AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

MR KEN GILLANDERS OAM

Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton November 2020

Interviewee:	**MR KEN GILLANDERS**
Interviewer:	Sally Dakis
Date of interview:	10 November 2020
Place of interview:	at his home
	1 Willowbend Road,
	Kingston, Tasmania 7050
Length of interview:	71.17 minutes
Restrictions on use:	Nil
Transcriber:	Pauline Schindler
Quotations:	Extracts from the interviews should be verified against the original spoken word.
Acknowledgement:	All uses of this interview should acknowledge the interviewee and the
	Society:
	Mr Ken Gillanders, Australian Garden History Society National Oral HistoryCollection, interviewed 10 November 2020 by Sally Dakis.

Interviewer **Sally Dakis**

Interviewee **Ken Gillanders**

Ken can you just tell me your name and full date of birth please?

Ken Gillanders. 9th of July 1930.

Beautiful. That's just fine that level Rhonda, so you can listen to that.

Tell us about – you know a little bit about your family history. Where you grew up and what your family was doing.

Well I was born in Melbourne in Brunswick where we lived. My father was a carpenter.

And that was in the middle of the Depression and he had great difficulty like a lot of other people at the time getting employment so he decided he'd buy a little farm which was up in Bullengarook in Central Victoria. And we moved there. And I, I was not very old at the time, I was about four or five and I do have memories of my stay at Bullengarook. The Depression eased after a period of time and we moved to Black Rock in Melbourne. And we weren't there that long and we moved to Sandringham – my father was a great mover. (*Laughs*) And actually, I went to school – the very first school I went to was at Bullengarook, because I went to school in Black Rock and in Sandringham.

And then he decided he wanted to go back to New Zealand where he was born. He was one of a large party of Scots that settled in northern New Zealand. So we went over to New Zealand and visited a lot of relatives and we lived there for maybe a year or so, mainly at Rotorua in the central area.

We finally came back to New South Wales and Victoria and I went – the main part of my schooling I suppose was then at the Sandringham school.

And I wanted to be a farmer, a dairy farmer. So it wasn't a very good outlook I don't think, but however that's what I wanted to do. So I got a – when I left school which was fairly early, I was only about fifteen I think when I left school, I got a job at a dairy farm at Mordialloc. Mordialloc was rural in those days (*laughs*) it's not now. And after that at two farms at Berwick – dairy farmers.

The war was on then and my parents were very worried about me getting called up – excuse me (*coughs*) so they wanted to buy a farm then and have me running it. Which they did. And they bought a farm at *[indistinct]* in the Gippsland, hmm, hmm, and we were there for several years. My mother hated it because we were very isolated – in those days anyhow – no power you know and no phone.

(*Laughs*) Anyway we moved from there and went to Melbourne briefly and then up to Yapeen which is out of Castlemaine. And then we had another farm which I ran.

And I was about seventeen, eighteen at the time then and I got a girlfriend. And that sort of made things a bit awkward because the pay in those days for a farm worker was twenty-five shillings a week and your keep. You didn't go very far on that at all. So (excuse me I'm going to cough again, I'll have to have some water soon I think) – and I got a job at the goldmine which was at Chewton not far away. And I got a lot of extra money then of course and I worked there till we were married – my girlfriend.

4:42 So we're talking Lesley here?

Lesley yes, that was my only girlfriend ever, and I was her only boyfriend. We weren't childhood sweethearts but we – she was sixteen when I met her and that was it. (*Laughs*) And anyway we married in Castlemaine. And the mine was very upset at that stage with what was going to continue or not, and I decided it would be better to get away from it so we moved to Boronia around Melbourne, bought a house there.

And that was my first introduction to horticulture. I had a – by that stage I decided I liked plants as well as cows (*laughs*) and I got a job at Chandler's Nursery, a very famous old nursery there and I worked there for twenty years.

So tell us about the Chandler's Nursery.

Well when I went there it was very old-fashioned. John was running it – that was the son of Bert who was very well known. He started it, Bert, he was on old man then and John ran it. He was a very nice person, John, I got on very well with John we were almost like brothers you know. And I worked there for nineteen years.

Did you have a job interview?

(*Laughs*) I remember driving up there. There was an ad in the paper they wanted a nursery worker. Nobody wanted nursery work in those days, there was lots of employment about where you didn't have to dirty your hands. But I – because I wanted it. And we drove up and old Bert was there, only there, John was away. Lesley was with me, and Doug was there. I don't know if Colin was born at that stage – because I've got four sons. And anyway you see I went. "Come on Monday morning". (*Laughs*) Just like that. "John'll be here then, he'll show you what you can do." So it was as simple as that in those days. And as I say I worked there for nineteen years.

I did a brief course at Burnley Horticultural College on grafting – that was the only thing – I learnt everything else at the nursery.

And what sort of plants was that nursery specialising in?

They specialised in mainly European plants but rare plants – they had a name for rare plants. So lots of interesting plants that were very new to me, I didn't know a thing about a lot of those ornamental plants in those days and I quite enjoyed learning about them. Going to Garden Week every year, and that was very – I learnt a lot there of course. John was very good, he said, "See what you can answer and if you can't, well you can't" sort of thing. And I was terrified, all these people coming and asking you questions about the plants – I'd only been working at the nursery for a few months. But it made you learn very quickly which I hope I did.

How old were you then?

Oh twenty-four or twenty-five I'd say at a guess. Around abouts there.

And did you work your way through the nursery? Like get more and more responsibilities?

I did. At that stage – when I first went there they wanted somebody to work at the nursery, general nursery work, and deliver the plants. Because when we used to go to Garden Week we'd take a lot of orders and after that there'd be a lot of delivery. So that's what I did for a start. But they decided they'd get somebody else to do the delivery and I'd do more nursery work and propagating. And after that well they considered me propagator and chief hand really – when I left there, yeah. So it's about as far as you can go.

