

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
SYDNEY AND NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT



INTERVIEWEE:	SHIRLEY STACKHOUSE, OAM
INTERVIEWER:	ROSLYN BURGE
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PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	AT HER HOME, 4 Willow Close, Killara
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QUOTATIONS / EXTRACTS:	EXTRACTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD.

Summary:

Shirley Stackhouse was virtually brought up in her grandfather's rose nursery. George Henry Heers, was the Director of Dairying for the Department of Agriculture and Stock in Queensland. He was a well known rose grower and he exhibited roses at every rose show.

Because he was legally not allowed to own a business his sons, Shirley's uncles, ran the rose nursery (Pacific Nurseries) in Manly, just out of Brisbane.

Shirley had a number of careers before horticulture.

Shirley a lifelong love of art and drawing and when she left school she did a Diploma in Fine Art at the Brisbane Technical College Art School. She also worked as an occupational therapist before her marriage.

Horticulture wasn't an option for her - Gatton Agricultural College in Queensland only admitted boys. In Brisbane she had a job writing tv scripts for the ABC's children's shows

When she came to Sydney she was employed by the *Herald*, writing the garden column 'Waratah' and worked at *Woman's Day* and at *Woman's Own* (where she worked under a pseudonym, Anne Summerfield, at the request of the editor). In time she began to take her own photographs for her articles or illustrate them herself (as she did with her books).

She believes there is much less emphasis on gardening in the newspaper and general magazines – there has been a great increase in interest in sport; people no longer have access (economically) to the traditional quarter acre block with space to garden. Shirley talks about the impact of gardening shows on TV

Shirley gave talks on cruises, in the Pacific, and garden tours to Europe every year for some time. Shirley spoke about her work on radio, when people would call in with enquiries, about her books, and her particular pleasure in "Gardening Year Book" which is being published anew.

She talks about the difference between her work and previous writers, who were neither writers nor horticulturalists. She was one of the foundation members of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens and the Australian Garden History Society.

Shirley talks about her awards, and her wide influence in the community and concluded the interview with a story from her childhood:

When I was a child my relatives of course as relatives always do were always asking what I was going to do when I grew up and I always used to say, even though I knew that they were going to laugh at me, I said I was going to be a writer and I was going to be an artist and then they would all laugh. And my uncles to make me say this would give me a penny so I used to think it was worth being laughed at by all the relatives around to get the penny because a penny was big amount of money in those days.

TAPE 1: SIDE A

Shirley, thank you for participating in this oral history project, I wonder before we start off on other questions if you could give me your full name and your date of birth.

My full name is Shirley June Dunbar Stackhouse and my date of birth is 20th June 1927.

And your maiden name?

Was Howes.

And where were you born?

I was born in Brisbane.

Your family were living there at the time?

Yes I was with my family and my mother's family had a rose nursery so we were really brought up in the nursery trade.

What was the name of the nursery?

The name of the nursery was Pacific Nurseries.

Right in Brisbane itself?

No, no it was about eight miles from Brisbane in Manly, which is a seaside suburb of Brisbane.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes I have a brother and a sister. My brother Peter lives in Sydney he is a keen yachting and he spends his entire life sailing. He inherited the family's sea-going genes which go back to something like the seventeenth century where they were all sea captains, probably no better than they should be, he's not like that. *[Laughs]*

In him it came out in sailing so he's been sailing since he could stand up, he got his first boat when he was eight. My sister is a very keen gardener and she is a leading light in a gardening club in Brisbane, or Queensland, their headquarters for it is Buderim, so she has a very beautiful garden she opens for the Open Garden Scheme so she has maintained the horticultural genes as well.

So that must have been a great influence on you as you grew up.

Oh yes it was a tremendous influence. We absolutely loved being at the farm, as we called it, and as well as roses they had strawberries and we used to pick the strawberries sometimes which was supposed to be helping but we ate as many as we picked.

Is that still in the family?

No like everything else suburbia caught up with them and it all had to be subdivided and disappeared. But for many years it was well-known and the largest rose nursery in Queensland at the time.

Shirley you were telling me when we met before that that had been your grandfather's property.

Yes that is right, my grandfather was actually the Director of Dairying for the Department of Ag [Agriculture] and Stock and as such he was legally not allowed to own a business or run another business but my two uncles, his two sons actually did the day-to-day running of the business.

What was his name?

His name was George Henry Heers and he was a very well-known rose grower, of course, in his day and he also exhibited roses, he didn't just grow them professionally, he exhibited them as well at rose shows. You know rose shows used to be big in the thirties and forties and fifties and he always used to show roses at every rose show.

There is no question it is in your blood.

Oh definitely in the blood.

What did your father do Shirley?

