

**AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY**  
**NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**  
**NORTHERN NSW BRANCH**



Photo by James White 2024

Interviewee:	MARILYN PIDGEON OAM
Interviewer:	LIZ CHAPPELL WITH LYNNE WALKER
Date of interview:	1 <sup>ST</sup> MAY 2024
Place of Interview:	LYNCHES ROAD ARMIDALE NSW
Details:	PART 1: 59 MINS 48 SECONDS PART 2: 1HR 6 MINS 21 SECONDS
Restrictions on use:	NIL
All quotations:	SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD IN THE INTERVIEW

00.00.00

**This is an oral interview with Marilyn Pidgeon at Lynches Road, Armidale. Marilyn will be speaking with Liz Chappell for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) of the Northern NSW Branch. Lynne Walker: sound recorder.**

**Now Marilyn, I thought we might speak first of all about your personal garden journey and then lead onto your public life which was heavily influenced by gardening as well. Can we start with your early life from the influences towards gardening, the garden you grew up in?**

Oh yes certainly, there were more than one. Yes, I was born in Launceston in 1941 and of course that was well into the war when people were really focussing on the essentials. I can remember parks being dug up for trenches in Launceston, would you believe, and various other things that had an impact on my early life. My parents gardened very enthusiastically, before breakfast on work days and a lot of each weekend and of course I was the only child [then] so I went into the garden with them. And from the age of 3, I think, I was already collecting plants from neighbours and some of those plants travelled several gardens further on in my personal history. And I knew names of things very early, I think my mother made sure that I knew that I could recognise what I liked. From there when I was 4 we left a simply wonderful garden which had marvellous trees and shrubs and towers of rhododendrons and deep beds of lily of the valley; just a delight for a small child with my bent and from there we went to what was in effect a non-garden but, as someone in a newspaper article said, we were hugely lucky to have a house, despite the fact that it was cream and orange and pink (they didn't have time paint it properly before the war began and you couldn't get paint afterwards). But I was heavily involved in the planting of that garden and I think that I could probably mentally walk around that garden now and name every plant. Sides, back, front, the lot.

**Now being war time was it a decorative garden as well as a productive garden?**

It was mostly decorative but there was a big vegie garden too. In a family book that my sisters and I published, we all made note of how important gardens were at that time. Everybody had a vegetable garden and they grew the basics. In Tasmania it was potatoes carrots and cabbages and all the usual things. My mother insisted on growing corn and yams, I don't know where yams came from. And there were fruits and currants and strawberries and raspberries. In Tasmania we had raspberries whether you liked them or not because they invaded from the next house if you didn't have them. Fruit trees and, oh dear, I can remember the street gang where I was the youngest, and therefore badly led. We raided and everybody could provide information about the gardens in the street and what was available at the time and because Tasmania has very long twilights we could be raiding at 9.30 at night and whether it was the cross

Scotswoman's nectarines or the first peas or strawberries, which were much more luxurious than raspberries, we raided. and consequently were well filled. I do remember also a poor man who was foolish enough to start a vegetable garden on a very steep slope, not very far from our place and people could harvest and buy their vegetables direct from him. He grew the same sorts of vegies but because it they were grown on basalt soil on an incredibly steep that faced north, he had early peas, carrots and lettuces. You harvested your own and most went down the gullet before they got back to the kitchen. So that was another interesting family memory that is virtually not replicated at all these days except, I suppose, for people who sometimes let people harvest their own.

We moved several times and each time I looked at what was in the garden. That was the most important thing for me. I nearly wept buckets of blood when my parents did not buy a highly unsuitable house which had forests of rhododendrons and it was just a dream for me. But no, they said they did not need twelve bedrooms, or whatever it had. So we moved to a much more humble environment. By that time my mother was incredibly busy and my father was often absent. So I was let loose on a nearly bare garden site.

For years I had been drawing garden plans down the margins of my poetry books and taking huge interest in the gardens of the families that we visited. I had spent a lot of time designing houses and gardens but the University did not offer architecture and my parents, with five daughters, were not going to entertain the idea. So I diverted myself with pen and paper

*00.07.47*

### **Not landscape architecture or horticulture at a tertiary level? They weren't available?**

No, they weren't available. But to me always the house went with the garden and so I was looking at aspect and tree types and the soil and the views and the general environment. So that was experience of a sort. Then I went off to Uni. My college was the only one that was off the university campus and we had to either walk or bus to one of the two university sites.

### **This is in Hobart now?**

Yes, and I chose mostly to walk. It was a hard decision because I wore out so much leather the shoe repairers' bill was probably much the same as the bus fare. So I walked, chiefly because I loved choosing the route to go past different gardens in season and of course it was wonderful to walk from the top of Davey Street which leads down mountain road down into, first of all the city. then to the Domain or to Sandy Bay past these wonderful old gardens with their stone walls and houses and trees even then more than 100 years old. So there again I was garnering ideas. My rooms at college in the various years overlooked simply wonderful things both in views and in plant material.

Some time after that I married and my husband, John, decided, after some very interesting prospects in Canada and Africa, we'd move 25 miles upstream to New Norfolk which was a little bit of a letdown but he had a very interesting job

as he switched from research to production engineering. New Norfolk was a terrible shock.

### **Now which year was this that you were married?**

*00.10.30*

1965. we married and moved mid '65 to New Norfolk where we were given a house, which was just lovely. We were also given terribly green wood to burn in our fireplace. I started making something of that garden but it was hard yards because it was hugely frosty, with frigid pea-soup fogs that lasted three days and then in the summer, with no sea breezes of any sort, it was boiling hot. But I battled and I had a vegie garden and a few bits and pieces but nothing special, although I noticed that the resident keen gardener visited me before we left to ask if he could take all the specimens small enough to move. So that told me that I'd got some things right!

And then we went, even worse, to Newcastle in 1966. And that was a terrible shock. Not only could I not recognise seasons (of course seasons were there but not in my terms) but we had a very challenging house. And the city was grimy, it was union-dominated, and almost it had no cultural life at all. I had some very funny experiences there which don't apply to this talk but it just highlighted the fact that you had to make friendships and find interests of your own.

### **Because Newcastle was dominated by the steel works at that point?**

Yes and they were all rust bucket economy so the threat, the Damocles sword, was hanging over these businesses. Commonwealth Steel and BHP and so forth, all of them are gone now, long ago in fact, and it was hard.

I tried to grow roses and they all got flooded by the heavy rain because the bottom of our garden was at the bottom of a gully. I didn't know enough about soils but it was good learning experience. My second son who was born there; the arch-naughty type from birth. One day when I was just at my wits end, I put him in the front garden which was child-proofed and I gave him the hose. It was a very happy arrangement for some time until I heard an unusual noise and on investigation I found that he'd brought the hose inside and he was hosing the sitting room. So, he didn't have quite the sensitivity that I had when I was his age.