But there were upsets in the Chandler family and Les and I decided we want to get away, drop it all and we took a holiday to Tassie and thought this was a great place. *(Laughs*) And we met Essie Huxley and –

9:32 Tell us a little about Essie.

Well Essie of course – I think everybody knows Essie, but she'd lived on that hill at Longley all her life. I don't know what age she was then, she would have been possibly her seventies – some sort of stage in her seventies. Anyway she had this block of land opposite and she said to Les – I was out with the boys up the mountains looking for plants and she said, "Oh it'd be nice if Ken started up here." She said, "I've got this block I'd sell you." And Les told me when I came back, she was quite excited about it and I thought oh I don't know about that. (*Laughs*) So I said to Essie, "Well we'll think about it."

So we went back to Victoria and we thought about it for twelve months. And she rang up and she said, "Oh there's a man with a bulldozer on the next property you could get him to come in *(laughs*) and put a dam in for you." She was pretty shrewd, Essie. (*Laughs*)

And then I thought about it. And Les and I went up and say John Chandler and I said, "I'm going to leave, John." We came back and let Essie know and I flew over, saw the bulldozer man and we had the dam – first dam – put in. And bought the property. So that was it.

What did the Chandlers say when you told them that you were going to leave?

Well John was rather horrified, I don't think he expected me to go. But he had two daughters and they were in their teens then, in fact one was married, and there was a bit of friction. I didn't like it but – with them and their husbands. John assured me I was right for a job forever there but that wasn't the point, I just – the feeling was different and I decided that I wanted to go. And as Tasmania was in my mind we went to Tassie, yeah which we've never regretted. *(Laughs*)

Which you never regretted.

No.

Did you want a drink Ken?

Yes thank you. I always have trouble with my throat.

I will tell you as an aside I've got distant relatives to the Chandlers, way back then, so I –

Oh right, have you? Yeah.

So tell me about the Ferny Creek Horticultural Society which then became the Australian Rhododendron Society. Can you tell us about your connection?

Yes, well of course it wasn't far from us – Ferny Creek – you just go up the road about five kilometres and you ascend a lot of altitude then and there was Ferny Creek and Olinda. And Ferny Creek had a lot of people retired or even not retired, doctors and directors and things living there. It was quite a place to be and they all had beautiful gardens. And John and I were in that Society, we used to – they had a rhododendron show every year and we used to put a display up at Ferny Creek, and a lot of other nurseries in the Dandenongs at that time.

Anyway the rhododendron side of it developed, the nurseries were specialising in rhododendrons and very keen on it. And we wanted to develop the rhododendron side but the Ferny Creek executive wasn't very keen about that at all.

And I always remember that first meeting when the society was more-or-less started, it was a Ferny Creek meeting, forty or fifty people there, they used to have quite a crowd go there – and we

were talking about this and it got very heated. And I was the youngest, I didn't have a lot of say in those days I was still in my twenties – most of the other – all the other members were you know thirty, forty or so. They said, "Right we're going out to the next room and we're going to have a meeting there" and left the main Ferny Creek meeting. And we went in that other room and they'd established the Rhododendron Society – as simple as that. And there was a lot of bad feeling.

Why didn't they want it – what was their thinking about the Rhododendron …

I don't know. I can't remember just why. But they were very strong willed people a lot of the people there, as I say there were doctors and directors and things like that and they didn't want us to develop into a society specialising rhododendrons, they wanted to keep the Ferny Creek Society as it was. Anyway when we – they started a society and we had to have our own show then, we couldn't show at Ferny Creek anymore. So we were very quick in doing it – we organised a show at Olinda which was only, it'd be four kilometres away. And we had a show every year, they're still having a show every year there of course at Olinda.

The Ferny Creek still ran a show themselves, the fact that we had left them didn't sort of harm that society at all.

14:58 What was your passion for rhododendrons?

Well the first rhododendron I ever saw was at Daylesford. Les and I went over on the motorbike and I saw this huge big bush covered in flowers – and I didn't see a rhododendron in my life before. I thought oh I'll have to have one of those in my garden. And that was the beginning of my love for rhododendrons.

But of course once we went to the Dandenongs there was rhododendrons everywhere and they became the plant for me in those days, yeah.

What was your role in the new Rhododendron Society?

I was the Registrar for new cultivars.

Quite an important position –

Oh well I suppose it was but anyhow we – there was quite a few breeders in those days. No one breeding rhododendrons much in Australia now but then there were quite a few – they were all very keen, the people. And anyway if you had to register – they had to register the (*indistinct*) with the Registrar there.

And did you breed then when you …

No. No I never had time to breed. *(Laughs*)

You said Lesley and you hopped on the motorbike.

Yeah I had a motorbike for a while till I had a crash and *(laughs*) …

And Lesley was pillion or did you have a sidecar?

Oh she wasn't riding – she was pillion yeah. But she wasn't on when I had a crash.

I'm just imagining Lesley and you on a motorbike. *(Laughter*) Um, so you – you wrote book, um I don't know whether it should come in here or whether we talk about it a bit later. At what point in all of this did you write your book "Know your Rock Garden Plants and Dwarf Bulbs"?

Well we had a friend, Gladys Paterson who lived in Longford, and when we came over to Tasmania on a trip, the first trip to Tasmania, we stopped with her. And she said she'd been approached to do a book with bulbs – because she's a bulb person absolutely. She said, "How about you doing the other section?" And it was Reeds the publisher in New Zealand at the time, I think they've gone nowadays, Reeds. But anyway I thought oh yeah I'll have a go.

So went back and I did my bit and she did her bit and the book was published, yeah. It sold pretty well.

And did you enjoy that process of writing?

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah. I'll pop that under there.

Yeah.

Um yeah, so we talked about – do you want to just go back and for those people that don't know anything about Essie tell us about her and how critical, or how important or what was her significant role do you think? Essie Huxley.

