

**AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
TASMANIAN BRANCH**



Photographer Rhonda Hamilton August 2024

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| Interviewee: | SALLY JOHANNSOHN |
| Interviewer: | Jean Elder |
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[JE] This is an interview with Sally Johannsohn recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking to Sally about her life as a renowned horticulturalist and about Plant Hunters, the nursery she established here in Tasmania.

The interview is taking place on Wednesday 28 August 2024 at Neika, Tasmania, in the foothills of kunanyi / Mount Wellington. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.

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

[JE] Welcome Sally. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and your parents and where you grew up?

[SJ] I was born in Ulverstone on the north-west coast. My mother was Tasmanian and my father was from Latvia and he had come to Australia before the Second World War and then eventually arrived in Tasmania. I think perhaps a lot of my interest in plants has probably come through him. He came from a very rural background.

What did he do? How did you get involved with the plants?

I just think – we lived on the river, we had quite a big piece of land, I just spent my childhood outside. My parents both gardened. They built a new house in a paddock and so they established a garden and Dad was really interested in trees, a lot of European trees. He was really interested in things like Huon pine, and all of the pines of Tasmania, before really people used them very much, and the new house – which was built in the '50s – had a lot of Huon pine furniture in it. Quite, sort of, contemporary, Swedish design. I was introduced to – and he used to get European magazines – so I was really influenced by the things I saw.

Gardening magazines?

Yeah, gardening and just European style. It had architecture and gardens, and almost a Bauhaus-style of thing. So I was introduced early on.

What kind of garden did he develop?

It was just a rambling; I suppose the pleasure-garden style. It wasn't designed, it was more probably a collection of plants to begin with, as people generally do – they see something they like the look of and just pop it in somewhere where there's a space. It rolled right down to the river, so there was a lot of room.

It sounds an idyllic childhood.

It was pretty fabulous really, yes.

Did you go to school, in Ulverstone?

I did.

What were your interests in school? Science subjects at all?

No English and art were my preferences, very strong preferences, and probably a huge weakness in mathematics [laughter].

When you left school, what pathways did you take?

I was really determined to find the thing, and I tried lots of things: I did window-dressing and car-washing. I started work early. I worked in a really lovely design shop in Ulverstone, so I was introduced there by a woman called Sheila Stratton – the Stratton's were quite a well-known Ulverstone family – and Jack Stratton, he was a furniture restorer and they dealt in antiques, and then Sheila Stratton she had one of those beautiful homeware shops with lots of Orrefors glass and all those lovely things. So I was introduced to that, probably when I was about 13, I did after-school work there. Then I just kept trying lots of things. I tried horticulture.

How did you try that?

When I was living in Launceston, I tried working for Allans.

4:39 That was a big nursery then, wasn't it?

Yes, and they put me in the horticultural/wholesale area, but they were foolish because they had me weeding everyday in the same area without anyone and day after day after day, and I was wanting to learn and I wasn't really learning anything, so I didn't last very long there [laughs].

Eventually I moved to Hobart and – eventually through trying lots of different things – and I worked in hospitality. I'd come to art school in Hobart – so I'm probably missing out a bit there.

I left school, went to Devonport Matric, after Devonport Matric I moved to Hobart and went to the Art School, which was then at the campus at Mount Nelson. That was the '70s, so all the lecturers were all European lecturers, all really interested in a more avant-garde approach, a very freeform approach to education [laughs]. So I did fine art there and then I ended up leaving there and going to New Zealand.

What took you to New Zealand?

I just needed, probably, to go somewhere [laughs], and I could afford to go to New Zealand and I went there on a boat and then I had a year on an island in the Hauraki Gulf, working in hospitality. There I was introduced to every aspect of life imaginable. The first people I met were two Maoris who were transitioning – and we're talking in the '70s – and so I had my eyes opened to a much wider, broad-minded aspect of life.

Then I left there and I went to Norfolk Island. And again, I just spent my life outside, and amongst trees and on the beaches, and so my natural environment is in nature really, and outside.

In Norfolk Island, was it hospitality still or had you begun ...?

No, hospitality. It wasn't until I came back to Australia and I moved to Hobart and then I met a florist, and then I started to get interested in floristry and I used to help Terry – his name was Terry Bourke – and he had a flower shop in Sandy Bay Road.

Is that the one in Gregory Street, or Sandy Bay Road?

No, much earlier. In the white house, on the corner of Queen Street and Sandy Bay Road, and then I used to go and help Terry down at the market on Saturday mornings, and eventually I said to him, 'I want to be a florist.'

Was there any training for that or you just learnt on the job?

Well there probably was on the mainland but Terry said, 'No, you need to go to London.'

