

# AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



Photo: provided by Ruth Bailey

Interviewee:	<b>LES MUSGRAVE</b>
Interviewer:	RUTH BAILEY
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This is an oral interview with Les Musgrave, owner and the Head Gardener at The Kaya, Wildes Meadow in New South Wales. Les will be speaking with me, Ruth Bailey from the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS), as part of the collaboration with the Berrima District Museum (BDM) to create an exhibition of eight significant gardens in the Southern Highlands to be showcased in the BDM Digital Gallery 'Story Centre'.

Les, on behalf of the AGHS and the BDM I'd like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

(Les's comments are in *italics*).

This interview is taking place today, 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020 at about 11.35 a.m.

This interview is intended to cover the history, development and adaptation of the gardens at The Kaya, from commencement to the present period and in particular since your acquisition of the property in 2009 and including any future plans you might have for the garden.

So, we're going to start with some biographical details if that's OK.  
To start off with, where were you born?

*I was born in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, Rose Bay.*

*I have two children, And are they nearby, are they still in Sydney?*

*One lives in the Hawkesbury area out of Sydney, and our other daughter lives in Queenstown in New Zealand.*

Do you have any siblings?

*Yes, I have one brother and he lives in Brisbane.*

Did you go to school locally?

*Yes, I went to school at Rose Bay Primary and then to Vaucluse High.*

OK, and did you go to university or tertiary education?

*Tertiary, after leaving high school I went straight to the Ryde School of Horticulture and studied horticulture and garden design.*

What got you interested in garden design and gardening? What were the influences in your life?

*I think the main influence was my parents, both of them are keen gardeners. They were so keen that when my father retired they couldn't agree on what to do in the garden, so one got the front garden and one got the back garden, but before that they encouraged me to develop the garden at Rose Bay,*

*which, I think at the age of about 17 we entered a competition and we won Best Small Garden in Sydney.*

Oh, right.

*And then it was two consecutive years that we won Best Small Garden.*

So, you were gardening as a young child, and you had a little patch of your own in the garden?

*Yes, I had a patch, and then slowly took over the garden. I always remember when I was about 7, wanting to build a fish pond, and my parents gave me a couple of bags of ready-mix cement to build a fish pond.*

And did you?

*Yes, but it wasn't that exciting because my grandfather, who was an engineer, decided we had to do formwork and all that, and it took too long.*

The impatience of youth, as they say.

Yes, yes.

So, you were introduced to gardening as an infant basically.

Yes.

You crawled around the garden, and watched your Mum and Dad garden and so it became part of your life. That's interesting.

So, being around a garden doesn't necessarily mean you're passionate about a garden. What do you think made it passionate to you?

*Most probably at an early age being able to grow plants. My father was very keen on vegetables and then in my very early teens he built a small glasshouse for me and then I was propagating, so I think it just helped develop that feeling for plants.*

You could grow things from little cuttings and seeds.

*Yes, I used to check the glasshouse out every morning and see how things were going.*

Now in terms of your style of gardening, what has influenced the style of gardens that you create? Is it through research, or through travel, or friends or colleagues?

*It would be a combination, magazines and other designers. I was especially influenced by a designer from Brazil, Roberto Burle Marx. His gardens are*

*very dramatic. He did a lot of work around Rio and his plantings were quite strong plantings, very definite plants.*

5:00

Structural, architectural were they?

*Yes, very architectural plantings, and then an English designer, Russell Page, who was very good at doing formal gardens, very intense formal gardens and then letting them spill over into more informal areas and with vistas, which helped a lot. Also, Christopher Lloyd, with his strong use of colour in various areas of the garden. I've always enjoyed his writing.*

So, you've taken a little bit of each of these, and created your own style.  
Yes, very much so.

Good, so where were you living and working prior to coming to The Kaya?  
*We were living at Kurrajong Heights. I was doing restoration work and small landscape jobs in the Hills area of Sydney, plus Mt. Wilson and Mt. Irvine and we had a 28 acre property at Kurrajong Heights with a 12 acre garden which we opened to the public, so it was a very different garden to what we have here, because there were a lot of creeks and rock formations and lovely cold temperate rainforest.*

Did it have a name, this property?

*It was called 'Fernbrook'.*

Is it still there?

*Yes, the place is still there but it's not open to the public anymore.*

So, it was very different to this garden? You were looking for something different?

*Very different. I suppose so, this one I've enjoyed because it's a completely different sort of feel to it. It was a challenge having such a sunny garden, because Fernbrook was naturally a lot of ferns, it had the sunny areas too, but it was a magic garden.*

With creeks and valleys, and shade?

*Lots of creeks. It had a lovely creek called 'Little Weenie Creek' that ran through it, a lot of shade areas, but at least half of the garden would have been open garden which was good, but the gulley areas were the favourite ones.*

So, you opened this to the public and people came and visited?

*Yes, Elaine had her botanical studio at the entrance to the garden. It was in a converted milking shed so people used to come in and have a look around the studio and then head off to the garden.*

Right, so was that a fulltime job for you, or were you still doing the other work in the Blue Mountains?