Well she was very keen on – her life was plants. She'd lived by herself with her mother up at Longley – her mother was alive when we went there. And very involved with native plants and the society, the Australian Native Plants Society, and she got great pleasure out of her gardening.

18:20 How did you meet her?

Well I had a Russian botanist write to me when I was in Victoria – and how she got my name I don't know in those days, I don't know but she did – and she wanted specimens of Athrotaxis, could I possibly get them for her? And of course I couldn't get them and somebody said, "Oh Essie Huxley in Tasmania would help you." So that's how I – I got specimens through Essie because she had them growing in her garden and that's how we made contact. Otherwise yeah I don't know if I ever would have. But yeah.

I mean it's not like now that we've got the internet and mobile phones –

Oh yes things were different in those days, yeah.

So did you write a lot of letters you know to plant breeders and that sort of thing?

Not a lot in those days, no. No.

Okay so tell us about Woodbank Nursery. You know did you have a vision for what it was going to be? You built your dam.

Well the dam was the first thing – we had to have water because there was no water up there. No water laid on of course and no stream close to us so yes the dam was very important. And we got that done.

And I brought over a container load of plants which I had to plant in Keith Huxley's property next door, because there was no clear ground on that block really at that stage. And then I came back in the summer with a load of bulbs and I planted them over in Keith Huxley's. And then we – we moved over in '75, 1975, and stopped in Essie Huxley's old house which burnt down in the fires – it was opposite – and built the house at Longley.

I had the frame put up by a couple of young chaps and I couldn't get a bricklayer. Nobody wanted to come out to Longley in those days. I'd contact a bricklayer, "Oh where is it?" "Longley." "Oh no I'm not interested." So I couldn't get a bricklayer. So I had to lay the bricks myself, which I did. I was about three-quarters way round the house and then I got tennis elbow and I couldn't go any further *[laughs]* and it just had to wait then till my elbow came good before I finished it off. Got tiles on the roof. So we built the house at Longley over a period of time.

Do you think that was a long held ambition to have your own nursery, or do you think …

Oh yes. Yes Les and I had spoken about it a long while ago you know when I was working for Chandlers. I enjoyed working with them and as I say I learnt an awful lot but we wanted our own independence. And it was something – when we'd started it we really looked forward to – we never thought it'd get as big as it did. Not that it got that big but I thought it'd keep very tiny, but it didn't. It grew. (*Laughs*)

So what was the range of plants you started with, and then perhaps you can talk about how it ended up?

Well quite a lot of alpine stuff because I was very keen on alpine plants as well as trees and shrubs. Chandlers never grew alpines, it

was nothing to do with them it was just an interest of my own. And we grew, I suppose half what we grew was perennials and alpines and half trees and shrubs but not much Tasmanian stuff in those days because I didn't have access to it. Which that came later, yeah. But it was mainly European stuff: stuff that I'd grown at Chandlers really and you know that I liked.

22:30 And how did that change over the years?

Well it changed, excuse me. (*Coughing*)

Yeah, have a good cough.

I need a sip of brandy I think.

Oh I didn't bring that – have you got brandy?

I've got it there, yes. If it gets bad I'll – I'll have a sip, it makes a difference. Whisky or brandy, it doesn't matter. (*Laughs*)

Yes well as we developed – I always had an interest in Gondwana plants. I remember in Victoria when the boys came home from school they were talking about a Continental Drift. I'd never learnt about Continental Drift, it was a new theory in my mind completely and that explained things to me about some of the plants, where they were growing. So I became very interested in Gondwana plants and when we came to Tasmania well here was quite a nice selection which I tried to develop, and of course later on we went further to New Zealand purely to get other plants in that group, yeah.

Do you think you had the best collection of Gondwana plants in Australia?

Possibly I did at that stage, yes because a lot of gardens bought plants from us – the Botanic Gardens that sort of thing. Yeah we had quite a good collection. There was no Chilean stuff in those days, Nothofagus, you couldn't get one in Australia until we brought them in here.

And how hard – can you just talk to us about how you collected all those species? Was it seed, and was that difficult to track down?

Seed. Yeah well it's always been difficult to get plants into Australia. And you could in those days when we first started importing, you could bring plants in quite easy. But seed was the practical one when you were travelling around. We'd go to say Chile for three weeks, you're travelling around and you couldn't cart plants around with you – if you could even buy them because there weren't many nurseries over there. So it was seed, yeah.

So that must – that's a long journey isn't it? Trying to source seed and grow them up to get stock plants.

Yeah well it was enjoyable as far as we were concerned, yeah.

And what was Lesley's role? I know you were very much a team, but how did – what role was yours in the nursery and Lesley's?

Well she did all the bookwork, and being mail order which we were when we first came over here – in fact even to when we finished the nursery we were mail order, and I think seventy or eighty percent of our plants went out of Tasmania. And there was a lot of bookwork. And I remember Les sitting up you know ten or eleven o'clock at night watching TV and doing invoices. I thought this is no good so we developed an order form then and had people fill in that order form, and saved a lot of work, yeah.

What about the catalogues? When did they begin?

We always had a catalogue from when we first came here, first it was just roneoed sheets – we had a roneo thing, an old duplicator. (*Laughs*) But then we went to this sort of thing – these are all our catalogues – and they started in '91.

So you've got a book there on your coffee table which is an entire collection of all of your catalogues.

Well it's not a book, it's all the bound, bound catalogues. And they started in '91, there was no colour in those days, because you come back and we started colour. And they're all up to when we finished which was 2002 was it? Or not? Yes 2002 we finished.

That's a beautiful compendium.

So I know your family was involved in the nursery as well so can you just tell us how that developed? Because you had your four boys when you first moved here.

And our daughter, yeah 'cos she was ten years younger, Sandra. You know Sandra don't you?

I do, yes.

And anyway the boys, they all wanted to go their own way: engineering and this sort of thing.