My husband, John, was very keen to start a new business which was not the newsagency, but growing eucalypts for an industry producing essential oils. I had stupidly given him an annual gazetteer that highlighted all the major facts of Australia's development and he discovered to his horror that Australia imported something like 90% of its eucalypt oil which he thought was a national disgrace. Being a chemical engineer, when he read up he could see that, or maybe he knew already, that the production process was a cinch but growing the plants was not. So he did a lot of reading and a lot of travelling. We all did a lot of travelling, as he researched this but we could see it was going to take a great deal of money to get this set up so he decided that the best way to do it

was to take over the [newsagency] business in Armidale from his father which was very profitable and what little spare time he had was sunk into the business of getting appropriate eucalypts. He settled on a particular kind of oil from Eucalyptus dives. He tried to grow plants from seeds he collected. The seeds were too high, so he tried ladders and throwing things and in the end he bought himself a 243 shotgun and he would shoot off the branch, way out in the Styx, to gather the better kinds of nuts. And then he had plots all around, in many places.

### **But around the Armidale region?**

Going out to Ebor, yes, but that was no-go either because they were so various and he couldn't monitor them. At that stage he became aware of a fellow named Ron de Fossard. Now Ron was a botanist at UNE and he had recently developed what was the essence of the cloning industry and he had schools both here in Armidale for hundreds people who came from all over the world. He also went all over the world to give courses in Europe, Hawaii, and Israel, I think, but certainly many, many places. It was an absolute breakthrough in the industry. But no-one in the early years had cracked the code for the cloning of eucalypts and that's what John started to do. He built a state-of-the-art laboratory at home, the same as Ron had out at the UNE with lamina flow cabinets, autoclaves etc in a space beyond the garage. So that was very important to us as the family grew up and John focussed on these things. It also meant we travelled widely again because if he was going to grow it commercially he knew he had to do it in an automated way. So we went to the Nerada tea factory way up in North Queensland to look at their hedging systems and the machinery that they had. We also went down to the ACT where we looked at some of the old bush boys' subsistence production and he was able to look at the different kinds of eucalypts. He read very widely and it was a particular interest for him.

*00.18.56*

Whereas I started off in Garibaldi Street, where we lived there for 6½ years and I had my own good fortune. The garden had some lovely substantial trees and the woman who had redeveloped the garden was the wife of the head of Agricultural Economics, John Lewis. She had come from Canberra so the garden was planted with the things she chose from good advice that had been given to her in Canberra.

I started my collections. I can remember very early on, because we arrived in July, I was desperate to get something colourful in the garden and I bought polyanthus and I can remember it started to snow one night and I rushed out to cover them [all laugh]. I soon learned that it wasn't snow, it was frost that was the problem. I tried growing cinerarias and goodness me they lasted only a minute and half. But I learnt lots of things and I started collecting. And on that subject, I was hugely fortunate that John's childhood neighbour Sue Curtis, was a friend of John's mother. She gave me rare things like regal lilies, almost unobtainable these days. She gave me peonies which I had hankered for because my mother had a few peonies that travelled with us to our various gardens And she introduced me to tree peonies. I'd never heard of tree peonies

and of course that was a compounding effect in focussing my interest. I also collected camellias and some roses. I was very lucky in that Carl Taylor had to move. He was a great rosarian, won first prizes at all the shows available So when he heard that his garden was going to be bulldozed for a house extension he arrived at my doorstep, this very gracious old gentleman, to beg me to take his roses. So I said, yes please. My father happened to be staying so together we dug ,14, I think, of the least big roses and I still have some here at this address.

Another person who was very helpful to me was Margaret Smith who was also of at the Botany Department. Now she was a professional horticulturalist as was her husband Noel and she was a rosarian of great knowledge and also an expert in bulbs. She taught me about the basal propagation of bulbs, something I'd never even dreamed of. She also encouraged me to become a member of the Royal Horticultural Society. Now I couldn't go to any of its meetings or garden visits but the overseas members got the second prize of a catalogue with I think it was 80 packets of seeds that they offered from Kew. So I grew my own first tree peonies with seed from Kew. I also grew rare bulbs, particularly spring and autumn crocuses and many, many other things. And it was a great delight to me to first of all get the catalogue and there'd be about 1,400 choices and I wondered how was this going to get into Australia but the blurb said they could send it anywhere. In those days I didn't even know about AQIS Everything came through except one, a Swiss oxalis. There was a note from Quarantine to say that the Swiss oxalis was persona non grata. [laughs] It was burned.

### **Or ended up in someone's garden.**

Yes, that's true. So that was another thing that Margaret gave me, an insight into those things.

### **Now of course that wasn't in your present garden here?**

Yes, that started in Garibaldi Street. I knew her well by then through Women Grads and then because of my great interest we kept in good touch.

00.24.38

### **When did you move here?**

1970. Yes, November 1970.

### **I remember you telling a lovely story about moving here with loads of trees going past other people. Could you repeat that one for the tape?**

Yes. The moving men came and looked at our fairly small, humble house, and said oh yes, one truck, a middle size truck and I said I think you will need more than that because some of my antique furniture is very heavy and big and I told them I wanted the pots moved and they just didn't take any notice. Not only did we not need one truck, (I think it was three trucks for the household equipment) but they had to get another truck for the pot plants. A friend of mine who lives

on route was sitting having morning or afternoon tea with a friend and she looked out beyond her hawthorn hedge and said, apropos of nothing in particular to the friend, oh the Pidgeons are moving. The guest looked and all she could see was Burnham Wood passing to Dunsinane beyond the hawthorn hedge.

But on the subject of the moving, I'd moved a huge amount of material here and I did what I thought in retrospect was a very good thing. I had a whole truck load of sand deposited inside a nest of trees. As I decided which plants, I brought them up here and put them in that sand, bearing in mind this is autumn going on summer, so I only had the one place to keep moist. And then I could leave them there until it was the season and I had the right place for them to move out. So that reduced the element of frenetic activity with the garden because I could do it at a better pace.

**Of course, by then you'd been in Armidale for several years.**

Yes, 6 years. and when I designed the house and the garden and there were things I had very clearly in mind. One was the aspect of the house so that every living room in this house and all but one other room would have access to morning, middle day, afternoon sun. But I also knew that I needed shelter from the sun in summer so we left some giant eucalypts at the western side of the house and until the trees that I planted in between them had grown to a sufficient height, they stayed. They were all white gums and they drop their limbs in a very dangerous, unexpected way and eventually they all had to go. But that took about 10 years for us to thin them out. So the garden, of course, as for most people, started near the house and moved out, except for the line of the trees at the back which was to be a windbreak, and the specimen trees. And thereby hangs a tale. When I started to dig for these trees I found I had a teaspoon full of soil for every ton of rock and so I got Mr Briggs, wonderful Mr Briggs to come with his backhoe and he dug 50 holes along the back fence line for the Torulosas and he dug holes for the specimen trees that I'd already pre-planned for the west and the north of the house.

**So were you working to a plan for the entire block from the beginning?**

Well no, a concept. There had been a tennis court at the far end of the property but little corners of it were on other properties because all this had been owned by the one property once. So the tennis court, which had two huge cotoneasters growing in the middle of it used by the chooks for roosting at night, became a thing of the past. We planned to have a tennis court a bit closer to the house but when the tennis court man came some years after we got established he said, 'all those trees will have to go, they will ruin my court' So we sent him away and we bought a croquet set instead. That was very satisfactory because two of my four tennis playing friends had courts and they enjoyed playing croquet as well. So that's how the croquet lawn came to replace the tennis court.