My father was an engineer and he was keen on the garden when he was younger but when he got older he didn't do much gardening because he got sore knees, which mercifully didn't get inherited by any of us.

You had your schooling in Brisbane.

Yes I went to the Brisbane Girls' Grammar School and I also went to the Art School, I spent four years at the Brisbane Technical College Art School where I did a Diploma in Art, Fine Art that is. We had a wonderfully happy time doing that. That is why I illustrate my books and I used to illustrate for the *Herald* ('Waratah') column many years ago botanical drawings as well. So painting was my obsession really.

Have you kept tabs of how many drawings you've done for your publications?

Oh no, no, you just have to do another one. I did all the illustrations for the *Burke's Backyard* books as well, so most of the illustrations in there, the plant illustrations that is, were done by me.

Why did you choose that course?

Well I was very keen on art, I was very keen on painting and drawing, from when I was about four so when I was doing tertiary education I couldn't go to university in those days because I didn't get a scholarship and my father actually didn't believe in spending a lot of money on educating girls. This was a very common attitude in those days, his attitude was 'it would be wasted money because you would just get married'.

Of course I did get married but I've never stopped working so it wouldn't have been wasted. To go to art school I had to ... I worked for two years and saved up the money so that I would have enough money to sort of live on. I lived at home of course and my father gave me money every week for tram fares and things like that but I basically saved up money so I could stay at home and go to art school.

Was it a battle to go to art school?

It wasn't a battle because my mother was dead keen for me to go. It wasn't that my father wasn't keen for me to go he just didn't want to have to pay for it, not that he couldn't but because it was against his principles. [*Laughs*]

Well he certainly wasn't alone at that time.

No, no, and of course it cost him money to keep me at home not working, lying about being an artist.

Was horticulture ever a thought at that time?

No because the only way you could do horticulture in Queensland was at the Gatton Agricultural College which only admitted boys, so there was absolutely no way you could study horticulture in Brisbane in those years.

Was that ever a thought for you though?

Oh I was keen to do it and when I came to Sydney to live the first thing I did was enrol at Ryde School of Horticulture.

When did you come to Sydney?

We came to Sydney the day the *Voyager* sank, which was a national disaster. Of course it reflected on us very personally because my husband was a TV journalist at the time with Channel Nine and of course he was off on the harbour with the survivors and running round doing interviews with a television team behind him and dropping cameras on his thumb and all kinds of things and I was at the airport with four children, one of them six weeks old, and no husband to pick us up.

Mercifully at about nine o'clock, after we'd been there for some considerable time - -because I left on that seven o'clock plane from Brisbane, he suddenly thought, and to quote him, 'Oh Jesus, Shirley.' He was out in the middle of Sydney Harbour somewhere on the ship that didn't sink and he remembered he had an aunt over at Randwick somewhere near the airport and he rang her up. She had never laid eyes on us in her life and she was a very kind lady she came and rescued us.

Goodness. How did you feel leaving Brisbane and your family with four children?

Oh I was pretty devastated because we had the most beautiful house which was designed by an architect friend and it was an absolute joy to live in with two and a half acres of ground around it and gum trees and native bush and a garden that I had built round the house itself. I had put a tremendous amount into it and it was heartbreaking really to leave it.

Did you come straight to this house that we are now sitting in?

No we had to rent for a couple of years. We bought the land but then we had to rent. We didn't sell our house in Brisbane for a while because I kept hoping I could go back to it but then realised that we were going to stay here. I had been working for the ABC when I was up in Brisbane as well and I was heartbroken about giving up my job there because I was writing TV scripts for their children's session that they had then. It was a lovely job and I was doing the only program, I was writing for the only program, that was actually going live out of the Brisbane studios and when I came down here the guys at the ABC were heartbroken because they built sets for what I wrote every week. It was the only live program that was going out and it was just such fun.

How did you get into that?

Well they just asked me to do it.

Were you writing before?

Well I'd always written yes but I'd never written about gardening at that stage, I mean television scripts were more my line then. They were comedy too, they were funny, well they were meant to be funny.

I read somewhere that you were also working as an occupational therapist.

Yes, yes, before I was married I was an occupational therapist and we were trained by the Repatriation Department. At that time they didn't have, in Queensland they didn't have, a university course in it which they have now but we were trained by the Repat. We worked for Repat, we were trained by Repat, and then we went out into the hospitals. They had a general hospital which is at Greenslopes, Greenslopes now, Greenslopes General Hospital, Kenmore Repat which was the TB hospital, and Rosemount which was for blind people. All for repatriation people. Wakool which was the psychiatric hospital.

Did you involve gardening in any of your occupational therapy work?

