

STUART READ'S
FAVOURITES

Picconia excelsa
Carissa spectabilis
Pinus roxburghii
Adhotoda vasica
Epiphyllum spp
*Angophora
floribunda*
Punica granatum
*Brachychiton
populneum*
*Lagerstroemia
indica*
*Rothmania
globosa &
Gardenia
thunbergii*

Correspondence on Colonial Plants

Stuart Read compiled a list of his favourite plants from last year's the post-conference tour and an e-mail correspondence ensued with Colleen Morris and John Hawker chipping in. This is what AGHS membership is all about.

Stuart Read on 29 October 2004:

1. *Picconia sp.*, (can't find species – it's barely in any of my plant books). A rare tree of the olive family, seen both on the back lawn at Camden Park, and on the north side lawn at Denholm Court – the only other one I've ever seen was pointed out by the redoubtable Jim Webb (ACT, Monaro & Riverina Branch) on the back 'garden front' of Cooma Cottage at Yass. Corky oak-like bark, shiny dark green pointed leaves . . . Now, an intriguing thought, given all three have similar size and butt diameters, is that all three stem (pardon the pun) from same stock, seed, etc.

This plant generated quite an electronic discussion:

Stuart Read on 31 October:

Found the species name – it's *Picconia excelsa* or palo blanco, an endangered tree of the olive family from the Canary Islands .

Colleen Morris on 2 November:

This one intrigues as its former name was *Olea excelsa* but this species name does not appear on early lists so must have been known by another name – I will look again tonight as it is obviously something that was around in the 19th century. In *Hortus Britannicus* (1830) Loudon describes it as having been introduced to Britain from Madeira in 1784. Curiously it is not listed in the Camden Park catalogues, or in any other of the known early and mid-19th

century NSW nursery catalogues. It may have been a later planting, or known here by an alternative name.

And again on 3 November:

Picconia gets rarer by the minute. It is not listed as growing in the Sydney Botanic Gardens in 1895 (looking for *Picconia excelsa*) and it is not in plants listed in Nursery Catalogues in Victoria 1855-1889. Loudon's *Arboretum* (1838) discusses specimens which were growing outside in shelter, one in Ireland, in such a manner that it does not seem to have caught on as a garden plant in a big way in Britain. I guess the best way to find out how it got here would be to trawl Macarthur's manuscripts, but the most important thing is that there are two growing in western Sydney. Should AGHS propagate it to ensure its continuity?

John Hawker joins in on 3 November:

There are only a few *Picconia excelsa* in Victoria – 3 trees in the Royal Botanic Victoria's largest (Cir. 3.85m., Ht. 10.5m., Can. 15.7m. [1989],) and a single tree at Kamesburgh in Brighton.

I thought that Yaralla had a few remarkable trees. How common is *Maclura pomifera* (Osage Orange) in NSW? There was a very large and old tree near the dairy, also two *Scolopia brownii* (Gunstock Tree) and a *Geijera parviflora* (Wilga).

Stuart continues his list:

2. *Carissa spectabilis* (Natal Plum) – the 'mystery' prickly shrub in the carriage loop at Horsley – kept many of us guessing and hitting books for weeks. Perhaps the same species behind the book *The Great Hedge of India*. Gardenia-like single white spiraloïd flowers, glossy dark leaves, twin-branched 'antler' spines.



3. *Pinus roxburghii* (Himalayan or Chir Pine) – interspersed with the Bunya Bunyas down Horsley’s magnificent driveway avenue, and gracing the garden hilltop at Brownlow Hill. Also likely to have been supplied by Dr Nathaniel Wallich, Director of the Botanic Gardens in Calcutta, who was in correspondence with the Macleays (Brownlow Hill). Given Horsley’s clear Indian links . . . a definite possibility, homesick companions?

My sketchy research suggests:

Pinus roxburghii (syn. *P. longifolia* ?) Hillier’s *Manual of Trees & Shrubs* suggests *P. longifolia* = *P. oxburghii* & *P. palustris* (Southern Pitch Pine, USA) was introduced into England 1807. Hugh Johnson’s *International Book of Trees* Introductory chart has a flood of Indian material hitting England from c.1800 on – funnily enough the first entry is *P. roxburghii*.

NSW – Craig Burton has it on a list from 1835 – source – Landscape Management Plan for Univesity of Western Sydney, Parramatta, the former Female Orphan School.

Tasmania – Phyll Fraser Simons *Historic Gardens of Tasmania* notes Mr Gunn of Hobart had it in 1853 and the Botanic Gardens Hobart in 1857 (*P. longifolia*)

Victoria – J.J. Rule’s 1857 list also has *P. longifolia*.

Late dates aren’t they, given India’s active trading dates 1820s-1830s according to Broadbent, Hughes et al. in the Museum of Sydney/Historic Houses Trust Exhibition in 2004? I guess Himalayan botanizing was very much a side-activity to spying in ‘the Great Game of Empire’.

Colleen re-enters the discussion:

At the Sydney conference James Broadbent questioned whether the plants Hardy Wilson associated with colonial gardens were, in reality, available. Many of them were, but Winter Honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*), so treasured by owners of old gardens and according to *Paxton’s Botanical Dictionary* (1868) introduced into Britain from China in 1848, is curiously

absent from colonial NSW catalogues. So the gardens we imagine that existed in early colonial times differed, botanically, from our notions. In our mind’s eye we can envisage links between the Chir Pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) in the garden at Brownlow Hill or Horsley with the Macleay or Weston links with India but Alexander Macleay who was in correspondence with Dr Nathaniel Wallich of the Calcutta Botanic Garden did not list it among his desiderata or receive a plant of this tree, then known as *Pinus longifolia* and first listed in Macarthur’s 1843 catalogue. But romantic notions are fulfilled when we stand and appreciate the same mighty tree whose emerging form was captured by the hand of Conrad Martens in 1871. So this is one of my favourites too.