The pond was not planned. My middle son was at UNE and looking for money-earning jobs and he came to help me build stone walls. He in fact built them. I made the mistake of insisting that they all be basalt to match to soil type here which meant we travelled thousands of kilometres, out to Ebor, up to Glencoe,

out west looking for flat basalt and I'm sure it was illegal. Future archaeologists and geologists are going to be very puzzled about the source of what they find here. And at one point Phillip said to me as he and a friend sank some huge slabs into place, 'you know, Mum, basalt is four times the density of granite'. He's said since that he was exaggerating but he wanted to make a point. So the pond was his baby. He had asked me what I wanted for Mother's Day or a birthday, he didn't have any money, and I said well I would like that pond and we'd all talked about but not agreed about the site or the type. So he took off and I said I want a perfectly round pond with coping stones around the flat edge over near the birch trees. And what I got was a kidney shaped, two level monster. But it is a wonderful resource and brings huge numbers of birds. And on the subject of birds I should say I have kept a register over the years and I have 46 species of bird that I've seen, quite a lot of them only once or twice and some that will come in once, almost non-existent now; others in huge, worrying, hooligan packs but that's nature.

**I'll just take you back one little step when you said the basalt was a mistake. I presume you meant for the distance you had to travel and the weight of it to handle. You weren't disappointed with the end result?**

No, no, we all love it. Yes, we arrived here and very quickly John built the laboratory and so we were all very busy working and the kids helped a lot too. Andrew my eldest son is extremely methodical, orderly. He was given the job of mowing lawns which he did perfectly. Well, they weren't lawns; it was mown paddock. His next brother, the one who hosed my sitting room, he delighted in drawing patterns in the grass with the lawn mower and it nearly drove his older brother mad. It only lasted a few years and then, of course, off they went.

00.33.45

**So, this garden that we can admire from the window is really the fruition of your gardening knowledge that was acquired? Could you take us for a virtual walk around in our minds and point out the highlights?**

Well I'll try. I guess the problem for me is I'm both a hopeful plant designer and a plant collector and when you do both there are some awful conflicts and some terrible mistakes. I'm looking out right now at that Sequoia sempervirens which is about 80, perhaps 90 feet high, planted right where it can take a lot of the winter sun that I'd so carefully placed the house for. It should have gone right down into the north east corner where it would have been admired and not abused but it's too big to do anything about it now. And when I designed the terrace I knew it was going to be much used because the house at Garibaldi Street had a similar shaped terrace - a u-shaped terrace so we'd always have sheltered place or a sunny place with the pergola allowing sun in the winter. We've actually pulled off all the wisteria, a white wisteria which went berserk; It was coming in the house and getting under the tiles above the second storey. 35 years, maybe longer, after we thought we'd removed it. And ditto the ornamental grape, it's still trying to shoot. So these things can hang around for a long time.



But the trees are now doing the job that they were supposed to do. On the western side we had a lawn and then what I call The Mound because that's where I shoved all the mowings and stuff which makes soil. The trees in that mound are now substantial and give us beautiful summer shade and so this place simply doesn't need air conditioning. It has triple skin walls and that helps, and now double glazing, but it's the trees that make the big difference.

**Now under those trees which are . . .**

*00.39.44*

There's a linden, a golden ash, a scarlet oak, an Indian deodar and there was a metasequoia that died in one of the droughts; two dogwoods, *Cornus capitata* and Eddie's White Wonder. At ground level there are bulbs that flower from late winter right through to the lycoris in March. There are also big patches of hellebores and bluebells that flower before the trees break into leaf, but the leaf canopy means not much growth occurs in summer. I might pull weeds every pancake day but that part of the garden is minimum care. Very satisfactory.

**Well you were very influenced by English gardens and English garden plants. Is there also a place for Australian plants in this garden?**

Well they're here yes, the eucalypts of course went but I'm just trying to think, I've got a few, can't think what they are but not many obviously. Yes I suppose my Tasmanian upbringing dictated what I wanted to replicate and then I started reading more widely and travelling which showed me other plants to add. I should say that I found that the camellias, particularly the japonicas, do really well on the south side of both the house and our garage. They just love it, despite the effect of lime and so forth close to the planting. It's a really good position and good side to put them in.

**What were some of the limitations of the New England climate that have frustrated your gardening?**

Oh well obviously the frost, I've learnt to live with that. One of the problems was that this site which is a very peculiar shape, is a sort of odd battleaxe block, It had an enormous avenue to its north and I had to plant things in the shade of that avenue that were drought-tolerant and shade loving; and when the trees had to go about 12 or 15 years ago, little by little, because they died, or they were dying or they became dangerous or they blew over or neighbourhood kids burnt them, suddenly the garden I'd planted hated the exposure. and I really had to start planting again which has made the garden out of balance. It irks me no end but it's too late for me to achieve what I wanted to do in the first place. I've tried and perhaps if I'm lucky whoever takes over this place will have the garden as well and they will see what could be possible but more likely it will be cut up into tiny blocks. So that was a problem.

The wind: when the avenue was here we had a wonderfully sheltered garden, especially once the back torulosas grew but of course the wind is much more damaging now than it used to be.

Drought is just terrible on this place because there's so little soil. It is impossible really to provide enough water. In the last drought in 2019 I had about 8 buckets of water for me, cooking, washing and the garden. I mean it was sick making and I think I actually went into a sort of depression because I didn't realise how much the planning of the garden and the ongoing activity of the garden was such a positive influence in my life. Always moving forward, always looking to the next season or the next year and suddenly I couldn't do any of those things. I had no idea, no confidence that it would actually get better in time for me to save the things that I had. So the lack of water has been terrible. The lack of soil has been terrible. The exposure has been terrible but you've got to live with what you've got.

**Of course the great love of your gardening life, the peonies, have a place not only in your personal garden but turned into a commercial venture for you.**

Yes, could we talk about that a little later?

**Yes, certainly.**

Just a couple of things I wanted to refer to before we do that. I guess, looking at my personal history, I was on council for quite a long time so I was involved in a lot of projects and crises and so forth.

**Can we just mention what years you were on Council, broadly speaking?**

Yes, 1974 to 1983, three terms of three years. Yes I wanted to talk about the Dieback first. It became a matter of real public concern in the 70s. I can't remember which year it was but the concern was so great that we had a public meeting and more than 600 people attended in the Town Hall. For my sins I was heavily involved in that because no one else on Council had much of interest at all in gardening. We had a Council Community Committee which set up fund-raising and we raised over \$80,000 in six weeks at the same time that the town was raising money for NERAM and that would date it more or less. I thought that was a hugely significant thing that this tiny community, comparatively speaking, could put its hand in its pocket to such great extent. Now that money, the money from the committee's fund raising went to several programs at the University where they were trying to work out what the major influences and contributors were, and of course they found it was a multi-layered, inter-related set of issues. Some people were already concerned and I heard I that someone said you need at least 7 acres, and it was acres then, of natural woodland to keep the various species of birds and insects alive. They found it was something like 70 acres per square kilometre. I've probably mixed my terms but you can see it was a tenfold increase in the understood need for an ecology that would maintain sufficient species to be predators particularly of the dieback beetle.

00.47.34

**Now just for the record I will point out that we were looking here just at the Armidale council which was a city council, so that makes the magnitude of fund raising quite amazing because the rural area surrounding was still Dumaresq council?**

No, we had farmers involved, it was a district thing.

**Oh right not just Armidale council.**

It was probably more than a district. I think you could say a New England thing, wherever Dieback was serious, people came.