No, no, no, but all those hospitals had the most beautiful gardens around them because it was considered to be part of the healing process to have nice gardens round the hospitals. We had a patient who was always going out in the garden and taking photographs, his name was Mr Hinkley, and he was quite an elegant gentleman. He wasn't a sort of common-all-garden patient he was quite an elegant patient and he always had this very good camera and he used to go round but he was a psychiatric patient and he never had a film in the camera you see and he used to be always taking photographs. Anyway one day there was a fearful row at the hospital and everybody got blamed, particularly him because he'd been seen out in the garden so often taking photographs, he was blamed for picking the flowers and the gardeners were absolutely beside themselves with fury on this occasion. He said, 'It wasn't me who did and what's more I can prove it because I took their photograph,' and of course everybody is going oh yes. Anyway, he had a film in the camera and he went away and he processed it and he came back and he said there you are and there are all the sisters, the nursing sisters, busy picking the flowers. [Laughter]

Oh what a nice little story. Shirley I read somewhere else too that you lived in New Zealand and New Guinea for a time, was that before coming to Sydney?

Yes, yes, we lived in New Zealand for two years which is a wonderful place to live, I was very, very happy living there, and New Guinea which I didn't like being in because it was hot and dangerous and I had two little children. Jennifer was twenty-one months old when we went there and Peter was six weeks old. I always seemed to have to go somewhere when I had a six weeks old baby. Yes it was hot and dangerous and I wasn't very happy. John had a wonderful time, he was always somewhere else travelling about with the Agriculture Department so he had a great time.

So coming to Sydney you went to Ryde Horticultural College what do you remember from your days there?

Well Ray Rowell was the principal at the time, a wonderful man I think possible one of the best principals they ever had there. It was really run...He ran a tight ship so you didn't go to college in your thongs or anything you went properly dressed. I mean when you have got boys at a college who are apprentices and things they are liable to want to come dressed anyhow but not with Ray Rowell they came properly attired and they came and sat up and took notice, so things were good. Funnily enough when we started in our year there were thirty-two boys and seventeen women and after the end of the first year there were sixteen boys and sixteen women, one girl had given up but sixteen or so boys had given up.

You were in your thirties, this is 1960s, so you must have been a mature-age student.

Oh yes and I wasn't the only mature-age student, most of the girls were mature-age students. In fact the one who gave up was a girl of eighteen who decided she didn't really want to do horticulture, so she was the only one who was a school-leaver as such the rest of us were all mature-age students.

Do you keep in touch with those women?

Some of them yes, I made some very good friends there and was always acquainted with the boys who went on to be successful as well so. Then my daughter, Jennifer, went there as well later. First she went to Sydney University and got a Fine Arts Honours Degree but when she started doing horticulture she went and did the course. She did an upgraded course so she did a better course than I did.

I was going to ask you how the course compared then with perhaps later times, even now.

I think it has been upgraded and it is a better course these days. But we had very good lecturers at the time, I think they were extremely good, and I mean I was grown up so I knew a good lecturer from a bad one. They liked teaching us, they liked teaching older people, in fact that they would say that they enjoyed teaching the older people because they wanted to learn, they were there to learn.

Did that time at Ryde have any particular influence on you?

Oh yes I think it made me...When you are immersed in a subject like that you become, your whole life becomes absorbed in that case horticulture so that you become much, much more -- not just learning more about plants -- but you become more conscious of the plants around you and what they are doing and the world around you and the temperature and the climate. You know, all those things become so much more part of your life, day to day existence than beforehand.

And any particular people who were an influence, apart from the principal?

Well I think any of the people who taught us were certainly well worthwhile and we really enjoyed being there, being taught by them.

How did you manage it with four small children?

Well I was very fortunate because my mother would come down and stay for periods of time and she had some sisters, some unmarried sisters, and they

would always come down and stay here for a couple of weeks which was really wonderful.

And my mother-in-law, who was very keen on education (she was a teacher herself). She used to come up from the school she was teaching at - down at Frenchs Forest - and she would come up here and be here when the children got off the school bus. She could leave the school, get up here and meet them off the school bus and wait until I came home because I came home a bit later than that. We were there until five and I didn't get home until twenty-past five or something and she'd wait until I came home with them. So that was a wonderful, *wonderful* help, I couldn't have done it on my own.

So when you finished at Ryde what did you do then?

Well I was already writing for the *Herald*, I had been writing for the *Herald* for some years, and was really, really glad to get some proper qualifications for what I was doing I can tell you. And I think I had already started working for *Woman's Day* as well so that I was already writing columns every week for the *Herald* and for *Woman's Day*.

Did you feel an absence of qualifications in your writing?

I don't think anybody knew I didn't have any qualifications but I was very keen to get them I can tell you.

You mentioned you took over the writing of the 'Waratah' column.