So that got you to London.

Yes, and then I enrolled to do the Constance Spry Flower School.

Tell us about that.

Well that was fantastic. To learn a skill like that was a turning point for me. It was like being at, sort of, kindergarten for florists because you learnt the really traditional ways of doing things. We learnt how to make a wreath out of moss, and we learnt to do all the finest wiring and I learnt how to make a tiara out of lily of the valley pips, or hyacinth pips, and just really, really fine work. It was when Oasis – the flower foam – had just started to become available and people would say, 'Why aren't we using that', and they'd say, 'If you can do it the absolutely most traditional way, you will be able to adapt, to do anything in the future.' Which was quite true.

How long were you there?

I think I was there for six months, and then after that I got a job, working at Pulbrook and Gould (or I might have gone back and done that).

Was that the Sloane Street florist?

Yes. I think that was later. So I'd come back home and then I'd gone again, and then I worked at Pulbrook and Gould for a year.

9:49 You also had a nursery in Launceston – the Flower Barrow?

That was in between. So, Constance Spry, then I came back, and you couldn't buy nice cut flowers. You could buy gladioli or chrysanthemum,

(on Mother's Day),

and mostly you could just buy a triangle of those things from a florist. I was really interested in introducing bunches of flowers.

I gather it was, literally, a tow-along barrow, decorated with a red-and white-striped canopy, exposed to the elements. It was really well known in Launceston.

Yes, it was. It was hard to get permission to do it because in those days councils weren't keen to have random people on the street [laughs]. So I learnt about authority, but I didn't probably learn very well [laughs].

Were there many florists, or were you one of the first in Launceston at that point?

I was the first person – there were florists, flower shops – Hinton Lloyd, he had a flower shop in the Quadrant and that's where the Flower Barrow was, and he was a great friend of Terry Bourke's, who'd first told me to go to England. And Hinton was really good to me. He was not opposed, I don't think, to me opening up a flower shop near him [laughs]. He was good about that.

Then I moved to Hobart and opened up the Flower Barrow in the Hobart Mall, eventually. Then I had both of them.

You had them both at the same time?

Yes.

Was that one called Bloomsbury?

No, that was the shop. That came again later. So I had the Flower Barrow in Hobart and then I went to England to work at Pulbrook and Gould and my sister ran the Flower Barrow. Then I eventually came back and then opened up the Bloomsbury – with Wilmar Bouman – who I spent yesterday with and he said 40 years almost, in September: it was 40 years ago that we met and he was a florist. He was very young.

What did you do – in terms of the history of florists – what sorts of things did you do back then, 40 years ago? Cut flowers, wreaths, or the whole range?

We were trying to do something more modern, more interesting, and more natural. We were not interested in the sort of stiff ...

Bunch of roses or anything?

Yes, we were trying to introduce ... What had happened with me is, because I had trained at Constance Spry and then I'd gone and worked at Pulbrook and Gould, all the time I was seeing fabulous plants that never were in Australia. You just didn't see them. I used to send lists home to my mother to see if she could track things down and I'd send home seeds and things that you just didn't see. We didn't really have a huge horticultural interest in Australia then. People were just growing what they could get hold of. People hadn't even really moved towards growing natives in those days, and because Wilmar was from the Netherlands – and he had trained as a florist there – he had a similar aesthetic as I did, using lots more interesting and natural things.

In between all this – I'm not quite sure of the timelines – you actually had an exhibition: a gardener exhibiting in an art gallery, in 1984? Tell me about that. How did this come about?

Because I'd worked at Pulbrook and Gould they did much more sculptural work with flowers. So you'd make a big garden in a basket with moss and rocks and bits of wood, and I used to collect things from the beach and make baskets with shells or mirrors with frames of shells, or whole trees, like topiary, but they were dried, so they were two, three metres high. So big sculptural pieces but all made with natural materials [laughs]. Yes, I forget about that.

It was in Handmark Gallery I think?

It was, yeah. It was really good; it was really successful. It was in conjunction with an artist: Christine – I've forgotten her surname [Forsyth].

It's fascinating because that would have been very unusual, at that time.

Yes, it was, and since probably [laughs].

15:28 Have you always had a garden wherever you've lived, as you moved around?

No because I lived in Salamanca Place. When I had the Flower Barrow in Hobart I lived upstairs in Salamanca, in one of the warehouses.

That would have been interesting times then.

Yes, it was a fabulous place to live. It was before Salamanca, there was nobody there on a Saturday. We used to haul our wood up using a block and tackle and drive out onto the middle of Salamanca Place and there was not a single person around [laughs]. It was still when the fishing boats were coming in and the silos were filling: you could hear the silos filling.