**Thank you for that clarification.**

And at the same time the Taylors of Kentucky were embarking on a really serious program to revegetate their own property and in turn of course it became revegetating a lot of other people's properties. So, the dieback issue related to our interest in eucalypts. We went to Jon and Vicki Taylor's first open day, a perishing cold day on bare hilltops and I've been to those hilltops since and they are now covered with forests. So it's wonderful to see the changes that can be wrought with energy and some money. So that was one thing, the dieback.

Another thing, yes, The International Year of the Tree, 1981. Now that occurred while I was on council too and again guess who had to be chair of that. We had a public open day on the then totally ignored Arboretum at the western end. We had 1,400 people on the first day of August and I think it was -5 that morning so it says a great deal about the local interest in trees. I don't think Maria Hitchcock was involved with that but I'm sure she would have been there. Following that event Council had another public meeting and it was decided that we would have a new program for the Arboretum and again, because I was on Council, I chaired that up to until 1988. There had been plan by someone called [Ray?] Margules, he was a Canberra landscape gardener and he had a notional plan that simply divided the Arboretum into a western general use area, the next area was to be indigenous plants and water gardens and the eastern area was to be exotic plants. But that was virtually the only indicator. There might have been some comments about soils, but it really didn't go into any more depth than that. There had been a small committee, maybe in the early 1960s which had done a little bit of planting at the western end but it had virtually all died. A few of the conifers stayed but that was it. So, we had Margules' plan and we had an enthusiastic section of the community and we had to find a way progressing this. Shortly after that Bill McCarthy, the local state member, chose to put half of the Bicentennial money that came from the Federal and State governments, towards the Arboretum and the other half was to go to the Aboriginal Keeping Place. I think he thought he was spreading his bets and doing the least damage to people's sensibilities, I don't know, but anyway he chose.

So we now had a budget of \$450,000 but we had to match it. We thought we'll never do that, but through cash, labour, goods in kind we did. And whether it

was Richard Belfield and his bulldozer or school kids planting daffodils or service clubs providing money for trees or PLC girls coming down for some particular aspect of their education in a bus. If they didn't have trowels they'd have soup spoons from the kitchen, to plant the bulbs,. So there was a huge amount of activity and we got it going. The terrible downside was, well there was one funny thing, we looked at the water garden plans and we knew we had no capacity to do any of that, so we found that a former, recently resigned Curator of the National Botanic Gardens in Canberra had set up a consultancy in Coffs Harbour and we could just afford to bring him up for a day, in fact several days, and he designed the water gardens. He envisaged a series of ponds dropping from Galloway Street down to the highway and we knew that there was water there because there were two ponds where my children had caught craybobs for years when we lived at Garibaldi Street. That gave him the idea for having ponds in steps and stairs and his idea was they would be mirror ponds and you could sit at any level and have the landscape and the skyscape reflected off the pools. We said we can't afford and and he said, well, what can you afford and we said very, very little. So he designed one pond at the bottom and when he gave us the costings for that that, \$450,000, we said how could it be? and he said well you've got to have it lined and most of the cost is in the butyl liner which is a very, very heavy rubber that's used for the inner tyres of cars. And I said well, we just can't afford it and he said well you won't have a pond and I said what's wrong with an agricultural pond and he said if you think you can have an agricultural pond built that doesn't leak go for it.

So I rang Richard Belfield who said yes, yes, he would come and have a look and he said yes, we can build a pond there. So he got out his very best and largest bulldozer and took it down and he made a magnificent deep pond and it was all very satisfactory and someone built the bridge across and we got stones from down near Bendemeer to make the lip of the waterfall which is also John Wrigley's design. It all was marvellous - until I heard Richard talking one day, recounting his version of these events and I heard him label the bulldozer Marilyn. [laughter] He was a friend but it was a little bit dicey for a while.

### **Just to clarify John Wrigley was the consultant from Coffs Harbour?**

John Wrigley. Yes, he had just retired from the National Botanic Gardens and he established a consultancy in Coffs Harbour. He also worked with the Coffs Harbour Bicentennial Committee and being close, he gave a great deal more advice and probably plant material and it's very humbling experience to compare, their Botanic Garden with the Arboretum. Here the Town Clerk, who was the great controller, was very unwilling; he thought the money should have gone elsewhere and he dragged his heels and it was not a happy situation. In Coffs Harbour the council has been very supportive. They now have three professional permanent gardeners and they have a team of 200 volunteers, so these programs can start off with a vision splendid but unless you have administrative backing and a lot of active goodwill in the community it isn't going to go very far. But we have preserved the arboretum. At one point when I first got onto Council and I was chairman of planning and development I found a map under a former mayor's reign which had it all being divided up for a

subdivision and that was when I realised something had to be done. So I think that was all that I wanted to say about that.

**LW: Can I just ask a question, who then gave the land, was it council land?**

Oh, it was gazetted as public open space.

**LW: And how did he have the powers?**

Because it was council, council administers the open space and I suppose the proposers probably thought they could get it rezoned. And maybe they could. I don't know but it seemed the wrong thing to do, not so much that Armidale was lacking parks; in fact for our rate payer base we have too many, it's just a terrible, terrible burden. I think 47% of the city was non-ratable land small Armidale city council when it was 13 square kilometres and there was a very tiny ratepayer base to provide all the things that this well-travelled, well informed community insisted we ought to have. So we saved the arboretum and for populations in the future that will be a great resource, like the Creeklands, And when money becomes available it will be developed further.

**Would you consider that one of your greatest achievements on Council?**

No, no, it was done, I don't know how. I don't think I'd say anything was a great achievement but it certainly took up a lot of time. So that took us through the 80s.

00.59.48

**Transcription Part 2:**

00.00.00

At the end of the Bicentennial experience I was exchanging notes with Noeline Miller. She had been chairman of the Guyra Bicentennial Garden and we both had lots of people asking questions, showing just how difficult it was for newcomers and enthusiasts to get started. She thought a manual was needed and said, I can't write it. I will do the illustrations and the photographs but we need to do something. Well the manual idea didn't work because there were too many variables. So we hunted for good gardeners in differing districts and interviewed them, got their views and their experience and that was the structure of the book. I was determined to put in as well detailed climatic information for each of those districts so people could see not just the rainfall and the temperature but the frost occasions and the snow occasions and winds and so forth and the university of course had all those statistics and Jack Hobbs who was a professor of geography, a climatologist, he provided us with all those things so that was very helpful.

**Now the book was called *Gardening Secrets*.**

Yes. I should have said, just going back to the business of the arboretum, that Maria Hitchcock joined me on the committee for establishing the Arboretum and she was and is a powerhouse and she took responsibility for the planning of the Indigenous plant section. But it wasn't just that. She had a systematic scheme for New England, for New South Wales, for every other state, she got the local indigenous plant clubs involved and providing material. She also, in the course of doing all this, found that Australia didn't have its own national flower. We all assumed it was the wattle but it wasn't gazetted and it was her work, her background work and research and Bill McCarthy, of course, helped move that on. So at the Bicentennial *Acacia picnantha* was gazetted as Australia's flower, chosen because it flowered most widely of all the acacias. So that was the beginning of my very strong involvement with Maria and her enthusiasms.

**Well Maria is somebody we hope will also participate in one of these interviews shortly.**

Yes, I'm sure she will.