But Colin did his apprenticeship in engineering and then he decided he wanted to come over and work with us. It was great. So he worked with us for just about twenty years.

David was going to school when we first came over here, he was our youngest son, and he got an apprenticeship straight away so he was tied up with his own work. But he used to help at the nursery quite a lot, and also Alan which was our third son. He'd help where he could, he did a lot of welding for me actually in the glass houses. They helped, not fulltime but gave us assistance to get going, yeah.

How did you design the nursery? I mean you'd worked in nurseries so you had a good idea, but can you just – did you have a view of the layout when you began?

Well we had to go with the layout of the land really. It was an unusual block in a way, we had a rather flat area which used to get very wet. And then it went up onto a little knoll where we decided the house would be best up there, which we never regretted that. Because at the start I thought I'd have the house closer to the nursery, but it wouldn't have been satisfactory at all.

So yes we designed the nursery then on the flatter area, got it well drained and built our glass houses so they would get the sun which is very important. And we had a problem with wind up at Longley, because wind is a thing in Tasmania anywhere I think. (Laughs) It seemed to be particularly bad up there. And yeah we planted a big row of radiata pines, I thought oh that'll fix it. And of course we had a bushfire after that and killed the lot – killed the lot, every one of them. And they'd just got up to about ten or twelve feet. Anyway I thought well we'll put wattles in, they're quick. I wanted that windbreak quickly. So we got some wattles from the Forest Commission up at north, Perth, and put them in. But they weren't silver wattles they were black wattles, and they're shocking things they get all scraggy and …

29:21 Short lived trees.

They're good for a start but only for about five years really. So I got some leylandii's then and we planted those, and they were a fantastic windbreak. They're up there now – they're huge.

You mentioned you had a lot of – eighty percent was mail order.

Yeah.

Did that limit what you could grow and the size that you wished you could grow?

Well we had to design our pot size to suit. We always had little pots – this was the alpine stuff – but for the trees and shrubs, well we just knocked them out of the bigger pots. Because there was quite a large area under fourteen and sixteen centimetre pots there and in the winter we could do it. Natives we had to be careful with those, but other stuff was quite alright to handle.

Now do you remember – this question might be taxing your memory – but when you started to when you finished can I imagine you kept adding species and cultivars (*indistinct, both talking*)

Yes. Yes that was part of what we did. We were always looking for new plants. (*Laughs*) Yeah. And hence all these overseas trips we did, we enjoyed them, but then we worked to another point too – and thirty-two trips we did.

We might talk about that in a second.

Yeah.

How many did you end up with? How many varieties or different types of plants? Do you have any idea?

Oh I don't know. Les did say that – 'cos she worked with me making the catalogue every year and did all the computer work on it – about sixteen hundred things we were listing. We had more at the nursery of course.

Now eighty percent of your clients were interstate but how well did you get – did you make friendships with some of those clients? And do you know where some of those plants have ended up?

Ah yes. The main percentage went to New South Wales and Victoria, and yes quite a few of those people – a lot of them have passed on now you know. I'm living too long I think. (*Laughs*) But yes a lot were there and we did have a relationship with them. And they'd buy three or four lots a year, they weren't content with buying one lot, they'd buy one lot – it might be you know thirty or forty plants in it – then they'd put another order in. Big boxes were going out.

But anyway, a few to South Australia and actually a little pocket in Western Australia down near Albany. There was a keen gardening group there that were very good customers.

I would imagine that one of the very satisfying things could potentially being that knowing that the plants that you've collected from around the world and you grew here have ended up becoming beautiful specimens somewhere.

Well we always hope so. I know there are losses in plants, I've lost them myself. (*Laughs*) But yeah.

Do you know of any that have gone on to become beautiful trees?

Not particularly. A couple of things the other nurseries got hold of and pushed, not a tree, but one of them is Salvia corrugatta which we collected in Ecuador and very easy to propagate. And yes they woke up to that and it was available in nurseries all along the east coast of Australia. (*Laughs*)

Did you mind that?

No. No I mean you – once you sell it that's it. You've got to accept that. We were very cagey with some of the things at the start that we didn't try to let them go to wholesalers, but they'd get them anyhow. Yeah you've got to accept it.

Now let's talk about your special finds and some of your – we'll go overseas in a minute, but tell us about your collecting in Tasmania and your special finds that you've made.

Well I became interested in the leatherwoods and we heard that there was a pink one up north. I thought oh that sounds interesting so we did some enquiry, and somehow we were led to the Forest Commission up there. They knew about it, it was Zeehan – not Zeehan. Oh, what's the town right up the north-east? Oh, west.

Smithton? Oh, Scottsdale? You're talking about the north-east?

No, north-west.

North-west.

The big town there – the Nut.

Oh Stanley.

Stanley. Went to the Forest Commission there at Stanley. Sorry about that. And yes they knew where it was and they told us where it was, and said, "Oh don't go knocking it around." I said, "I won't knock it around." And it was quite late, it was autumn and I thought gosh I hope there's still flowers on it. Anyhow we, Col and I went and had a look and –

Col?

Colin.

34:40 Your son?

Yes he was working for us then. And there was hardly any flowers around, and on top of this – I thought it was the one they spoke about before a bridge. But we had binocs with us and we looked at the top and there were two or three flowers right at the top of this thing about sixty or seventy foot high, and they looked pinkish to me so I said, "Oh that's it. How in the heck are we going to get to it?" Because it was an old tree and all the lower limbs had gone right up to about twenty or thirty feet. How on earth were we going to get cuttings from that? So we cut a sapling down of a eucalypt nearby – it was all bush – and leant that up against it and Colin shinned up that. I couldn't have done it. And he got a few cuttings. And it was all this old, knotty wood you know, it wasn't good wood at all, but it was all he could get.

So we took it home and we struck a lot of them. It was a start because the next year we had those young plants to work from and had plenty then. And we called that Eucryphia Pink Cloud, that was our first Eucryphia. And because we got several others after that, better ones, but that was our first one.