Yes. Well he didn't have any qualifications either! People didn't in those days. He was an interesting man whose name was Peter Hurley [some noise as the microphone is moved] and he was wounded in the First World War and he'd been a journalist at the *Herald* so when he came back and he'd been wounded they thought he needs an easy job so they gave him the job of being the gardening correspondent, which he did for about forty-odd years. I think he was in his eighties when I came along and he got sick and he was in hospital and then they rang me up one day and they said would I write a column, a gardening column, because their gardening writer was sick in hospital and they didn't think he was going to survive. And I said well yes all right and they said, 'We want it by six o'clock.'

Here I think it was five o'clock and I had four little children here and I was just starting to get their dinner ready so I stuck them in front of the television and grabbed the typewriter and sat there - in those days it was before computers - sat there and bashed out the stuff on the typewriter and then had to dictate it over the phone and I managed to do it. So I have been doing it ever since.

That in itself speaks of a very different era in the print media itself.

Yes.

Are you still writing for a newspaper?

Yes. Well since I've been sick in the last few months I haven't written much, I've just been doing a little piece which is not in I don't think this week, 'Question from Readers'. Jennifer has been doing the column, she has taken it over, because I wasn't well enough to do it. I mean I was in hospital for two months and I wasn't up to doing it but she has been doing this year.

Well you certainly don't seem to have taken your foot off the pedal very much at all.

Oh I have in the last few months.

Could you tell me about your time at Woman's Day writing the gardening column there.

Well Joan Reeder was the editor in those days, she was a lovely person. You'd go in there and she'd be sitting on the floor with all the layout round her and that is how she did the layout. In those days everybody was (not like they are today in jeans and T-shirts) they were all twin-sets and pearls and good skirts and stockings and high heel shoes you know, so they would all be on the floor crawling around with all the layout. She was a terrific person and she did something very funny. They had at one stage another magazine, it was called *Woman's World*, which they ran for a few years and she said she wanted me to write the gardening column. She called me in and she said, 'I want you to write the gardening column but I don't want you to use your name, you'll have to use a pseudonym.'

So I said, 'Oh I could be Clover Summerfield,' I thought wow, she nearly had a fit. Anyway it became Ann Summerfield so I wrote this column in the *Woman's World* for two or three years until she came in one day and she said, 'Well I want you to write the column in *Woman's Day* now,' she said, 'and the reason I wouldn't let you use your own name was because I wanted to save it up for the *Woman's Day*.'

Why not Clover?

She thought that was too much. I thought if you were going to have a phoney name you might as well go for it.

You mentioned when we spoke earlier that you always used your own photographs.

Yes, yes. I took photographs. When I first went to *Woman's Day* I used to go out with a photographer and unfortunately, sadly, he got lung cancer and died so after that I took all my own photographs.

Who was that person?

I've forgotten his name. I was thinking the other day, my goodness, I have forgotten his name isn't that awful. I worked with him for several years, went to his funeral.

Did you find it better taking your own photographs?

Oh yes, yes, I got some very good cameras. And in actual fact the very first column that I wrote for *Woman's Day* had a double-page spread which I took in Alice Springs, I went on a trip to Alice Springs. So my very first column featured a double-page spread of my photographs which looked pretty good.

So that was quite a strong emphasis in the paper a double-page spread on gardening.

Oh yes. I did a lot of double-page spreads in *Woman's Day* in those days, nearly every ... well at least once a month I'd have a double-page spread. I did a huge number of pull-outs. That was another thing that isn't done any

more, I used to have to do gardening pull-outs, there'd be a little magazine on its own, eight-page pull-out something like that on gardening.

So how much of your working week was spent at Woman's Day?

Well I did most of my work at home because of the children and I only had to go in and out. So I used to go in during the day, do the work in there, and then come home by quarter-past three or something when I would be home before the children. I would have to do that perhaps two or three times a week depending on how much. If I had an eight-page spread I'd been in there working all day because I had to do...in those days there were things like galley-proofs. Things were different then. Nowadays you just put it all up on a computer but then we had to go in and actually physically check the galley proofs and then they'd do them again and you'd have to check them again to there'd be mistakes. They'd fix up the ones you had fixed up and put new ones in.

Did you have to wear the twin-sets and smart skirts as well?

Oh yes, yes. One very funny thing happened, you probably don't want to know this, but they had a competition at the *Woman's Day* and they'd put all the entries in a cardboard carton on top of a filing cabinet, the prize-winning entries were in it, and when they were running round looking for the prize-winner they couldn't find (it) the ticket was gone, the box was gone off the filing cabinet. And somebody said, 'Oh the garbage collectors came in and took that.' 'My God,' they said and they had to, with their twin-sets and pearls and high heel shoes, pursue it to the tip and they are grovelling around in the tip trying to find the contents - and they found it so they were able to rescue the winner of the competition.

Were there many other gardening writers in Sydney at that time?