**So we have your inspiration for the book?**

Yes, yes and that was great fun. That really was great fun. I think that that actually has been a good influence because I know the books have gone round and round through the Rotary Book Fair and Ross Burnett's second hand book shop. It's people speaking with feeling and knowledge about the things that they like and don't like and we put planting schemes in the book to help people. It was great fun to do with lots and lots of funny stories about that but we haven't got time for those.

**And how long did it take you and Noeline to complete those interviews and travel the district?**

I don't know, a bit over a year. She became almost mortally ill and that delayed our start. The first big expedition we had was to Tenterfield and her husband drove her to the junction near Ben Lomond and I picked her up there and they said a fond farewell through the passenger window. He said, as a parting comment, have got your magnet and Noeline said yes, it's in the glove box. I started the engine and off we went and I said what do you need a magnet for, Noeline? And she said well if my new device, (well it wasn't exactly a pacemaker, but was something very special), she said if it stops I just slap it against my chest and it starts again. So with that Sword of Damocles lurking in the glovebox we set off and that was just the very beginning.

The book was launched, in November 1991. Simon & Schuster, which for some strange reason had agreed with alacrity to publish this thing after seeing only one chapter and a few drawings. They said that they had never had such a large book launch but of course the people who were in it bought copious numbers to give to all their friends and relations, some of whom probably finished up with several copies that Christmas.

**Now I will cross reference to the book in the transcript<sup>i</sup> but just for the record can you tell me how many gardeners were interviewed?**

I think it was 50, or might have been one either side. We had to be 90% certain that these people we asked were going into the book because it would be dreadfully difficult to say oh no your garden isn't good enough or you aren't sufficiently well informed so we had to do a lot of spade work before we even approached the owners.

**LW: Sounds like good training for the Open Garden**

Yes, but I wasn't a selector thank goodness.

**Did you do that research through garden clubs or personal networks?**

Personal networks really. Noeline had been a lifelong New England resident and coming from a garden family she was very knowledgeable and in fact she would have been a person you would certainly interview because she had a superb garden. She had two arboreta; one was for general interest and the other was specifically for oaks and that work benefitted her daughter and son in law at Terrible Vale very much indeed because they've found that oaks are overwhelmingly the best performers in the re-treeing They might learn other things as time goes on, but it was Noeline's initial interest that made all that possible.

*00.08.17*

**Now your book was highly successful, it went into two print runs I believe?**

Yes. In six weeks it sold out and another printing was done but then an awful thing happened. A new managing director at Simon & Schuster did a terrible clean out of the storerooms and there was our newly reprinted book and he sold them off in a huge job lot, I think it was to Angus & Robertson, and he didn't offer them to us as the contract specified. I think Noeline and I both protested very loudly and they scrambled around and got I think 80 for her and 120 for me or something like but it was a scandalous thing to do.

**But there are many 1,000s still in circulation around Armidale.**

Yes, so that was that.

**I think the book also brought you into the spotlight for when Australia's Open Garden Scheme was mooted for this area.**

Yes, I suppose, I think that was about 1993 or 1994. I had a phone call from someone in Victoria saying that he wanted to visit to look at the prospect of having northern NSW as part of the Open Garden Scheme and of course I was enthusiastic. It turned out that it was Neil Robertson who was the National

Director and John Henwood who was the manager of regional garden programs on the ABC or maybe regional radio, I don't quite know, do you?

**LW: Regional Radio.**

Regional radio. And he had a very particular interest in gardens and he was a charming, delightful man. And the ABC at that stage of course had everywhere marvellous garden programs for the locals, with local contributors and local experts being the comperes for the program. And they were an amazing source of advertisement for this projected scheme. In every district we could get radio coverage, letting people know. So yes, it started and Nan Robertson from Wanderriby, east of Armidale, she was the first co-ordinator. So we started off with a small group of gardens, really testing.

*00.11.24*

**You were the first regional chair from this area?**

Yes, the Inaugural Chair and I guess it helped that I knew a lot of people in the town and quite a lot beyond because I should say that when I came to Armidale I met a lot of people who had been at school with John and then married girls who were very often from here too. Probably my closest friendships stemmed from those times and the one link we all had in common was that we loved gardening. So it was a way for initially bonding with a major interest. So that was special.

But back to the garden scheme, what can I say about that? I don't want to miss things. One of the things I wanted to say was that part of the reason that districts, towns and district gardeners took to it so enthusiastically was that they could see they had an opportunity for raising money for the things they really needed money for, for the public good, and whether it was air ambulance or their local school or the hospital they seized on it to the point where, when I went to the National Conference and looked at the figures that were shown about income, the cities might have earned more in gate takings, they might have, not always, but the fund raising activities that went on within the garden were a pale shadow of what the Scheme did in these regional areas, in both country and the towns. So it was a wonderful facilitating scheme that met many purposes and it was lovely because you would find people who lived hundreds of kilometres apart, they'd arrange to meet in that set of gardens so that they could have time together and they could do something nice and be fed, not have to provide the food. So it had a big social value as well. So that was good. And yes thereby hangs a tale because I didn't open the garden while I was chairman I think but I did thereafter sometimes.

*00.14.48*

Anyway, just after we retired in 1999 the garden was open, in late September, and friends from the country were asking me very pertinent questions about the growing of peonies. I answered all the questions and I laughingly said to these two landowners, all information shared is on the understanding of a future partnership and four days later they rang up and said we're serious. However,



for completely unrelated reasons, they couldn't go ahead with it but they said look it's a great idea, run with it. So then I looked about for a place that had good soil and good water and lots of other things that I didn't realise I needed until later and asked Graham and Yvonne Philp, who were orchardists, if they would be interested. They didn't know what a peony was but they soon did. And so then began a wonderful experience for me. I would have to say that the development of that business was one of the joys of my life, although damned hard work. To begin with John and I, because we had just retired, could travel. So we went to Victoria, and to the ACT, visiting people who were growing them commercially or were just enthusiasts. We went to New Zealand, where we visited five specialist commercial growers in November. So as a result of all that we ordered our first 2,000 tubers from Victoria and we ordered I think it was 125 to be imported from New Zealand and thereby hangs a tale. To begin with we had to prepare the soil and we found that the copper levels were low and that therefore the pH was low. And we came home looking quite blue from hand-sprinkling copper sulphate around the place. There was no horticultural agronomist. We had to bring in an agronomist from Queensland, that was the closest we could find, to give us some advice. We had to think about the supplying of the water. Now as it turns out the Philps' land is on that great aquifer that exists underneath the plain between Armidale and Uralla which had developed between 50 and 60 million years ago when there were volcanoes either side of that valley and the water has collected above impermeable rocks. And so there was a wonderful water supply. In addition, the Philps had, because they were fruit growers, the cool rooms which were absolutely essential. And they had tractors for the ploughing and the cutting and all those things. And they had a wonderful work ethic and so we were very, very lucky to have them as partners.

Our contribution I suppose was that we had good business skills; I had plant knowledge and we had travelled a lot and knew a thing or two about peonies. So we started growing in the winter of 2000 and we harvested our first experimental crop in either 2002 or 2003. We sent samples, free, to a variety of sites in Melbourne and Sydney to see what their impressions were. And they were all very enthusiastic because at that time there were very few suppliers. What none of us had appreciated was that in fact Armidale sits at an exquisitely satisfactory position on the continent. We flower 3 weeks before Guyra which is the most northerly place to grow for a peony operation and we flowered well before the people to the south. I'd visited a lot of places in Tasmania over the years and I could see that they could grow into the New Year, at the higher levels. So they extended the season in one direction and we hoped to extend the beginning of the season to an earlier date. And that's what happened.