Is that a pink is it?

Yes. The best one was Ballerina and that came from the west coast also, a different area. And the best colour was Lesley, but it's not such a strong grower, Lesley – Ballerina was a very good plant for

the general public to put in their gardens because it flowered as a baby plant and it grew strongly.

Was Lesley named for Lesley?

Yes.

And the others? How did you choose the names?

Well Pink Cloud, it was a light pink, we thought oh it sounded nice. Ballerina, well we thought it looked a little bit like a ballerina's dress. It was quite a good pink and a good shaped flower. And then there were two others we named for the foliage: it was, um Gilt Edge had a goldish edge to the foliage, and another one Spring Glow – and that got a lot of pink on the young growth.

Are these readily available now? What's happened to them?

Well I guess the chappie up there at Ferntree will still have them going, I would have thought so, yes. Of course the Eucryphias, you're limited to your climatic conditions whether they grow well. They grow well anywhere in Tasmania, and the Dandenongs in Victoria they grow very well. But you get into the hotter, drier area it's not so good.

What about King's lomatia?

Yes well we had that for a while.

Can you tell us how you came by that, that story?

Well Alec Gray – I don't know if you know Alec Gray …

He was with the Forestry Commission then was he?

Not then, I think he was with the Gardens then, the Botanic Gardens. Anyway Alec lived not far from us at Longley and he said, "Oh I'm going to go down and get cuttings of lomatia." And he said, "Are you interested in getting – coming down?" And I said, "Too right!"

So we flew down with him and there was somebody from the Botanic Gardens and somebody from the university and somebody else. There were five or six of us really. Then we had to fly down to Melaleuca, pick up Deny King who was the guide, and then fly back to Cox's Bight and land on a beach there and he took us in where they were growing. And certainly needed him to find them that's for sure. (*Laughs*) It's pretty wild down there you know, but he knew just where they were and we got cuttings. But I wasn't allowed to touch them because I was commercial, but I saw them and saw them getting the cuttings. And we came back and Alec said, "Well we've got them now but we'll give you some. You didn't collect them but we're giving them to you." So that's how we came by the lomatia.

38:54 Had Deny King found them first, had he?

I don't know if Deny or his father. There was only two patches of it: the patch he took us to and I believe there was another patch somewhere else across the other side of Cox's Bight – but I've never heard another thing about that. Because it's – it doesn't set seed, it's an ancient plant that's propagated itself over the years. It's quite interesting really, yeah.

Do you have a favourite Tasmania wild landscape?

A favourite?

A Tasmanian – a favourite wild landscape in Tasmania?

Wild landscape. I only did a bit of bushwalking, not a lot, but a bit. (Pause) It's hard to say, they're all lovely.

Exactly.

Yeah they're all lovely.

Yes absolutely. You mentioned you did a lot of seed collecting trips in Tasmania, did you?

Yes.

What were some of the others you did?

Oh all sorts of stuff: persoonias, other lomatia, telopea, blandfordia, and a lot of other odds and ends. Milligania, that's another one that comes back to my mind, we used to grow it as the Tasman lily. And we even grew the geum for a while, talbotianum. So yes there was quite a lot of different things.

Do you think there's a lot more that could be done with Tasmanian natives, or do you think you've kind of …

Oh there's always something, yeah there's always something. And you know forms and varieties of a plant, and some of them do occur, they're not around for a while and all of a sudden a plant will grow a sport and something new.

Let's take a – we'll talk now …

Do you want another drink of water?

I'll sip that again.

Tell us if you want that whisky.

We'll talk a little bit about your overseas travels. When did you start travelling? Was it when you were in Tasmania?

Yes. Yes. Yes our first trip was to UK. We've always had a friend, he's still there in Surrey, Brian Matthew, he's quite a well-known botanist and an author of bulb books, and we used to stay with him. And that first trip well we went to Brian's and travelled all over – not all over but, England's not that big really is it? (*Laughs*) Not when you think of here. Anyway we went around, yeah and we enjoyed it. It was tremendous.

And came back and I had a letter about a year after, they were holding a rock garden conference in Edinburgh and would I be a speaker. So I said, "Oh will I or won't I?" I was frightened of all that, absolutely. Anyway I said, "Yes." That was the second trip and we went back to UK and I did that talk at Edinburgh.

What was that on?

Oh, oh Tasmanian natives. It was all alpine stuff of course of different countries – the speakers were from different countries. Yes I did alpines.

And at the same time they were opening up the Alpine House at Kew, a new alpine house they'd built. They built another one just recently I believe and scrapped that one. But anyhow they built the one then and they were opening and they wanted me to talk at that too. That was a very selected group invited, that was not opened to the public. Oh there were forty, fifty people – I don't remember what there were now. So I did those two talks anyhow, yeah.

That's pretty prestigious stuff Ken.

Oh I don't know.

You're too modest – but to speak to a select group of alpine specialists at Kew Gardens …

Oh you were frightened you were going to put your foot in it, yeah. (*Laughs*) We all can do that.

Oh you must have met a lot of interesting people.

Oh we met a lot of interesting people, yeah.

43:21 And so then after that trip, what's after that?

(Pause) I think New Zealand. I had met – I don't know how – Jenny Reid who was a botanist at the uni, she used to teach botany there in Tasmania. I don't know how I got to know Jenny, but anyway I had met her and I invited her up for tea and she said, "I'll bring some slides up of Chile." So she came up and showed us these slides and that fired our enthusiasm absolutely. (*Laughs*)

But anyhow in the meantime I had gone to – I had decided to go to New Zealand, South Island, I had a friend there also that was a very good nurseryman. And we did stop with him briefly too but travelled around the South Island at different nurseries and got a lot of plants.