Extraordinary times, yes.

Then the big move to the country. How did this come about, when you bought the land here in – roughly 1988 was it?

Yes, so we had Bloomsbury, the florist. Wilmar and I then decided to let go of the florist and – we owned the building, so we sold that – and we bought here. This house, I came to when I was 13, to visit for the day.

So you knew it?

I always wanted to live here.

That's extraordinary, and how did it happen? It came on the market and you saw or ...?

Yes, pretty much. We'd started looking for houses in the country.

You were by then, with Andrew?

Yes, I was with Andrew, I was married. We made an enquiry about it and then three weeks later we got a call to say, 'That house you like is on the market.'

Who owned it when you came here, at age of 13?

Oh, the Youngers: Dr Vernon Younger. He and his wife and, four children I think, had been burnt out in 1967, in Summerleas Road and they had moved to this house straight after the fires. But they were only here for a couple of years, but I was staying with another family in Hobart and we'd come to visit for the day.

Was there a garden at that point? What drew you to it?

There was a conversation pit upstairs and a bar. I don't really remember the outside, I just always remember coming here.

Obviously a deep emotional ...

I used to drive potential boyfriends up, to look at it.

Andrew knew he had to ...?

Well, I don't think he did. I don't think I ever told them what they were being asked to do. Then it came on the market and we came here – we couldn't come on any of the open days, we came on the day, because we wanted to meet the owners – and it was snowing, and fortunately he fell in love with it as well, but neither of us really understood why – it was a feeling. It wasn't anything to do really with the house, it was just a feeling.

And at that stage there's this beautiful 1870s stone house on more or less bushland with beautiful views ...

Yes, eight acres.

And you had a dream?

Yes, I mean we didn't really have much of a clue. We just knew we wanted to live here and I knew, I think, by then we'd sold Bloomsbury, I'd been to England, I'd travelled all round England looking at more plants with Barb Jennings. We had just been transported by what we saw – the plants. We just came back with lists and lists of plants and we knew we wanted to grow them. I had this idea that I wanted to have one of those gardens you see in England – like the National Trust gardens – where people go and visit, or stay. So that was it, sort of open garden. That was my concept I think, yeah.

19:57 So how did you go about developing it, because basically there wasn't much garden here?

No. So just started ...

You had the list of plants and ideas.

Yes, and Woodbank Nursery was down the road, by Ken and Lesley Gillanders, so I'd already been buying from them for years. Because I did

have a garden in Evandale when I lived there, and I did have a garden in South Hobart, so I'd become a gardener and then I'd met Barbie and she had become really interested in plants as well, and Wilmar was really keen and there was just this hub of really keen gardeners, looking for the rare and interesting. We were wanting things that weren't available, so we were seeking them out. We were buying a lot of seed from overseas and just, you know, you stop at every roadside stall, just seeking out anything; taking cuttings from private gardens.

And starting to plant, obviously. Did you have some sort of plan, given the land here?

I'm trying to remember where I started here.

... How you started developing this wonderful property. I know you love land contours, with your bushwalking and others, just how the land flows. How did this influence your garden design?

Well first of all – after going to England – I came back and put in a double herbaceous border: two straight lines, with a lovely long path through the middle of it. But I was never comfortable with it. I never felt it really worked here. It was uneven and I realised that, symmetry, you needed to be a very organised and symmetrical sort of thinker, and I'm just not. So that's when I changed, to everything was following the contours of the land and, you know when you look at a map and you see the contours of the high bits and the low bits and there were all these lovely curving lines, and then these open spaces where you're on level ground. It was that, and then that was when I started mowing, in the curves, and that's when that led on to making the garden follow the contours of this ground here.

And we live in an amphitheatre of trees, so these two straight lines were very uncomfortable. Then there was an old shed and an old asbestos tool shed as well, that were part of the place, which we removed. So there was this, sort of, falling away area from the house, with rocks and just tumbling away from the house and really untidy, and huge holly trees that needed removing. So that's when we did the amphitheatre curves, all the curves that led down to the lower area.

Beautiful. Then, of course, you started introducing the plantings and you talk about the New Perennial style and that was just happening in gardens and you went to visit, you went to explore that I guess, in the 1990s and met with Piet Oudolf? Tell us about that.

Piet Oudolf, yeah. In 1996 I went to the Netherlands and went to lots of the New Perennial movement gardens. It was when Piet Oudolf still had his nursery and I was buying plants. So I bought lots from Piet and his wife, and it was when I saw, again, lots of new things like veronicastrums and astrantias and all these lovely ... and because, still, I was really keen on flowers, so I was still coming from that florist background of trying to find beautiful flowers, but more that meadow-style of planting.