### **Now these were of course herbaceous peonies?**

These were herbaceous peonies which is what the market wants. We looked at tree peonies but they don't yield a lot and it would have been wildly expensive to fund the plant material so we didn't do that but I learnt a lot about those in China later on. So it was herbaceous peonies and as the markets grew and demand grew and knowledge of our existence grew we had some very strange requests. One came from a woman I'd never heard of who said she needed I

think it was 2,000 blooms on a certain date. What do you need them for? Because we are having the Pissaro exhibition at the Gallery of New South Wales and I want those flowers. And I said do you know a lot about them? No, no she said but a friend told me that they'd be good. Well, I said, you are going to need a cool room. Oh no, I haven't got a cool room. Well what have you got? A friend's stone cellar, somewhere in the eastern suburbs. They were going to store them there and then take them to the Gallery of New South Wales. And all this happened. They put an enormous net above the foyer at the gallery and they put peonies in there so the scent came down and as well as that they had wrist bands for the women with one peony on the wrist and the gentlemen had a smaller peony for a lapel. And I gather there were some rather unseemly scenes as people quarrelled as to which would match what piece of wardrobe best. There was another Sydney florist at this time who was asked by the French Consul General to have a particular flower display for some bigwigs' visit from France and she said they have to be French peonies. As it happened we had a lot of French peonies and she said I want them red, white and blue. I said well you can have white and you can have red but you can't have blue. She ordered 400 and put them in towers I think at the entrance. And then there was another order that came from the ACT, not even a wedding party, an engagement party, for 5,000 flowers. That didn't go ahead, I think the engagement might have been broken. But I told them we couldn't supply that many, on one day, because we had to honour our other orders. So they were a few of the funny things that occurred. And after that we did a lot more travelling to do with peonies.

#### *00.23.40*

We went to America in 2007 and we went to Washington where I swear the peonies were all flowering for our special edification. I even saw them growing up through municipal footpaths, they were so aggressive. Before that, instead of flying straight from San Francisco to Washington to stay with friends, we discovered that the American National Peony Society was having its annual convention in Kansas City. So, to my enormous surprise, it had me and my husband attending a convention in Kansas City. And that was an amazing experience because we had people from South America, we had them from Alaska, they all brought specimens because that was the site of this annual convention which changed states every year. And where the best new hybrid for the year was chosen and the person who was selected would be a millionaire selling the highly priced plant material. There was a Catholic priest who was trying to breed a blue paeony, a bit late for the Sydney woman, and people from South America. It was just fascinating but the most fascinating thing was that on the very first morning we had to be at the foyer at 7 o'clock to drive up into Missouri to go to the home of a man called Don Hollingsworth who had bred the most famous of the Itoh hybrids. And it was just the most wonderful thing, all these devotees of peonies wandering the lines, rather as we had friends doing when we were growing peonies, but so knowledgeable. And he lived in a house that was quintessential Norman Rockwell, with the swinging seat on the verandah and the finials on the steep rooves and so forth and we sat on hay bales and had our lunch.

And the history of how that all came to be was truly fascinating. It started in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when his forebears were in the great movement to the plains as that land opened up. When they got to the Missouri River they decided that they wouldn't continue with everybody else; they would stay there and breed horses to provision people for the next stage of their journey into the unknown. And that huge Dutch barn was still there, about 200 feet long and he said that six generations of that family had been on the land and every generation meant that the land got cut up smaller and smaller. When it came time for him to consider how he would establish a viable livelihood, and they weren't breeding horses by then of course, he realised he had to find some much more intensive type of agriculture. He'd loved peonies since he was a boy and he'd been breeding and so, although he was an agronomist by training, eventually when he bred Garden Treasure, the Itoh hybrid, he felt he could do it full time. Maybe he did it before then but that was a wonderful experience. And then of course we went to the gardens in Canada and so forth.

After that I went to China and that was fascinating too because the year before at ADFAS we'd had a lecture by Lars Tharp, of Antiques Roadshow fame, on the origin of porcelain china. One of our number who ran a tour business said they're very interested in this. Do you think you could lead an expedition? Oh yes, said Lars. I didn't think it would ever happen but it did and because it was to be in April I said to Peter the tour man, if we are going to China in April we also have to do peonies, so the tour became Peonies and Porcelain.

We started off in Beijing where they were barely coming into flower in the Forbidden City and we then we travelled west into Luoyang which has for 1,200 years been the peony capital of China and tree peonies were the imperial flower by default, so that city has kept its tradition and its fame for this purpose. Of course back in the 9<sup>th</sup> century it was the imperial capital. We had three days there at the beginning of their month-long peony festival and it was an absolute mind blower. We went to parks, research institutes, plantations and saw forms that were just amazing. One of the things that really hit home was you barely saw a herbaceous peony, they were almost grown like grass. It was the tree peonies that were the focus of their attention. So that was wonderful and we saw them elsewhere in China. One of the things that happened was that we were taken to the Peony National Scientific Research Station where the Director took us to their centre and cheerfully told us all sorts of things which here would be trade secrets, like how to force peonies (which was to mix up chemicals with alcohol of some sort and have some poor serf stroke the buds at sunrise every day for three weeks as soon as the buds started to swell). And of course in China they were so revered, plants would be put on barges and floated down for the great and the famous to have flowering in their halls and their courtyards and they'd be just chucked out at the end of it because they'd want a new wonderful specimen for the next week or the next day.

*00.31.36*

I've veered a bit from the logical progression but it does remind me that in 2001 we went to England and where we had prepared to go to Kelways in Somerset. Now Kelways and some great French horticulturalists were early rivals in

importing suffruticosa tree peonies from Asia and I think herbaceous as well but the suffruticosa (tree) peonies were the ones that really caught their fancy, They both bred herbaceous peonies too, many of the most famous are French ones, like Felix Crousse, Duchesse de Nemours and Sarah Bernhardt. Kelways' business, is still running a peony business, and we decided we would go there. I contacted the manager before we left and he said look I'm awfully sorry but it's Chelsea Week. But ring when you get to London and I'll see what I can do. So he arranged for his land manager to meet us and she took us round there. I went twice in fact, we stayed a couple of days so that we could really take things on board. She gave us a wonderful insight into their production process and their breeding process and it included things like her saying, of a very, rocky paddock, actually this paddock is our best performer and that corner over there is the very best performing zone of the whole farm. Why? Because it was the farm cattle dump for 200 years before we started planting peonies. Which meant they loved blood and bone. So that was an interesting insight. And also seeing them parcelling up tree paeonies to go to Chelsea. They were wrapped in cotton wool, the buds, just about to come out, and then they were tied with silk ribbons and they went in a special vehicle. Each day they sent a new plant up, or plants, so that it would be exquisitely exposed to view for the visiting public. Some preparation [laughs].