We used to take two suitcases, one inside the other with our things in the inside one and then the outside one that was for plants when we came back. And we'd just fill that up with plants acquired from the nurseries, and I'd come to Hobart – and of course the inspectors were there and I'd say, "Well here it is." And Les'd have a list made out. And they'd take it away and gas it and the next day I could go and pick it up, put it in our own quarantine house – which we had a registered quarantine house at Longley. So it worked out very well.

And I don't know how many trips we did to New Zealand, four or five I think, and always brought back a suitcase full of plants.

Because of course that Gondwana connection would have been …

Oh yes, although not all the plants of Gondwana that I've got from New Zealand – they were, the gardeners there are very keen and they had imported a lot of stuff from United States and England. And they hadn't been importing into Australia much of that stuff at all, so I was able to get new plants that were acclimatised. Because if you were getting from the northern hemisphere there was always the problem of acclimatising. And it was great, I got quite a lot of stuff: different ceanothus from America. They had a huge collection in New Zealand at that time of different other plants, so we were able to get quite a good lot of plants.

So you'd see those plants that you brought in scattered right through the commercial nursery industry? I mean you …

Oh they are now, yes. A lot many years ago, they've been scattered through – yeah ceanothus and a lot of pittosporums, all the new pittosporums at that stage. No I haven't bothered to bring them in here – I brought a lot of those in as well because there was a lot of pittosporum variations in New Zealand. I think they had a lot named. So they are very popular plants, yeah. But a bit of Gondwana stuff as well.

The quarantine house, was that tricky to manage or …

No. No it was a registered house, it was glass and had double doors on it and traps on the drains. And of course screens on ventilation. So we put that up on a slab and it worked very well. The Department had to come up and check the plants now and again, they didn't very often but they'd have to check them before they were released. And

before they were released they had to grow so sometimes they were in the house for quite a long while, sometimes not so long.

But that quarantine house was the key really to all this material.

Oh yes. It all went through there.

You couldn't have done it really without it.

Yeah well I remember when I first wanted to import stuff I spoke to them down at the Department and they said, "Look why don't you have your own house?" I thought oh well – so I priced it out and I thought oh yes, I think we can make it pay over the years for sure. Which we did.

47:32 I don't think you can do it now.

No things are different now, absolutely different in the regulations with AQIS, yeah.

And out of all those things that you collected from overseas are there any favourites?

(*Pauses and laughs*) There's too many.

You must have loved everything!

There's too many. Because I've got a wide range of plants I like, you know I like trees and shrubs right down to alpines, the whole extent right through. Yeah it's a bit hard to say. I do like beech – I like a southern beech and I like northern hemisphere beech very much, and we had quite a good collection of both. But oh favourites, it's hard to say. And we imported quite a few new rhododendrons also.

Yeah I was going to ask you about that. So obviously you were there – you were at that point when the Australian Rhododendron Society was created. What …

Yes. I'm the only one left from the original meeting, because they were all older people than me – as I said I was in my twenties, they were in the thirties and forties. They're all gone. And I only said the other day at the Rhodo Society, well I told them how it formed and I said, "Well I don't know if I'll be around much longer I've got to tell you now." (*Laughs*)

Was that unusual? Did they think you were unusual being a young man interested you know in this with such passion when everyone else was quite a lot older?

Well there were quite a lot of younger people in the profession at that time, a couple of my age. Arnold Teese was a well-known

nurseryman, Yamina, he was about my age. He was at their first meeting but he died because – quite a few years back now, Arnold. But we were the only two younger ones I'd say, yeah.

Well the Teese nursery still goes doesn't it, but it (*indistinct, both talking*)

One of his sons is running that, yes.

Did you have any mentors? Were any of those people mentors for you?

Oh it's hard to say. No my main mentors would have been at the nursery I worked at I think, yeah.

So tell us about the Tasmanian Rhododendron Society.

Well that started up – I didn't start it, that would be Faye Marsland. No, I only knew her now but she's a bit of a goer and she decided she wanted to get it going. She's keen on rhododendrons and there was quite a few other growers around at that stage. And she came up and saw us, I said, "Oh yes I'll be in it." So we – I can't remember the exact year now, it'd be in the 80s. Yes we came here '75 – it'd be in the early 80s I think, that's from memory now.

It might have been 1978 but …

As close as that? It may have been then. It wasn't long after I know she came up and saw us and wanted to get it going and I said, "Yes I'll be in it." Anyway we had quite a, quite a good membership. I know at one stage there was thirty or forty members which is quite good, and that persisted for quite a few years because we ran the Rhododendron Show in the Town Hall, it was very successful, very popular.

But then quite a few of our members have died and dropped out of growing rhododendrons and it got to that stage well we couldn't, couldn't put a show on. We just couldn't – there wasn't enough members and not enough flowers and we dropped out of showing. But we kept our society going, and of course it's still going. I went to a meeting this Sunday, one of our members had a garden open. And there was nearly twenty people there.

What about the Australian Society for growing – or the Society for growing Australian Plants?

I was in it at the start, I was a member. But dare I say I think they were a bit one-eyed. (*Laughs*)

51:58 Oh, a bit one-eyed. I remember a meeting –

Don't spread that around. No they, they do a job.

But I did a set of articles for their journal. I remember what really put me off, I sent these slides along for this particular article – they lost them. I was very upset about that. It couldn't be helped I suppose, but it upset me at the time. I couldn't replace those slides. I don't know what they were of at the time, native plants. So yes I had – no I haven't had anything to do with them much since. I did speak to their group a couple of times.

So tell us about the closure of the nursery at Woodbank.

Well.

Had you been thinking about it?

Oh yes we knew it was coming, I mean you're getting older. Yeah we knew it was coming and I said to Les one day, "Look I think we'd better think about closing up." And I had had my first, my pacemaker put in at that stage and it was sort of a wakeup call for me, I'd had pretty good health through my life, you know I've (*indistinct*). But I thought oh gosh things are starting to slow down – they put the pacemaker in and I felt real good but I thought you know maybe I should think about slowing up.