So that was very inspirational going there. And he didn't just have the perennials, he also had beautiful woodland plants. I mean, he was a plant collector in those days, and then slowly he shifted to mostly perennials.

I've since been back, so we went back in about 2015, and all the nursery's gone and that's all now – where the nursery was – there were long narrow beds and the beds are sort of still there, but all the nursery plants that were in them were just let grow, to grow. It was lovely to see that transition. He'd built his studio in amongst all of that, so we went to his design studio where you look down on the garden.

Your garden encompasses several different micro-climates, that allow you to grow some very unusual perennials and plants, and I read somewhere that you said, 'I think about the plant first, not what the area needs.'

Yes, so I'm really interested in where a plant comes from. So, if it comes from a woodland area, then I want to put it where it's comfortable. I don't want to try and force it to grow somewhere it doesn't want to be and then have to water it to keep it alive. I'm really keen on climatic areas in the garden. I have a sunny garden; a picking garden; a shady garden; a water garden; and so on.

You also describe every plant having a story. Do you have any favourite stories: favourite plants and their stories? So many probably ... trillium? I love your trilliums.

Yes, well the trilliums. I think the woodland plants probably: the ones that are really ephemeral. So, a lot of the things that come from North America – the woodland plants, rather than the hybrids – they would be my absolute pick. So *Jeffersonia* and the trilliums, all the different trilliums. And they are ephemeral unless you see them. Sanguinarias, and a lot of the plants that came out of China when China opened up a bit more, and new things became available. Those little transient things that only I see, because I'm up in the morning to see them before they finish.

I think of some of those unusual plants too – thinking back to you background at art school – because many of them are structural and unusual shapes and colours and they are quite artistic, very many of those plants.

Well they have really good form, some of them. Like lobelia. The lobelias that come from Africa. We all think of lobelia as the little bedding plant with the blue flowers, but there are the lobelias that come from Kenya which are just wonderful green, leafy rosettes that throw up a huge spike and they're evergreen, so they add an enormous amount of structure to the garden, and that's probably where my interest is now, in having a lot more form in the garden, to go with the little ephemeral things.

I'm just going to read something that you wrote for Claire Takacs, in her wonderful book *Australian Dreamscapes: the art of planting in gardens*

***inspired by nature*, and you said, ‘I do a lot of experimenting with new things. Running the nursery alongside the garden requires growing a lot of things, and that can make a garden on the busy side, like a cottage garden, which I don’t want. With a really strong design you can get away with being a collector. I work with drifts or repeats of things that give some coherence or create a similar effect with colour. I have a love of whimsy, taking inspirations from artists like Alexander Calder and Joan Miro. I’ve also been heavily influenced by Beth Chatto’s style of micro-climate gardening.’**

This encapsulates for me a lot of your work over time. Tell us about Beth Chatto, and you visited there?

Yes, that was fantastic. I went there in 1988 with Barb, and Beth Chatto was still there and it was just seeing, again, absolutely fantastic plants that you’ve never seen before and growing en masse, and I think too, it was that whole thing, she’s very keen on having right plant, right place. Her books were so inspiring because she tells you about walking in the mountains in Georgia, or somewhere, and telling you what plants she sees growing in combination, on the edge of a forest. So you understand how plants want to grow together, and also you understand the difference between the edge of the forest and in the forest, and she was really good at growing things where they ... Her husband was a botanist, so he could tell her, where.

This will do well here.

Yes, they had that really good combination of knowledge, and she travelled a lot, so she saw things growing in the wild.

And I think that’s what I did too, once I started travelling to places and seeing plants growing where they come from, I understood a lot more what plants needed.

30:59 We’re coming to now where, alongside all this, you began to develop a nursery. I’m not quite sure when that happened – in the beginning of the 2000s?

Yes.

How did it evolve?

I went to America, with Barb. Barbie and I started, we got a collection of plants. We were importing, I had a quarantine house.

Tell us about that first.

I set up a quarantine house in an old glasshouse down the back, and so when I went to the Netherlands – I think that might have been the first time I actually went and collected – and brought back a whole lot of unusual things.

You were then allowed to keep it in your own quarantine house in those days?

Yes, and the quarantine people would come and check. You had lists of what you were bringing in and there was a list of what couldn't come, and we had a pretty good sense of what wasn't a good idea to bring into Australia. I mean you're not going to worry about trilliums, you're not going to worry about something that's an American woodland plant because it's not going to go mad here.

But if it was more invasive, yes.

And I think those sorts of things became more of a concern later, when people started wanting to only grow natives.

Do you remember what year you set up your quarantine house?

I reckon in – we went to England in '88 – we would have started between '88 and 2000.