Well yes, the *Telegraph*. There was one in each newspaper, the *Telegraph* had somebody. He was a man who had won a lot of ... Do you remember the *Herald* used to have big gardening competitions and the man who used to win the garden competition quite often used to write columns I think in the *Telegraph*. They had various people in *The Australian*.

Was there much liaison between you all?

Oh we all knew one another, yes, because we all belonged to the Horticulture Media Association, Holly Kerr Forsyth works still for *The Australian*.

That's right. What other changes were there in the media? You speak about that pull-out, what other changes do you remember from say that third quarter of the twentieth century to now?

Well now there is much less emphasis on gardening because I think other things have come in, sports seems to have become *hugely* important to many Australians, and people have got smaller gardens or they live in apartments and they don't have any gardens at all.

I think the fact is that people don't automatically manage to get the quarter-acre block that you would once expect to have and so people are not doing quite as much gardening as they would have. And of course with these years and years of drought people aren't putting in the lawns that they used to put in

which were the pride and joy of many home owners, especially men -- the lawn was the boy thing in the garden.

What about the ...there seems to me to be a greater preponderance of television shows about gardening and ttitivating in various ways, do you think those have had an impact at all?

Oh I think they've had a tremendous impact on people but whether they actually garden more. They used to go out and straight away buy what was being recommended or talked about but in more recent years I think that affect has died away, that people enjoy watching a program without necessarily following up on a lot of it.

Now that *Burke's Backyard* has gone off, the [Backyard] *Blitz* is stopping, they are on their last couple of programs, there is only going to be really the ABC one with real gardening in it now, so I think that some of the interests on gardening has been lost a bit in the last couple of years.

How do you feel about that?

Oh well I think it is probably inevitable in view of the ... in Sydney anyway where the price of land and houses is in the millions and people just can't afford, ordinary people just can't afford the luxury of so much garden.

Is it important to you to have a garden?

Oh yes. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have a garden. I'd be ... I'd be ... I mean not that I've got a garden that you have to go out and garden in very much, as you can see it is a garden which takes care of itself. From the front part of the house out there it is just natural, it is just rock ledges and the natural trees that grow. The part on the back of the house, the other side of the house, I've planted things there because that was all weeds when we came. A lot of weeds out there and we got rid of the weeds and planted normal garden plants, there aren't any garden beds as such it is just a kind of naturalised planting.

Lovely sort of informal terraces.

That is right. They are natural terraces though, they weren't terraced, it wasn't terraced it is perfectly natural. The house was built by the architects it's designed to go over three rock ledges so underneath, if you went under the house, you'd see the rock ledges it is built over.

From this spot Shirley perhaps you should describe the view.

Well it is a view of the valley, Soldiers Park, that's Soldiers Park down there, and we look across the valley to Lindfield and we can see the television aerials.

Of Gore Hill. Not many houses, it is a lovely and peaceful view.

No, you can't see the houses. You wouldn't know there were many people living over there because you can't see them for the trees so we are very fortunate in that we've got the view of the trees. And of course we've got our own trees, we've never touched anything, it is still completely natural. You can see that nobody else has left it natural, if you look out there it has been all bulldozed within an inch of its life ...

TAPE 1: SIDE B

You can see that nobody has left it natural, if you look out there it has been all bulldozed within an inch of its life but our bit is a natural sandstone.

I can see on your verandah, your timber verandah, you have these some elevated some not pots of lilies, aspidistra is it?

Aspidistra, which is the most wonderful hardy plant you could ever have for a gardener who doesn't want to garden, it is fantastic. And everybody admires my plant stands, milk crates!

Does that go back to your early years with your grandfather?

Oh yes. [Laughter]

Dairy crates, I think half of Sydney cannibalised those. But it is interesting, this is just an observation for the tape and it is not really an interview question it is my comment, which I don't normally make, but it is amazing there are so many of them and so many pots it is a lovely dark green atmosphere out there which is much cooler.

Of course there is a deck out here which is all covered with pots as well, I don't know if you have been out there?

I didn't come that way no, no, but it was a delight coming down your path where there are moments to pause and stop.

It has just been gorgeous with the roses but they have finished. I have a lot of old-fashioned roses growing through all the undergrowth there and it has been just gorgeous. Smells wonderful too when it is all out.

Yes and it smells different on this visit again. Shirley amongst your career moves you've also done cruises on ships.

Yes. Well that was part of my *Woman's Day* experience. We went on a *Woman's Day* cruise and a huge number of *Woman's Day* writers went on the cruise and we gave talks to the passengers and afterwards the P&O people, the captain, was very keen on my talks, he was keen on gardening, Captain Dallas that was of the *Arcadia* in those days, and he suggested that we do some more cruises. So P&O asked a couple of us to do some more cruises and I did quite a number of cruises for them talking about gardening and they were quite popular and successful. So I did the *Woman's Day* cruises on my own.