So she wasn't very keen at all at the start, oh you know she enjoyed the business, but anyhow she saw the light as well and we decided that we would sell. And we were rather shocked when we sold so quickly. Because we had closed up but we didn't sell for a number of years, we enjoyed the garden.

Well you made it huge after that point.

Oh I made it much larger. I had a tractor and the machinery and the time, and as I say once I had the pacemaker in I felt good so yeah I did a lot of work on the garden. And we enjoyed it tremendously.

But when I had the pacemaker – I didn't have the pacemaker in then, I'm sorry. I didn't have – not at the start. When I had the pacemaker in after – it'd be about 2010 I think or something like that – that's what made me think I had to ease up. So we put the place on the market and it sold in two weeks. It was a bit of luck it did sell that quickly, but it caught me out a bit. I didn't have a lot of plants to take with me that I would have liked, but that's the way that it goes.

You didn't propagate before you sold?

Oh I had some plants there, and I went back – I've been back since and got cuttings. It sold because – the people we sold it to sold it to Kerry and Harry Van der Venn who have got it now. We've got a

very good relationship with Kerry and Harry and you know I can go up and get cuttings anytime no problem.

And were you surprised by the public outcry when it was announced that you were …

(*Laughs*) Yeah we had a lot of people weeping and wailing – interstate mainly, and all these letters came back you know because we said, "This is our last catalogue." And yeah, yeah I forget the funny comments but, yeah they were quite upset a lot of it. They dwelled on their catalogue coming every year and getting the rare plants, yeah.

And it must have been a bit touching to know that that's how they felt about your nursery?

Oh yes. I mean you'd like to go on forever but you can't. We just accepted that, that we just had to close up and slow down. But yeah it was, it's nice to know that you're appreciated anyhow.

Well of course the Order of Australia Medal – how do you feel about that?

Well I never knew a thing about that, Les kept it a secret. (*Laughs*) It'd been going on for a year because they want all this paperwork sent in, and I didn't know a thing about it. We went – whether we'd gone to China or where we were that year – and we came back and there's all these letters and phone calls of people trying to contact me, the paper, for an interview. "What's all this?" And the letter of course, I had to accept it. And I didn't know a thing about it.

56:40 So you were overseas when the award was announced were you?

Well the award was announced about the day I came back I think. Oh it was quite a surprise, yeah.

And without you being too modest, how did you feel about the Order of Australia?

Well I wondered whether I was really worth it, to be perfectly truthful. I thought what have I done to do this you know?

Perfect, it's really perfect yeah. So when you sold the nursery just describe what retirement was like? Obviously you were doing a lot of gardening.

I did a lot of gardening. There was one area I put in that we had stock plants growing in it of rhododendrons we'd imported. And there was quite a batch of them you know, maybe forty, fifty – they were up this high, a metre or so high. And I dug all those out and

ploughed it all up. I knew what I wanted to do with it. And put a little water feature in one corner, a path down through it, and then planted these stock rhododendrons back as a garden.

And in one end I planted – I'm mad on dwarf rhododendrons, they're my crazy things too – I planted all dwarf rhododendrons and they grew very well there. Because dwarf rhododendrons in Victoria or on the mainland aren't very good because they're high alpine and they don't like the heat. In Tasmania they can – our bit of heat here doesn't worry them, they can handle that. So I was able to grow dwarf rhododendrons very well there, and that was good.

What about photography? You mentioned the slides that you took, do you want to just tell us when did that begin, that interest in photography?

Well I got my first Canon in Victoria, it was an outlay for me in those days we didn't have that much money, and I used to take flowers around the garden you know. Ended up Bogong and those areas, we loved to go up there into the mountains and take a few.

The high – Victorian high country?

Yeah, loved that. Oh it was beautiful up there, it's different to Tasmanian high country – it is quite different. I really enjoyed that. We'd been up there several years running, camped up there. And anyway when I came over here of course I had the camera and I started taking a bit of Tasmanian stuff. Then we did our overseas trips, I was taking photos all the time.

But of course it was film then, and when digital came in I got Les a little digital camera and oh it was great you know. She said, "Oh you should get a digital as well." I was loath to change, and I used to go and buy all my film when we went to the airport in Melbourne – you could buy all your film there. And it was getting hard to get, I thought oh this is ridiculous I think I will go digital. So I bought a digital. I had the same lens because I bought a Canon again, and I went digital. And of course I never regretted that, it's so easy.

So have you got a huge collection of photographs that you've catalogued?

I've got a few there.

Tell us about them, what have you got?

Well I've got all the countries in the computer separated that we've been to, and then I've got one I call 'flowers' – well that's all trees and shrubs really. And then I've got another one 'alpines', another

one ‘bulbs’, and I’ve got another one ‘Chilean flora’, another one ‘New Zealand flora’, and another one ‘Australian flora’.

And they’re all named?

They’re all named, yeah.

That’d be huge.

Oh I get a lot of satisfaction out of them still because I can go back and be there. (*Laughs*) More-or-less, yeah.

So you mentioned obviously the UK, Chile, China and New Zealand.

Yeah.

What other trips have you done?

Japan, China, States – the northern States, Colorado and that area. Kyrgyzstan. No plants there, but Egypt. South Africa, Kenya, Uganda – yeah they’re all on that bit of paper there anyhow.

Oh yes, can I have a look Ken?

And their dates.

Oh right, we might – can we keep this, a copy?

Yeah you can keep it, I’ve got it in the computer. I did that the other day, I thought I might need it.

61:32 Oh my God look at – so there’s multiple trips there?

Oh multiple trips for a lot of them, yeah. Not all of them but a lot of them.

So I’m just reading out for the record. So New Zealand: 1985, 1988, 1991, 1996 and 1999. China is 1992, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2009, 2010, 2011 – that’s one, two, three, four – seven trips to China, wow.