Oh, quite some time ago.

Yes. We started by having a collection of plants, Barb and I did, and we had some wooden pallets and we set them all out in there, then we invited some people to come and we made \$300, and we thought we were just ... [laughs]

It was Christmas!

Absolutely.

Picking up again, where we were talking about you establishing your quarantine house – so you could import all these amazing plants – and at the same time you'd begun running the nursery and selling, but in between all of this (or perhaps a little earlier?) when the Bennetts were at Government House [1987-1995] you were working as a florist at Government House. Tell us about those days.

Yes, I went to work there, it was just part-time, and it was during the time when, you know, there was Charles and Diana, and Andrew and Fergie and all of those people were coming to visit. I also learnt a lot more about plants there because Brian Lumb was the gardener, at Government House. He was also a keen plantsman, so I had that contact as well. He could tell me what things were and I just absorbed as much as I could about unusual things and finding out where to get unusual plants from and working in the gardens at Government House, there were some beautiful trees.

Did they have the picking garden then?

No, not really. There was the remains of an old picking garden, but not so much in those days.

Where did you source the plants, the flowers and things for your arrangements? Where did you source those?

Some from around the actual garden, rather than the picking garden. Most of the foliage would come from the garden and then we would buy some commercial flowers, to top it up with, if there was a special event

on. Because I had been a florist, I had a lot of contacts of where to get things from.

35:14 Are there any memorable occasions that you had to do arrangements for that you recall? Any stand out?

I suppose when the Royals would come. That would be the stand-out thing. They'd have very big, lavish dinners and it was all much more ... attention to detail was really great.

There were the big flower arrangements or did you have to do any on the tables?

The tables were really the ones that were very striking because I'd use all the silver that belonged to the house and lots of glass and candelabras and so on, so I could do some very extravagant pieces there.

Have these all been photographed, do you know?

I don't know.

Oh, it sounds like an amazing record.

They may have been, I really don't know.

Coming back to the nursery, by now you've got your quarantine house; you're bringing in lots of plants; Barb Jennings has gone off doing her hellebores and you are beginning to sell specialist. Tell us about that, you had that first occasion when you sold some plants and then ...?

Then I started to do a catalogue and having to print a catalogue and then slowly learning a bit of computer technology, or not so much learning it, but getting someone else to do it for me.

Then I got a following of people who were also keen on getting unusual plants and it just became a word-of-mouth thing. I think really, I've pretty much operated my whole life through word-of-mouth. I don't think I could sell something that I didn't actually believe in, so I was always very enthusiastic about what I had to offer and was always trying to interest people – well, not interest them – but offer something that was interesting.

When did the plant fairs begin and the open days? By then you'd started the mail-order, through the catalogue.

Yes. Because there was that core group of us: Dan [Hinkley] and Ken and Lesley, and it was just a really nice thing to bring all those people who were particularly passionate about their interest together.

We had a mailing list, and in those days the computer was really just starting to become part of business and so you could then email everybody. So things like having to mail out and put a stamp on every envelope, that all changed. That started to alter how small businesses, like small nurseries, could run.

Then, I suppose, we had that following and all those people, and people would come from the mainland for our plant fairs.

You had plant fairs: two or four?

I think there were four. They were biennial: every second year.

In between you had – I know, because I came to several – open days or open weekends where we could buy plants from you, and that ran for quite a few years?

Yes I used to do that, probably, two or three times a year: one in Spring and one in Autumn. But it was an interesting business model because it was just when I had enough plants to sell. I tended to operate like that. Because I was doing most of it myself – you know, there'd be interruptions to life – it was when I had enough to sell. You'd just send out an email and people would come.

And they certainly came.

They did [laughs].

39:38 Tell us about the propagating then. You were self-taught to propagate these plants?

Yes, I was self-taught. I went to a propagating class at Adult Ed once – a very famous British gardener, he now does all the meadow gardens in England – I just can't remember his name [James Hitchmough]. He came and he did a half-day propagating thing with TAFE and then I got right into reading about propagating and, you know, using honey and rooting powder and different mixes and stratifying things and doing all these elaborate things and then slowly I gave all that up and I just did this one method: for seed and cuttings.

I did have a heat bed, which made a huge difference, but I realised that a lot of the books you read are for large commercial nurseries that need to not make mistakes. But because I was propagating so many things and I was never, ever going to be able to prick them all out, I just did my method: and it worked, and I was amazed at what I could produce.

Tell us about your method. What was it?