What sort of things did you talk about in those lectures?

Well I used to talk about...I would have some topics that were of interest, seasonal things whatever was going at the time that we were on the cruise, and I would also talk about the things we saw at the various ports. We'd go to tropical islands and I'd talk about the ... tell people about what we were seeing and talk about the tropical plants, which of course most of them weren't familiar with. I would also give ordinary talks and talk about ordinary gardening and they could answer [ask] questions so that was always very popular, everybody always wanted to ask questions. So yes it was good.

And you've done gardening tours as well?

Yes I did gardening tours nearly every year to Europe for some years. We used to do twenty-one days mostly and we'd take two bus-loads of people and we'd go travelling around. When I was doing the radio program I'd go with Phil Halderman and Phil and his wife, Joan, would be on one bus and I would be on the other bus either with my daughter, Katie, or with my sister, Judith, one of them would come with me, and we would be answering questions. Of course Phil couldn't answer many gardening questions because he didn't know anything about it but he used to talk about football and things and tell jokes and so we'd change buses each day so everybody got a fair crack of the whip as it were with answering [asking] questions.

How did you enjoy those trips, did you enjoy them?

Oh yes of course I always enjoy everything I do, had a great time.

That is a very nice thing to say, not everybody does enjoy everything they do.

Oh that's a waste of space isn't it. [Laughs]

Did you have to organise the trips or was that done for you?

No, no, no, no. I would talk to the people, to the company that was organising it, the travel company, and say what I wanted and where I'd like to go and things like that and then they would go ahead and organise it. It is not just a simple straight forward thing of saying, 'Oh I want to go to Sissinghurst and I want to go here and I want to go there' They then have to fit in where you are going with where the bus can go and where it can get to another garden on the same day and to the hotel where you can stay on the same day.

So you don't...a person like me doesn't actually organise the day-to-day destinations of a trip because it really is a very professional business on its own organising to go to gardens and be in easy reach of the hotel you have to go to afterwards and things like that. I would always have the input of where I basically wanted to go. I mean you'd never go to England without going to Sissinghurst, for instance.

Quite. In fact you mention Holly Kerr Forsyth, that is one of the interesting things about her garden she speaks about the people and a lot of private gardens that she goes to as well, have you done those sorts of tours too?

Oh yes, yes - and I've done them with Holly, round Australia not overseas. I don't think I've been overseas with Holly, no I think I've only been around Australia with Holly.

So you've done a lot of travelling in your work.

Done a *huge* amount of travelling, absolutely huge amount of travelling.

This is after the children have...

Have grown up a bit more, but I still had my mother and my aunts coming to stay. And I had a very dear friend, one of the girls I became friends with at Ryde School of Horticulture, who would always come and stay here with the children if my mother or aunts couldn't make it, so I was very, very lucky in that way.

Did you enjoy that direct contact too with the people on your tours, the various questions?

Oh yes ... I'm always happy to talk to people and answer questions.

You never tire of it?

No, no, no, no, it's always good. When you are talking about what you are interested in most in life it is going to be enjoyable - you are not going to get tired of it.

Talking of Phil Halderman you also did the radio program for many years on 2UE.

Yes I think for about twelve years I did it with Phil Halderman and he was the 'straight guy' as it were and I was the person that answered the questions. He couldn't answer questions, of course, but he would keep the program moving along, get rid of people who wanted to talk too long in a nice way -- mostly. Sometimes he wasn't so noise he used to gong them or dong them or something. [*Laughs*] Flush them down the toilet I remember a few times with a sound effect of course.

Your book of course Over the Fence was published on the tenth anniversary of that program and you have a lovely way of talking about in the beginning, which we all know but forget, how you are in that soundproofed atmosphere, very pristine away from the world atmosphere, and yet you are speaking to people all over the countryside.

Yes but of course you are only speaking to the one person. When you are talking on radio you are not conscious all the time, I mean sometimes you are - you have to be. In the back of your mind always conscious of the fact that there is several hundred thousand people listening to you. If you give someone some advice about something like spraying their tomatoes or something you have to always be conscious of the fact that it is not just that one person that you are talking to but other people who are listening who are going to go out and do that too and they might not have the same problem and it might not be the right thing to do so you've got to be careful. There is tricks, there are all sorts of little tricks and traps and in that radio talk-back business.

Were there ever questions that stumped you?

No I don't think so. Phil always said I answered all the questions but I remember occasionally I'd say, 'Well I don't really know, I'm not sure, so I'll go home and look it up and I'll talk about it tomorrow or next week,' as we were on Saturday and Sunday. You see sometimes if I wasn't sure of an answer I wasn't too silly to say I didn't know, I would always be quite happy to say, 'I'm not sure about that I'll check it up.'

