucked the water, sucked the clouds out there and it's sending it out here and then it comes back this way where it used to come that way. So very rarely now do I ever have to come and shut the windows and things, or doors, on the western side of the house because it just doesn't rain there. It all comes in this side.

OK.

And I think it's osmosis, or whatever they call it, you know.

Have you noticed other changes in getting hotter or colder or is that just a cyclical thing that's happening?

Well, I think ... I ... I mean we've always ... down here on the river it's always been very cold or very hot. I can see no difference in that, I think. We've adjusted the house to being a bit warmer when it's cold and it's beautifully cool in the summer because of the size of the roof and the shingles and the no ceilings and things like that but ... yeah ... I don't know ... I mean people sit here and they say, 'Oh, you're so lucky,' you know, 'you live in a beautiful house, lovely garden.' And I think, 'Yes, I am lucky.' I am lucky, I know I am lucky. But Bill is also lucky that I was willing to live here and learn to live here. I mean, I could've said, 'No, I'm not going to live there.' And, you know, he would've been stuck between a rock and a hard place so, you know, he's ...

On my quick calculation, you've gardened here for over 50 years.

Yeah.

How has the garden changed over that time, Christine?

Not a great deal. Nell had the front garden around here that I promptly filled up with shrubs and a tree. That was a stand-out garden. She always, without fail, it was full of the most beautiful red salvia. Just this fire burst of red salvia and then she'd fill it in ... you know, as that went off she'd put other things in there. Oh, they're so much work so I wasn't going to do that, so that changed. The fishpond around there, she had it all terraced and, you know, dear little plants and things going around there. Well, I soon got sick of that so, you know, there's lilies around there now. You know. What else is there? Daffodils and aggies, agapanthus, you know, various things ... just little things. She had the time and the interest. Everything full of, you know, interesting plants, which is where the plants' knowledge came in. I didn't have it and I certainly haven't the interest that she had. I like the garden ... I still get ... after Bill's mowed the lawn and, say, in the spring or a really hot summer's night to walk around the corner and look at all this garden spread out here, I think, 'Wow,' you know, 'that is

something,' you know, 'that's pretty special.' But Bill and I do laugh. He never looks inside the garden fence, he looks over at the cattle and the crops, you know. We're sitting here having morning tea and he says, 'Oh, look at that, doesn't that look really good?' And I'll say, 'Yes, it does look really good, but I wish those flowers,' you know those [indistinct] here, it's a terrific old plant, I say, 'I wish they weren't quite so yellow.' 'It's not yellow.' And he's looking at the oats on the other side and the cattle and things, and I'm looking at the garden. So, we can't just quite get it right. We're both looking at the same view with the same eyes. And then I think, you know, we both rather have our own outlook. We've been in our garden visiting ... been to a couple gardens where they've actively set to work to cut out the view, you know, fence it, with large trees and things like that. Oh dear, it worries me, I can't quite handle that. I'd like to be able to see over the fence.

Now, it's a pretty rare privilege to garden in the same garden for over 50 years.

Yes, it is.

Would you have any advice, as a final question, that you ... say you've learnt from gardening in this climate?

Well, don't be in a hurry to chop things out, you know, dig things out and chop things down. If you like it, persevere with it. You can always plant another one if you really want it and it dies. I don't spray anything, as I say, but a few roses I've got, occasionally we get aphid but ...

Do you spray herbicides for your gravel and paths?

Yeah, I use Roundup, although we do have a fair thistle problem here — I think that comes in from over the fence — and we use, I think it's MCPA or something — and that kills the thistle and not the grass. And I'm starting to use a bit of Roundup and MCPA at the same time. But then I will ... well, before you came, I had a big go about a month before you came so that everything was neat and tidy. Now I won't touch it again until the end of spring so that, you know ... I'm trying to use less of the Roundup. But again, you know, it's going to make gardening more easy for me, where I can sit back and enjoy it.

We have to do it.

It's going to be someone else's problem, you know, whatever the leftovers are but if it's still growing, you know, I haven't killed anything with Roundup yet. I do not understand how people say, 'Ah ...' I know a friend of mine in town, she had beautiful jacarandas around the tennis court in town, which is a bit unusual in Inverell. And she put Roundup round and she killed every single jacaranda. And she said, 'Ah,' she said, 'it was the Roundup.' And I said, 'It can't possibly have been. You can't have killed everything like you did, it's not possible. You must've sprayed on a windy day or, you know, you've done something. You have done something.' 'Cause, I can go around here and, I mean, in a wind like this I could spray but I'm very careful. I got the nozzle about that far from the

ground and little spray and, you know, just go along. Be careful. But this stony, heavy black soil, I sometimes wish it wasn't quite so stony and it wasn't quite so heavy because as I've got older I'm not into digging like I used to, so I don't. When in doubt, don't!

That's wonderful, Christine, thank you very much. Is there anything else about the garden that maybe I haven't asked that you'd like to tell us?

No, I don't think so.

End of interview: 50 minutes, 12 seconds