I just used a really good sand and potting mix mixture, quite a coarse mixture and I used that for cuttings and for seed. I'd put big seeds on top of the mixture and put 7mm blue metal over the top and the little, tiny seeds like meconopsis – the blue poppy – they would get sprinkled onto the blue metal and fall through the gaps, and then I did the same for cuttings. It just seemed to work for me.

And by then you had developed your propagation area up near the gate?

Behind the hedge. Originally, quite a few years before I specialised in tree peonies – and I sold tree peonies, so I propagated tree peonies, and that's much more complicated. You actually have to graft: so that was grafting. The grafts would have to go on heat and then on cool and then get planted out for two years, and then you were actually grafting tree

peony scions onto herbaceous peony roots. It was a trick – nobody much knew how to do it and I was taught how to do it and so I did it.

And they are truly beautiful tree peonies. But now you understand why they are quite pricey: they're very labour-intensive over a period of time?

Hugely labour-intensive, yes. You have huge losses. Well you did. I think there are much more successful methods now.

I want to talk now – we're jumping around a bit ...

I keep remembering something I've done that I'd forgotten [laughs].

I'm interested – when we were talking about propagating and developing the nursery and plants – you talked about bumblebees being big pollinators. Once the bumblebees became established here that made quite a difference. Tell me more about that.

I think it made a huge difference. I just, in the first say 20 years, we lived here without bumblebees – we never had a single eucalypt. I mean, we live in a *Eucalyptus regnans* forest, we never had any self-seed, but now – since the bumblebees have come – we just have lots and lots self-sow on our land, and also other native plants, particularly. Just new plants – things like liliium - *Cardiocrinum giganteum*, which is the giant Himalayan lily – they just self-sow all through the garden. That's quite a difficult plant to grow and they just self-sow and so do richea, I've got richea self-sowing in the garden. It's just not something you would expect and I put it down to the bumblebees, but I don't know of any scientific studies that have been done to agree with me.

While we're talking about that and the environment, have you noticed – over the 35-40 years – changes in the climate?

Oh huge. All the wattles, the acacias that germinated after the 1967 bushfires, they've all reached a certain age and they are all falling over. So there's a lot more light in the understorey, but because it's been so dense there hasn't been a lot of germination in the understorey around on the mountain where we live, and so, I think that's one of the reasons that the animals are moving into the city. So the pademelons, the Bennetts' wallabies, when we first lived here, you did not see one pademelon. You might see one dead pademelon on the road a year, and now you would see just masses, and Bennett's wallabies. We didn't see a Bennett's wallaby. And the possums have all moved in, so now I can't actually grow a lot of things anymore because of the possums.

What's happened is, where the trees have fallen over, so the wattles have fallen over, and where there should be new plants germinating, they probably germinate and then they get eaten off straight away by the hungry animals, who've all moved down. Ferns are fine, ferns survive – but the animals are eating things they've never had to eat before. So I don't really know what's next there.

That is really interesting to watch that happen over that period of time.

Yes. Because we live on the mountain, we walk pretty much every day on the mountain, so you really notice things, and the change of what grows here now. There are pimeleas that grow on the mountain now that were never here, and there are the pomaderris that self-sow everywhere. Again, they are colonising the Pipeline Track. You just notice those plants that I had never seen here before, and things that are not coping with the heat as well. A lot of the *Eucalyptus pulchella* aren't coping with the dry periods, and so that's changing the structure of things.

That's interesting, that's even in the big forests where there are a lot of them.

Yes.

This is a question – you've written a bit about it – is there such a thing as an Australian garden?

We've talked about this – we've had meetings to discuss it. I've always felt that it's a shame to have an either/or, or for it to be a prescriptive thing, I guess. In the end, growing plants is a wonderful thing to do, providing habitat. I grow *Isoplexis canariensis* which is from the Canary Islands, and it would either have seed or flowers on it pretty well all year round and it's outside the bathroom window and I would never not see, probably a wattle bird or another sort of honeyeater on it every day of the year. They absolutely love it, and they love all the native vegetation as well. But I think the two can live very compatibly together if that's what your interest is.

I'm switching now to growing rainforest plants from Tasmania, because I can grow them here, and there aren't many places where you would probably grow rainforest plants in a garden situation. So I'm really enjoying planting things like *richea en masse*, and *Nothofagus gunnii*, just things that I know will survive on this piece of ground. But I grow them with rhododendrons and I grow them with daphnes and they all work together, and there's that whole Gondwana connection as well, and they just complement one another I think.

To spectacular effect, I think, yes.

You also mention Catherine Shields, a well-known Tasmanian-based garden designer, and you consider she's got a very distinctive style? How do you describe that?