It didn't happen very often.

So just thinking about working Saturday and Sunday that is quite an imposition on your weekend time.

Oh yes. To do that, and we started at six [am], well we started at seven but we had to be there at six-thirty, you had to be there half-an-hour before the program, so you are really giving up your weekend because you can't go out. Well I didn't feel I could go out to parties and stay out until one o'clock in the morning and only have a few hours sleep because you've got have your wits

about you. If you are answering people for three hours - and you can get through an awful lot of questions in three hours - and you can't stop and think on radio. They ask the question, you give the answer, there can't be room for hesitation so you have to have a decent night's sleep before you go and do that sort of thing.

You mentioned when we met previously you had a lovely phrase something to the effect that you felt your brain had gone. Just see if I can find that.

Well you do feel after you have been answering questions on radio for three hours you come home and you feel like your brain has been sucked out.

Sucked out that was it.

Yes you really feel that 'sucked out' feeling.

Was the program called Over the Fence?

Yes.

Hence the name of the book.

We couldn't think of a name for it though we had to have a name for it. You see originally it was *Burke's Backyard* and all of a sudden when I first started to do it for Don when he got too busy with television he made me go in there and do it on Saturdays and he did it on Sundays. Then of course he didn't want to come in on Sunday either so we ended up with a 'Burke-less Backyard'. So we couldn't keep on calling it *Burke's Backyard* and we had to think of another name and we are all sitting around trying to think of something - we couldn't think of anything. We had to do it in a hurry and all we could think of was 'Over the Fence'.

It sounds a very apt name. You no longer have a radio program?

No and they've actually stopped doing it on...Jennifer took it over for a couple of years but then they suddenly stopped doing it just recently.

Why was that?

Oh the fellow that was running the place at the time decided he wasn't interested in gardening and he thought he'd just do something different. So everybody was very upset and they got huge quantities of complaints and emails and phone calls and letters, thousands, but they took no notice.

But then touching on that Shirley with your books of course, now I found twelve at the State Library perhaps there is more.

I don't think so, I think that would probably be them all.

One of which of course is your Gardening Year Book which you first published in 1980, what prompted you to publish that?

... I think we ...Oh I had a phone call from Angus and Robertson and they asked me if I'd be willing to do it and interested in doing it and I was and so we worked on that. Went through columns I'd written in the *Herald* and wrote more bits and organised it the way it is now. You can see how it is written month-by-month with what's flowering and what to do and what to plant and all that sort of thing. It is just going to be redone, we've offered to rewrite the whole thing.

Goodness. Are you doing that?

Jennifer is supposed to be going to help me.

So what edition is that?

... I'm not too sure, but it will be a completely new edition - everything. All the writing in it will probably be different because there is not much point in just rehashing what you've had out for ten or fifteen years.

Are you pleased with that book?

Oh yes it has been...I think it is a very nice book and I like my drawings, I like my photographs in it, I think they are very attractive in it. I have been looking, reading, through it myself just yesterday because of the proposal to re-do the book and I think it holds up fairly well. Found it quite interesting. [Laughs]

I am thinking as you say that Shirley it is not common for people to be so pleased with their work, how do you feel looking back on your body of work, your writing, your radio programs?

I think because...I think I am different from most of the people who have written about gardening in the past certainly whereas they weren't writers and they weren't horticulturalist mostly. They were just people who were keen on gardening and they wrote about gardens but they didn't have actually professional knowledge or professional qualifications as being able to write. Whereas I think I have been very fortunate in that I was a writer before I started to write about gardens and I've also got the public qualifications from doing the Ryde course, apart from my lifetime in the garden where you get a huge amount of knowledge.

Your writing is quite concise and you convey a lot of information very quickly it seems to me to someone who may not know a great deal about the subject, is that a skill that you've had to hone?

I think that is a journalistic skill. I think if you are a journalist you learn to write concisely and I think, I hope, that that is what I do. I try not to waste time on purple prose.

Is there one book that is a favourite for you?

Oh yes I think *The Gardening Year* is the one I really like the best.

You mentioned when we met previously because of your work on radio that people would recognise your voice in public places, does that still happen?

Well I don't go out very much at the moment because I haven't been one hundred per cent and as you can tell my speech has been affected by the problem I've had so I don't think I would have that problem today. But up until I got sick a few months ago I would have terrible problems going into shops and talking, just asking for something in a shop and people would turn around and say, 'Oh are you Shirley Stackhouse?' and of course you would have to say yes. It was always nice because they would say they liked listening to the program or they liked reading something that you'd written so it was a pleasant experience.