Back to Stuart:

4. *Adhatota vasica* (Malabar Nut or Vasaka) at Brownlow Hill, out the back of the ruined aviary – again intriguing possibilities about how an Indian plant might just be growing in that garden! Apparently it is a powerful, natural medicinal drug, anti-spasmodic, used in Ayurvedic medicine in India for centuries.

Colleen adds:

This has enjoyed renewed interest in the past few years largely due to the Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney. The plant’s story is laced with the romanticism of the trade routes. Collected in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) it was sent by John Reeves, Chief Inspector of Tea for the East India Company at Canton, to Charles Fraser of the Sydney Botanic Gardens in 1828. Was the young plant of the Malabar Nut one of the 6 shrubs sent to Brownlow Hill from the Sydney Gardens in 1832 or among those sent two years later?

Stuart goes on:

5. *Epiphyllum ssp and cultivars* (Orchid Cacti) – the red, but especially the cream:

Both at Meadowvale, where the red was a knockout under an olive tree out the back, and more spectacularly at Ellensville, Mount Hunter, creeping through a tangled Cape Honeysuckle (*Tecomaria capensis*)



COLLEEN MORRIS'S FAVOURITES

Araucaria bidwillii
& *A. cunninghamii*

Picconia excelsa

Pinus roxburghii

Lonicera fragrantissima

Epiphyllum spp.

Nolina recurvata
(syn. *Beaucarnea recurvata*)

Punica granatum

Ceratonia siliqua

Ulmus parvifolia

Rothmania globosa &
Gardenia thunbergii

Arbutus unedo

Brachychiton populneum

Phyllostachys nigra

hedge, the riot of cream, red, and rusty orange blooms a standout – and the granddaddy clump of cream, northwest of the house.

6. *Angophora floribunda*/*A. subvelutina*/*A. x intermedia* (Rough Barked Apple or Apple Gum or Apple Oak) A feature throughout the Conference tours – on the Mulgoa Valley properties, and more at Brownlow Hill, Camden Park, Ellensville and Meadowvale. Ellenville's giant, near the river crossing, took my prize with a close second going a younger one at Fairlight (Mulgoa) in a grove near the garden wall where their Hardy Wilsonesque vertically hanging wobbly branches were elegantly 'draping' the lawns. Stunning.
7. *Punica granatum* (Pomegranate) – wondrous plants at The Lewers Bequest & Gallery with hundreds of carmine flowers; Brownlow Hill's 'Round House or Monk's Cottage' had a lovely one full of huge 'husks' where the parrots had stripped nearly every seed and left its vessel hanging, and at Horsley, tucked between the house and nearest outbuilding, with a chaser of Belgian honeysuckle (*Lonicera serotina* cv.) in cream and rose pink – sumptuous abundance!

Colleen agrees but adds one of her favourites:

Pomegranates were seductive and especially redolent of Australia's earliest gardens. The lovely double-flowered pomegranate we saw at the Lewers Bequest Garden had many wondering at what it was. Thomas Scott, Archdeacon of NSW, was responsible for the introduction of this form in the Sydney Botanic Gardens in 1824. At St Paul's Church at Cobitty the survival skills of an ancient Carob or St John's Bread, *Ceratonia siliqua*, its massive base sprouting the multiple trunks that tell of radical pruning, is a favourite of mine. The Australian Agricultural Company introduced this species to Sydney in 1827 but I enjoy its association with Thomas Hassall, the galloping parson, so known because of the distances he covered each week. Hassall almost certainly planted this tree and another, which collapsed just over five years ago, in the garden at Denbigh, Hassall's nearby estate.



Back to Stuart:

8. *Brachychiton populneum* (Kurrajong) gracing many gardens, from Yaralla in the inner west, out to Mulgoa and right down to Appin and the Cow Pastures – tough old birds with some style and laciness, their dappled shade, trusses of hanging pods like children's boats, and those lovely bell flowers, both plain cream, greenish and spotted with red as at Denham Court where the mixed native avenue was an inspiration.
9. *Lagerstroemia indica* (Crepe Myrtles) an under-appreciated tree, especially in the rain, having seen the beautiful ones at Horsley in the old carriage loop garden, arching tracteries, no flowers needed (but what a summer bonus), their flaked, shiny, ginger, fawn and cream bark a standout.
10. *Rothmania globosa* and *Gardenia thunbergii* (Tree Gardenias) – both types at Camden Park tucked away in the lower garden – *Rothmania globosa* with its bluish citrine cream bells with upturned petals, strongly scented, and with green globe fruit, and *Gardenia thunbergii*, with long trumpet like-funnels and spiral 'frangipanis' at the end, swelling into hairy fruit, rather large, all over the bush. Again, strongly scented – quite the thing for the 'mixed border' of choice!

I could go on and on! No mention of Surinam cherries, strange blue things from South America, lochromas, and tiny scarlet Lapeirousias from south Africa, but I have already reached ten choices.

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Colleen Morris is a heritage consultant with a particular interest in garden history. She is Chair of the NMC.

John Hawker is a horticulturist who works with Heritage Victoria. His special interest is conifers.