Well Catherine's been a wonderful help to me here, helping me pull my garden together, because my tendency is to have a shade garden, a water garden, a border, without there being a lot of connect between them. She's very good at developing a flow in a garden and creating a feeling. I find she is – she calls her business the Alchemy of Gardens – and she is the ultimate alchemist. I've supplied lots of plants for gardens that she's designed and I say to the customers, 'Please just go with the plan and the plants that she's chosen for you.' There's something magical about that girl [laughs], and I've been to her gardens after they've been planted for a few years and her understanding of how to put

things together takes my breath away. So I try to encourage people to stick with the plan. If later on they want to change it, fine, but that's just from having seen the results of her careful combinations. Yes, she's a talented person.

51:23 She's also a member of the Garden Angels, is that correct?

Yes.

Tell us a little about that – you're involved in the Garden Angels group?

There's Catherine and Sally and Mark Geeves, and we were all very keen plants people together. Catherine used to have a garden at Cygnet and Mark had his garden and we just decided it would be really nice to get together once a month to work in one another's gardens and to talk about concepts and run by new ideas and share plants. We used to have 'show and tell' and share what garden magazines we'd recently read or different concepts. That is still going, not as often and certainly not as physical. Catherine used to always want us to bring our mattocks, which she used to give me [laughs], it would make me a bit nervous – I didn't use a mattock in my own garden, and now it's more of a discussion than lunch.

This is at the same time as your nursery began to wind down. Was that COVID that you stopped the mail-order work – in COVID?

Yes, pretty much. It started to slow down then, and I probably haven't picked it up to the same extent.

Are you still doing lessons?

I did do some workshops for people, just to encourage people to propagate themselves and to show them how I do it, and just how to simplify what they do in a garden because we all make it very complicated when we first start.

Are you still doing this?

I have to decide whether I'm going to do another one this Spring. We'll just see what happens.

The actual garden open days stopped some years back now.

Yes.

That was just after COVID I think?

Yes, just winding down from all of that, and because I'm trying to change the garden – there are some pretty raw areas again – I need to concentrate on doing that. Because when you're open, what I found was because I was still doing bus groups, is that you never really get on with the projects because you're always trying to just maintain it. We all feel conscientious about having it looking its best for when people are paying to come.

I want to backtrack a bit, but throughout your life you've done a heap of travelling and collecting of plants: you've been to Iran; Canary Islands, Madeira. Tell us about those sort of travels.

No, well I'm really just interested in seeing plants growing in the wild and I knew about this trip to Iran, which was driving, going in four-wheel drives up through the Zagros mountains, and seeing plants growing in the wild. And it's a really fantastic place to go to, the food was astonishing, the people were fantastic, politics is appalling, but it's just where tulips come from and iris come from and you see the rose farms where rosewater comes from and all the things that we don't see here, just growing in the wild: fields of *Fritillaria imperialis*. You're walking up to about 3000 metres to snow-melt and I think that was for me a bit of a revelation, understanding how those things grow. You've got the snow, all through Winter, and all these plants are covered in snow and then Spring starts to come, snow starts to melt, it runs down past all these plants and they get lots of water as they are coming into growth and they do their thing and then it just dries out. A lot of them are Summer-dormant, so they're just kept really dry – drought dry – through Summer and then it all starts again.

So I think I understood so much more about watering and how not to water through the Summer. Plants need water when they're coming into growth but they don't need to be constantly watered throughout the Summer and as soon as something wilts, it doesn't need to be watered because it has a mechanism to cope with that. But the more water you give it, the more it's going to need. And it's all very well for me to say that when I live here on the mountain [laughter], and I get snow-melt.

56:49 Yes, a very interesting observation though. And then Canary Islands, that would have been quite a contrast?

Yes, well they get so much rain there, all year round, but then they have areas like El Teide, which is like seeing plants growing in the ash from your fireplace. It's just this grey, gritty, volcanic earth and these fantastic plants that grow in it. I imagine it's just full of minerals and these extraordinary plants. Things that we grow in our gardens like wallflowers, they're growing on the side of El Teide, and echiums.

Again, seeing how plants survive with only what nature gives them. And obviously if you're growing a tree like a silver birch in Hobart, and we're in drought, and they come from the mountains, of course they're going to struggle. So maybe think about where the plant comes from and whether it's going to cope with a very, very dry Summer.

There are beautiful things you can grow that will cope with your individual conditions without having to keep them alive, so much.

I hope you keep your workshops going Sally. I think it's important to continue that educative role.

Well it's a bit opinionated perhaps [laughter].

Now I need to comment that Sally is – as you describe it – a forever florist. In front of us during this interview are some magnificent items – banksias – but they're not banksias, they're actually made out of plastic from the beaches.

Marine debris, yes.

How did you get into this?