But Peter Cundall has it much worse than I ever did because when he in Tasmania, which is a much smaller place, and people recognise him of

course because so much on television, much more than I ever have been, and he says he is looking onto a shelf and somebody will come up to him and say, 'Oh what are you looking at?' and he'll say, 'Oh I was just looking at that tin of baked beans.' 'Oh are you going to buy that, oh I'll buy that too,' they say. So whatever he is having they are having too. [Laughter]

Did readers ever write in to you about your books?

About my books? I suppose they have. I mean years go past I can't really remember, I suppose people have, they must have. That is not a very satisfactory answer I'm afraid.

What about the Encyclopaedia that you published most recently?

Oh yes. Well I did that with...I'll just go and get the book.

One thing I wanted to ask you about too was your work with the Friends of the Botanic Gardens.

Yes I was right in at the very beginning of starting the Friends of the Botanic Gardens and we went to the first meetings and I was on the first committee and I did that for some years. And then Jennifer became the Executive Officer and she was doing a wonderful job running the gardens ... the Friends of the Botanic Gardens. So I did that for a few years and then I thought somebody else should take over and do that. That was something I was very, very interested in and thought was very important to get established for the Botanic Gardens. I think it has been a tremendous help to the Botanic Gardens to have the Friends there. They raise a lot of money and it is a great thing to belong to because the things they organise are really good, excellent.

They do have a nice calendar.

Have a nice program.

What about the Australian Garden History Society, you were also involved in that in the first days.

I was yes but I am afraid when they had a big quarrel a few years ago and a big falling-out I just sort of thought 'nup let them get on with it' so I gave them up.

And garden clubs you also mentioned you don't join.

I don't join garden clubs. I always felt that if I belonged to a garden club people would think that I was giving it some kind of priority or more advertisement, you know, so I just thought it was just a good idea not to belong to garden clubs. The only thing I have ever belonged, and that is in more recent years, I belong to *Heritage Roses* which is not exactly a garden club we just go and have big afternoon teas and talk about our roses.

[some background noise from neighbouring lawnmower]

Shirley you've been recognised for your work in the gardening field, you were recognised most recently by the Queen with an OAM last year.

Yes, yes, that was a wonderful honour. Yes I was presented with my medal by the Governor, she is a most delightful lady and said how much she enjoyed reading my columns and listening to me on the radio so that was very nice. Yes I was really thrilled.

And before that you were the Australian Horticulturalist of the Year in 2004.

That's right. Yes. It was a big honour as well and they gave me a lovely thing, what do you call it?

A presentation statue...

A presentation statuette thing yes.

And that was in recognition of outstanding and sustained contribution to Australian horticulture, does that have more significance, rather, for you?

I think to have your peers acknowledging that you've been around for an awful long time, you've done an awful lot of work. I mean when you think of writing a column every week for thirty years or something there is a heck of a lot of commitment there."

It is. And of course you have also received the Horticulture Media Association's Laurel Award.

Yes that's right. Yes I've got my Laurel up in the dining room yes and a lovely painting of hellebores which they presented me with from the Australian Institute of Horticulture.

You speak with great pride on your face as you say those things to me.

Yes it was lovely. Nice things happen.

Just as we wind up Shirley, you've been very generous this morning, is there anything that you haven't talked about, that I haven't asked you about, that you'd like on the tape?

Goodness that is a surprising one. No I hadn't really sort of thought of anything like that.

Well you've talked about it generally as we've gone along about the influences but I wonder looking back is there one particular aspect of your life that has influenced you most?

Well I think because I am interested in gardening and my sister is interested in gardening, my brother is interested in sailing, so I think if you look at my family we must *mono-something or other-ists* where we are completely absorbed by one particular thing to the exclusion of a lot of others and so we sort of concentrate on one thing and I think if you concentrate on one thing and it is an important thing in your life well hopefully you are going to be good at doing it.

Shirley the influence on you is one thing, your family, but what about your influence on the community?

Probably I've had an amazing influence that I am totally unaware of because you don't go round thinking 'oh I'm having an influence on people' it is just something that happens without your being aware of it. But if you use a bit of commonsense and think about it ... and think about the number of people who read what you write or listen to what you say and you know that they are listening, you know that they are reading it, so they obviously are enjoying it so you know that you are giving people pleasure and hopefully teaching them a little bit more about gardening.

Well I think that is lovely spot to conclude on, thank you very much for your time.

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Shirley we've turned the tape back on because there is this lovely story about what you wanted to be when you were a child.

Yes. When I was a child my relatives of course as relatives always do were always asking what I was going to do when I grew up and I always used to say, even though I knew that they were going to laugh at me, I said I was going to be a writer and I was going to be an artist and then they would all laugh. And my uncles to make me say this would give me a penny so I used to think it was worth being laughed at by all the relatives around to get the penny because a penny was big amount of money in those days.

That is lovely, thank you.