### **What an amazing trip, an amazing trip.**

Yes, and there were two other things that happened in terms of travel. I went to Bhutan in 2013 with a group who were bird twitchers. They said they weren't twitchers but they did twitch. And we went to a valley; Gangtey, where the Tibetan cranes over-winter. It's too cold in Tibet so they go to the Gangtey Valley where it's so cold that even the locals used to move out until they got a little bit of power, I don't whether it was solar panels or what, but most of them stay there now. But it really said something about the cold. When we went to the monastery up on the hill above the valley, there were no other visitors there at all. We were really in wild country. The Abbott was a fairly young man who had some English and I'd been looking at the architecture and when I went to rejoin our little group they were all considering this scraggly looking thing in what looked like an incinerator, (one of those brick, space, brick, space, piles with some soil inside.) My friends turned and said do you know what this is? And I looked at it and I said yes, it's *Paeony suffruticosa*. And the Abbott said, you know this plant? I said; yes, I grow them at home. He was absolutely dumbfounded. They had two with an even more miserable specimen in another part of the courtyard This was the only plant material in the monastery.

### **LM: This is the Tiger's Nest?**

No, no, that was near Paro. This is much higher, much higher. And he said that these plants were critical to the survival of this Buddhist sect. And I said how is this? And he said because in the selecting of a new chief abbot, the child, (just the way they do for the Dalai Lama,) the child must be put through many tests and one of the tests is that he must be born on a day that we have recorded in this monastery that this plant has flowered. So truly, truly specific, and they'd kept records for six or seven hundred years. So that was another

amazing thing that I came across. You never know what's going to be around the corner.

00.37.40

### **It makes me worry about the health of those plants.**

Yes, and indeed the future of the sect. And then another more recent thing In 2018 I went with a friend on a Hurtigruten trip up the west coast of Norway in summer, and we had decided we would zig zag back down that enormous peninsular of land, I suppose you could call it, and I wanted to go to Tromsø, which is in the Arctic Circle, about 68 degrees north, frigidly cold but I knew that it had the world's most northerly botanic garden and a remarkable collection of plants for a position so far north, bearing in mind if you looked at 68 degrees south in the southern hemisphere you would be on the Antarctic mainland so it was truly remarkable and the reason of course was the Gulf Stream Drift that kept the seas relatively warm. Anyway we went to this Botanic Garden. I hadn't made any preparations beforehand. I just wanted to look and what I found there was truly extraordinary. We knew that the whole region had been under two metres of snow and ice just weeks previously but such is the power of the 24 hours sunlight each day that plants grow amazingly quickly, and tall. I saw peonies taller than I'd ever seen at nearly six feet high. At Kirkenes, even further north, there were rugosa roses and even delphiniums in full flower. And I saw Iceland poppies very little but just everywhere, growing like our ox-eye daisies, just like that. So that was wonderful to see.

### **How exciting.**

Yes, it was. The other thing that happened at the Tromsø Botanic Garden, it was a real surprise. I had stopped to ask two young gardeners the name of the particular plant that was further up in a bog garden. I said I can't find the label. And one of them said, oh there is a label there, in very good English. (They were both on their university long summer holidays from Paris and they were doing work experience at Tromsø). Anyway he bounded away to find where the label was and I talked the other. Then there hove into view a man who looked, I really shouldn't say it on a recorded program, but he looked like a troll, hairy, nuggety, short and I think bald, I can't remember. And I thought, oh we're in for trouble. These men have been talking far too long and so have I. And he was the director. Not only was he the director, he was also the garden designer and he'd been there 24 years. He was still in transports of delight about what he had achieved and he said, you know it's not just plants from Norway or even Scandinavia, he said all the northern hemisphere and he said we even have Gondwanaland plants. I said yes, I'd seen them. He said we have them from South America and from New Zealand and even he said, his voice going higher, Tasmania. And I said yes, I'd seen them. And one of them was languishing, we went over and had a look at the languishing one and they were a *Nothofagus* and I forget what else there was. He said, you know I have been doing a lot of reading and he said I think that we could grow Tasmanian highland plants because the rock types are similar, similar age, similar periglacial landscape, (which means right on the edge of another glacial period) But he said, I can't get them, I've tried but I can't get them. And I said, oh well, I think I can do

something about that for you. Talk about cheeky. He said, I do hope you can. So I got his name and his contact details and when I came back to here I thought I had better ring up my friend from university days. She was a professional geologist but her love was botany and she'd given a huge amount of her life to the Tasmanian Botanic Gardens She didn't answer so I then I rang the gardens people. The receptionist said, oh you will need to speak to so and so, that person said you will need to speak to so and so and I thought uhhhh. The third person said, oh yes, I think that can be arranged. She said, does he belong to, and she named a professional plant exchange society, and I said well if he doesn't I'm sure he should be, given the fame of the place. And she said oh well he'll be able to join. Just give me his details, so I gave them to her and put the phone down. And a few days later I thought I'd better tell him what I've done so I emailed to explain and I had barely pressed send when an eulogistic email came back, I know, I know, I've been sleepless, I've been reading books all night. So it may be that there is now an exchange scheme, particularly in Tromso's favour. So that was another lovely experience in the travelling that I did.

00.44.53

**We haven't of course covered your Order of Australia Award Marilyn. What year was that?**

2003. It didn't recognise anything about gardening, in fact.

**Could you tell me what the citation was?**

No, it was vaguely political and community interests but I was embarrassed. It was a nice thing for the people to do, who did it for me, but I think are many other people who deserve it more.

**But recognition of your community contribution none the less.**

A couple of things I really did want to cover were a more general look at the history of gardening in New England. I don't think people think much about how hard it was for people to garden when they came up in those buggies to begin with, with no water, no plant material unless they could bring it on their buggies with them. Only the wealthiest people could afford to import anything so it was really a subsistence way of life and coping with getting water however they possibly could. I did notice, in fact I've continued to notice, that the very early homesteads were nearly always very close to observable water and that really, unless they were washed out, that determined the site of the early homesteads.

The second really important thing was the arrival of the railway and the fact it could bring metal, even tanks, pumps and plant material, this is just looking at the point of gardening. That was important.

The next really important thing was the business of educating people about gardening and there was a distinct push at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century for children to be taught gardening, proper gardening, vegetable gardening, and I

think there was a very real understanding in the education professionals of the time that that kind of thing. It was a way of helping people to be better fed. There are some wonderful illustrations of that at the Hillgrove Museum. There was a headmaster who was very keen and lots of photographs of that were taken. But there are other things too. Brother Gatti who was at the Catholic cathedral, volunteered to Council to plant what was a terrible scruffy patch of land called Central Park and he was actually sent to Sydney to select the plants which he brought back with him and he not only planted Central Park, which still does have a tiny bit of an Italian influence, but it's much clearer at the cemetery where he planted the Catholic section of the cemetery. And there were catalogues as mail services became more reliable, big seed growers and plant people would send out their catalogues and that was a help. Also District Shows; a great deal of showing off but also a great deal of education occurred, both for men and for women and I think men were much more involved in gardening then than they even are now although there are more men becoming interested. And there were the fetes to raise money; school fetes, hospital fetes, they also gave people clues, showed them what was possible and introduced them to new plants and the garden clubs.