... When we used to go to Victoria for our holidays, and I'd just started collecting stuff off the beach, that washed up, all the bits of plastic, bottles tops, rope, anything that comes in, and then it slowly I started to turn it into a ...[pause]

Sally we were just talking about you being a forever florist and going back to those days when you were learning skills as a florist.

I really use them now. I've got probably fairly dextrous fingers which don't like to be idle at all and so I make the banksias out of the marine debris and then I make the leaves, and I'm using all the skills I learnt as a florist back in 1977. Which is just a wonderful thing to think and to adapt things. I've made people's wreaths for their family funerals and they're all made with moss and using all those old skills that generally people don't have anymore.

I think you're a magician for turning, what people might describe as detritus, just waste, into magical, beautiful things.

I want to go back again to one of your overseas trips. I think it was 2018 or 2019, you had the opportunity to volunteer at the Chanticleer Garden in the US. Tell us about that.

They run a guest gardener program and they do a lot of swaps with young gardeners. So I was quite lucky that I was able to go there and do two weeks at Chanticleer working with all the gardeners, and I lived in the house. I lived in the Chanticleer house while I was there. At night, in the afternoon when all the people had gone home, I had the whole of Chanticleer to myself, and people used to keep saying to me, 'Do you want to go and see this other garden?' [laughs] and I was just saying, 'No! I just want to be here at Chanticleer.' It was just fantastic.

The gardeners were so generous, and I learnt so much about how to run a big garden like that. It was fantastic, and again, being introduced to all sorts of plants I'd never seen before.

Is there anything like that in Australia? Should we have something like that?

No. Look we did try. We did start a program and a girl came and stayed with me. It was a swap with a German garden and it was funded, so that one young gardener could go and work at (was it Whyfenstein – I can't quite remember the name of the garden) [de Wiersse] and then she would come and do two weeks here and live upstairs. We were going to do that and follow it through and then COVID happened and it just petered out, it didn't go anywhere. So we did try to do it, and it would be

wonderful. There's just not that horticultural relevance I don't think. I do follow a few things, young women in horticulture on Instagram, so I think there are things developing and coming online for people who are really keen.

It's to be encouraged.

Oh look, it's just fantastic. People go and work at Great Dixter, as volunteers. Australian gardeners have done that. It's usually something you organise yourself, it's not a formal thing. I think maybe Dame Elizabeth Murdoch's garden there may be some work there, I'm not sure.

Now your garden's been used for all sorts of events over the years, apart from your fairs. There was, in 2021 I understand, a fashion shoot to promote the label *Romance was Born*?

Oh it was gorgeous, just gorgeous. They had – they do such extravagant floral clothing and the girls were wearing these beautiful coats with big flowers all over them and these exquisite looking girls and they had dry ice – I've got a tree circle of *Prunus serrula*, which is the Tibetan cherry and it's got these gorgeous, like copper, trunks that shine. So they set it all up in there and they had the dry ice coming up through it and these nymph-like creatures moving in and out of that and they had photos on the jetty and sitting in the field of daisies and it was gorgeous to see, yes. It was a lovely thing.

And you even had a helicopter land?

Yes, one of the firefighters who lived nearby had been working remotely for quite a few days, wanted to get home quickly so he got the pilot to drop him in our paddock [laughter].

Great fun.

Are there any other things? I think we're getting to the end Sally. Are there any other thoughts you want to add?

Oh just that this is such a good time for horticulture. I think because of COVID so many people became interested in plants, but it's not an area people seek out to go into as a long-term career and I do think there's an opportunity for people, if you do want to specialise, particularly. Because the specialists that were part of my sphere of influence are now no longer or they are winding down, well and truly. If you wanted to specialise in bulbs, for example, you would just do really well, because the opportunity you have with the internet now – we used to have to have paper catalogues, and the influence you can have with social media and trying to promote something new and interesting.

It seems to me there are a lot less small nurseries. And when we all struggle to make a living out of it, I really think now you can actually make a really substantial living out of it and have a really good lifestyle.

The time has come really, for horticulture.

Yeah, I mean, you're probably not going to drive a Porsche, but you're going to have a really good ute [laughs]. It just would be a really lovely thing to see more young people starting their own specialist nurseries.

That's a wonderful thought to end on and I hope we have many young people listening to this and it might be some encouragement.

That would be great.

Thank you Sally for contributing to our Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection.

You've given us a wonderful history of gardening in southern Tasmania over nearly 40 years and your garden is a truly beautiful legacy. The author/photographer Claire Takacs says, 'Your garden is one of my favourite gardens in Australia.' And it is, absolutely beautiful. Thank you again.

Thank you.

66.40

Recording ends.

Interview ends.