Ecuador: 1992 and 1994. And Bolivia and Peru – oh, Bolivia and Peru 1994. The UK: ’91, ’97, ’89, and 2001. Cyprus: 2003. Turkey: 2004 and 2005. Kenya: 1999. South Africa: 1989. The United States: 1986. Japan: 1984. Chile: 1987, 1990 and 1997. I don’t know how to pronounce this, Kyrgyzstan …

Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan: 2000. Iran: 2001. Italy: 2007. Greece: 2006. Goodness me (*indistinct*)

(*Laughing*)

That's wonderful. So can you tell us how important those photographs were in terms of being able to deliver presentations.

Oh very much so. The Society, well mainly the Rhodo Society, I always showed them slides of all the trips. They enjoyed them. And I use a lot of those slides still, I have been doing a few articles for some of the societies overseas and they require pictures. And also they're very handy to fall back on. I had to scan all my film slides, you know.

And if you were going to write a book – if you were going to write a book, what would you write in on?

Oh I don't know. My memory's not as good as it was.

I think, going back to those early days when you said you travelled such a lot as a child with your father, you know do you think that changed your thinking in the world, it opened your horizons? It taught you …

Well possibly it did. Yeah I went to a lot of different schools, it wrecked my schooling absolutely. But that was the way it was you know. Like I was schooled in New Zealand in a couple of schools but in Australia it was Queensland and New South Wales and quite a few in Victoria, and yeah I think it opens your horizons a bit, yeah. But it doesn't help with your schooling.

So you've no regrets about being a nurseryman rather than a dairy farmer?

No not at all. I still love farm life, but it's good not to be tied down. I mean a dairy farm of all things it's one of the biggest ties you could have. Every night, every morning – unless it's a big family, every day of the year virtually. So not so good for me nowadays, no. I enjoy the plants very much, they don't require as much attention. They require attention but not as much as a farm.

So any one particular trip do you think that was your favourite? Or do you think they were all good in different ways?

Well in different ways they've all been fantastic. And some of those trips haven't been for plants, a few of them haven't of course when you go to Iran and Egypt and those sort of places. I can see the flora and take slides but I couldn't collect – it was the wrong time of the year anyhow, if the flower is out well you can't get seed. So the trips I did to Chile mainly and New Zealand were solely to collect seeds so I went in the late summer/early autumn for that very reason. You still enjoy the country but you can get seeds then.

And would you say you're still connected, because I think that there's this kind of web of specialists all around the globe?

Oh yes there are. Yes, the Societies have contracted – there's the Alpine Garden Society in England and a huge membership, I don't know how many. There'd be six or seven thousand – worldwide – and it has contracted enormously over the last few years. The Scottish Rock Garden Club, that's another one. And again their membership has fallen. And North American, one in the States, they've had trouble – I know financial trouble to keep their society on its feet.

But the people are still there, just not as many as there were, yeah. Dendrology Society, I mean they're just for trees, well they're still going strong. They seem to have built up quite a lot in Australia, there's quite a lot of members now.

And just talking about Lesley for a moment, because I know she loved doing botanical illustrations, do you think that was a good fit for what you did? Like you'd take the photographs and she would then illustrate it?

Oh yeah. Yeah because there's a lot of her work around, and she ended up doing birds as well but flowers were what she started on. And she did a fantastic job, yeah. She was never trained, it was – well she did a course in Tasmania, an evening course for twelve months to draw, not to paint. And that was it. And of course we got married soon after that and she didn't have time, she had children then. And then there was a course down at Kingston at Adult Ed water paints, seeds and flowers. And well she thought I can do that, so we both did it. And that really got her going, she could (*indistinct*) alone. (*Laughs*)

So I mean it's a parallel with you isn't it, because you – you said you had this disjointed education so you're really self-taught through your experience through all the nurseries and the people that you've met, so what was your journey of self-education? Did you just read widely?

Yeah. Yeah I used to read widely and then – well I always have, but they've mainly been botanical books over the years. I've got an awful lot of them now because I read library books now (*laughs*) to fill in my time. Yeah.

So what sort of things did you read? Like publications from the various societies and things?

Oh well yeah all those societies I was in had publications, either quarterly or half-yearly, they always came through. I still get them from a couple of, several societies. And well I bought a lot of books,

books that you know if I was really interested in – not just general garden books but …

69:06 So the specialist ones?

Well the specialised of the genus, yeah so you could really learn something about them, yeah.

So what's your Latin like Ken?

Oh it's not good. (*Laughs*) Not good.

Better than the average I'd imagine.

Yeah pretty average. Yeah. Yeah we don't know how it was pronounced once, we can only interpret it in our own way now. That's what I always say to anybody, "Don't think you've been pronouncing it wrong because no-one can really trip you up on it." There is a theory but we don't know just how it was pronounced.

And just finally really, because I mean I was one of the fortunate people that you know used to pop in sometimes to your nursery, and it was a buzz of energy. It must have been a culmination of your ambitions, was it satisfying? Was it fun?

Oh very satisfying, yeah. Yes I never dreamt that the nursery would develop to what it was. I didn't have an ambition to develop through it there, I just wanted to come over here and enjoy Tasmania and perhaps make a living you know. And it got a little bit beyond that – I still made a living and I still enjoyed it, but I was very, very busy.

And one of the things that I always recall, because you had all the plants out and not every plant had a label on it, but you'd get it and I'd take it to the counter and you'd know immediately what it was. You'd rattle off the Latin name.

Yeah.

How did …

I did then. Yeah well I think if you're mad on a subject, any subject, a lot of it gets instilled in your brain. And I had an eye for the plants, I propagated them, I knew them. (*Laughs*) Yeah I couldn't do it now I don't think. But handling them all the time I could do it, yeah.

That's terrific. Well it's been a real pleasure Ken. Is there anything else that we wanted to touch on that you felt that we haven't? But it's been really lovely. Your recall is fantastic. I think we'll stop the recording here now.

71:17 RECORDING ENDS.