But I think more change came with WWI and the Depression and with the breakup of most of the great properties. Fewer people in town needed cows and horses. But right at the cusp of the Second World War in Armidale we had two huge influences that I think we take for granted. The first was the arrival of the Teachers' College. There were 107 acres that had to be managed, had to be planned and developed and they had the great good sense to import a professional gardener. Maybe he was here already, but he trained at the Saville Gardens in Windsor Great Park and his name was Fred Dye. Now he was there for a long time and the roses, the wonderful trees, they are his work, his legacy. He trained up Ned McCann who a lot of people in town would remember as being a very competent professional gardener and for a long time he was an ABC presenter. So first of all, the college and then the university which had an entirely different history, (of being a great private property with a lot of money available, being gifted to the nation for the purpose of becoming a university college and then independent university). It had other values like those magnificent trees, the avenues and the trees around the homestead. And the finish of the place, the deer park, the brick work, the stone work, was all truly admirable for people to learn from, to appreciate. Sadly, in the last 20, 30 years, its importance in the bureaucracy's view has diminished immensely and the lack of funds and interest has really damaged the quality of what is offered, although the trees still remain. But for many years, after the Second World War and probably up to the 80s they were major tourist attractions and when the Queen came they didn't hold a reception at the Town Hall or wherever, they held it in front of the Teachers' College.

00.52.37

**We'll just grab a couple of dates here for the record, I think 1947 the property was gifted to the university. Is that right?**

Oh no the university started in, I think the first classes were in 1937. It was a college of Sydney University until its independence in 1954.

**And the Queen's visit was 1956?**

Oh, no, no, that's another visit. She first came to Australia 1954 but she came to Armidale in 1970.

**Well those things we can always check.**

Yes, so they had a big impact. The Teachers' College grew their own seedlings, There used to be big seed beds in glass houses and it was a very special place. So I think it's important for people to realise that we are in danger of losing some of those things. And the other thing I wanted to say about that. These institutions brought new blood, new thinking; university people, CSIRO people, College people came in and they brought different ideas and new enthusiasm and the first effort to replant the Arboretum was made by people. After the Second World War, someone called Alwyn Jones who was languishing in Sydney, was desperate to plant trees that coloured well, so he moved his family to Armidale. He found a pal who had similar ambitions and they had a competition and they tried to outdo each other. He very quickly moved out of the centre of the town in the valley and went up onto the hill to Garibaldi Street. One day and he was phoned by his friend who said, I've found it, I've found it, the ultimate tree. And Alwyn, sceptical, went down and he had to admit this tree just took the cake! It was *Pistacia chinensis*. So those two, with their competition saw the *Pistacia* come to Armidale. And then another group of enthusiasts including Jack Hilder and many others whose names I don't know, they planted street trees and they used their own plant material to begin with Then a town street tree committee was formed and they were told what they had to plant but the trees were provided and some help. Formerly the streetscape of Armidale looked just as bare and barren as you know in the least-loved town. But their initiative, their personal commitment was something that was valued. And another person, one of the Curtis family, he planted all the *Liquidambars* down the western side of the cemetery and his nephew told me that he had to help his uncle to water those trees. So there was a lot of personal, unfunded, committed input in those years. This was the beginning of the years after the Second World War that I'm talking about, so I think they're people to be lauded and thanked.

00.57.09

**Thank you for particularly bringing those names in of people who should be remembered.**

Oh I'm sure I'll think of lots of others. In fact, if we can just whisk down a few more to think about. Recently we've had the establishment of the New England Gardeners Club, a digital club. I think it has 4500, members, just an extraordinary figure. And this was Lou Forsyth's initiative. It met big needs. People who were time poor, people who needed advice, people who were keen but didn't know where to start things. It's a wonderful facility for people to be



able to get a fast answer to a problem, whether it's a plant type or a pest or a disease or an improvement or to be able to distribute surpluses of things they have. All those things don't happen easily with a garden club and the garden clubs that existed I think have languished a bit because they've kept the form of the meeting more like an English garden club. Not so the native plant people. I haven't had much to do with them but I'm well aware that not only have they had huge input, probably from the time of Dieback onwards. Also in the 1970s the National Parks Association started and that's provided a gathering, a purposeful place for these people to meet. And, of course, there is the Tree Gsend this with email group who propagate and people like John Nevin who have been powerhouses in the field of interest. And Maria, of course, with her enormous input.

But there were other people too, like Beth and John Williams, both of them academics. They gave so liberally of their time and their knowledge. John would give talks all around a considerable area, well beyond New England itself, helping people become familiar with their own local plant material. And I know about this because Beth Moore who lived at Hanging Rock, so isolated there was no power and she had to home school her children. She had a natural interest in what was on their place that ran from 4,300 feet down to 300 feet on the Allyn River. She thought she had about 96 different species but she said she didn't know how to recognise them, didn't know how to start. And then she heard John was coming to Nundle to have a weekend school on native plants. So she took a bucket of all the things she could find, or maybe many buckets, so that he would identify them and to her horror he gave her Latin names. And she said I can't do this and he said yes you can. Take it slowly, one by one, you will do it. And he said your son's started at UNE. This is how you make a specimen recording and if you get stuck he can bring it up to me and I will help. And that's what happened. That's just Beth's story and that must have happened right round New England and beyond. The Williams also established Beadle Grove almost doublehandedly. They were an amazing pair.

And what else have I thought I'd like to tell you? Going back to Lou, her latest innovation is the New England Garden Expo That is a mammoth thing she's taken on. It remains to be seen how long that will last because it depends so much on the personnel who will commit to it. But it is admirable.

**I think this year she's got even bigger plans, either side of it to do garden tours, starting at Walcha and ending at Tenterfield.**

*01.02.28*

Yes, that is amazing. And just going back on the business of garden touring, I think this garden visiting exercise took off in the 80s. I think I'm right in saying that it actually started in this garden because a music teacher, a Canadian by the name of Jo Griffith, who taught clarinet, was appalled to find that the Eisteddfod Committee was defunct so she drew up a committee of people and they had to find funds to relaunch this scheme. She suggested to the group that they might ask people to open their houses that had old or interesting

architecture. When she asked me, I said this house was hardly special, but I would open the garden and I would offer teas. So that's what happened and this is where they came for tea and to look at the garden. Following that Lou Brooks, who became Lou Abrahams, suggested that they develop a Cathedral group and so the Cathedral Gardens started out, I think about a year later, maybe two years later. But it was Jo Griffith's idea of fund raising in private places that kicked the whole scheme off.

**And that pre-dated Australia's Open Garden Scheme by several years?**

Yes. I know that there would have been other gardens that opened, the Curtises at Cotswolds and Eynsford, they had regular openings that were open to the public for fund raisers. I suspect that Eynsford did, for the hospital, and that Saumarez probably had things in aid of NEGS. And there would have been other gardens that opened for their own pet charity.

**Red Cross or the like?**

Yes, but a systematic scheme that went from year to year began in the 80s.

**So that grew into the St Peters Open Gardens?**

Yes, that was Lou Abrahams, I think she was the initial chairman and many, many people of course came to help with that and it became a big thing.

**Is there anything else you would like to add Marilyn? It is a pleasure to deal with somebody who is so well prepared and articulate.**

Well I'd have been cross if, I've probably still missed some things but no ,I think not, unless you have things you would like to ask me?

01,06.21

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<sup>i</sup> Pidgeon, Marilyn, *Gardening Secrets: Successful Gardeners show how they cope with the Variable Australian Climate*. Photographs and Illustrations by Noeline Miller. Simon and Schuster Australia, 1991.