*I was still doing the work in the Blue Mountains and maintaining the garden at Fernbrook.*

All on your own?

*Yes, all on my own and having a cut flower production based at the garden at Fernbrook, supplying six florists every week of the year. So, it kept me busy.*

Oh, so I can see you were busy. So, this one is as busy or less?

*This one is only busy for our own enjoyment mainly now. We do open it occasionally, and also, I'm busy growing plants for the Southern Highlands Botanic Gardens. We're most probably just as busy, but with less pressure.*

A different way, more a volunteer way, as opposed to a production facility is what I'm hearing?

*Yes, we can get away from this place when we want to.*

Which is nice.

Yes.

The other question I had, is the history of The Kaya? Has it been here a long time? Did you buy it as an established garden?

*It was partially established. The first owner who built the house and put the driveways in, she was New South Wales' first female jockey so hence the two stables and no garden as such.*

And when was that do you know?

*That would have been about 2005.*

OK.

*Then the next owners came along and they commissioned Chris Webb, a local designer from the Southern Highlands, to do a bit of work for them and he designed the parterre garden and then it became a deceased estate. They were only here for a very short time. So, they did a secondary planting after the first owner and then we've come along and finished it off, hopefully.*

So, what drew you to this particular space, because there are many properties in the Highlands?

*Yes, when we looked in the Highlands we had always liked the rainfall in the Robertson area, and it turned out that all the properties we looked at, four or five of our favourite ones were within about 3 kilometers of this one.*

10:07

So, knowing the history of this property, did that influence the way you developed it, or did you start from scratch in your own mind?

*I virtually started from scratch. Because the garden was so new, from the previous owners, the trees and things. Our first winter there were so many deciduous plants around, there was very little to look at in winter, and so I had to start introducing structure into the garden, with hedging, and then some evergreen plants, and just give it more variety and tying the garden beds together. The previous owners just hadn't had time to put a lot of thought into finishing the garden.*

They probably didn't have your experience with plants as well.

*No, they started with the parterre, which we love. They wanted a rose garden so the parterre was very, to me, not that interesting. To rose-lovers it was probably very interesting but 270 roses in a climate which normally has 60" of rain a year, with black spot and aphids – it wasn't on. So, we dug up all the roses from the parterre garden, gave 200 away, kept 70 and put them into another area of the garden and then that started the development of the parterre garden which is the main feature of this property. I decided, a friend had told me a long time ago, 20 years ago, about a garden she'd heard of that was essentially a non-green garden and then I thought I've got the perfect parterre garden, lovely layout, so I started introducing grey Teucrium hedge to surround the parterre and got rid of the grass and put red decomposed granite to complement the gravel paths that were already in and then started adding plants with wonderful textures, colours. There are greens in the garden, but a lot of them silvery greens or softer greens. I've tried to keep it as non-green as possible and still have a certain amount of colour, with the dark-leaved miniature dahlias and lots of other plants that flower but they've got grey-green leaves.*

It gives lovely contrast.

Yes.

So, a question about your material about the garden. Do you keep a diary, do you have garden plans, photos, those sorts of things about the garden?

*A lot of photos. I'm constantly taking photos because it helps to look back on the photos, and you realise how much growth you've had.*

In a relatively short period of time.

*Yes. I don't keep a diary as such. I've got a draw full of labels that never get sorted but it's mainly photographs is the record that I keep of the garden.*

What about garden equipment, do you have pieces that you wear out and toss aside, or do you just keep using the same things.

*I keep using the same things, they don't wear things out that often. I think I've got 7 pairs of a very good brand of pruning shears, lots of secateurs and then just your normal garden equipment.*

I've seen where they hang up some retired gardening equipment. They hang them up on walls and things because they've moved on to something else. I'm just curious whether you had such things.

*No, I don't keep anything, if it's not working then I don't want it.*

So, just to reiterate, some of the changes you've made to the garden. You've refreshed the total parterre garden. It's quite a large property, have you done other things to the garden?

*Yes, I've added a lot of areas to the garden. I've put in 2 bog gardens, because we have excessive rain periods, we have areas that flood, and so the bog gardens are a feature of the garden. There's quite an extensive grass garden, a gravel garden, bulb garden, so they're all areas I've tried to link up with big sweeping areas of lawn and vistas.*

Do you have an orchard?

*Yes, there is a small orchard on the place, some of the trees were there and I prune them and look after them and the birds enjoy them.*

Well, it's good to contribute to the local bird population, they're very appreciative of that.

Yes.

15:34

And how do you select the plantings for the garden? Did you start with a blank piece of paper to design it, or did you start to plant to see what survived and then moved things around?

*I virtually knew exactly what I wanted to do. I've been very lucky, I can see things. You know, I'll buy a plant and look at it and I can see what it's going to look like in 10 years or 15 years' time.*

So, you're a visionary for your plants as well.

*Yes, and I don't need to plan certain things, you know you get ideas and then you've got to toss up as to whether it's going to work. Every plant has got a lot of good points but some bad points too and I'm very conscious of maintenance, looking after the 5-acre property on my own, so I'm always thinking about how much work is involved at certain times of the year.*

I think that's important, some people don't always appreciate the demands of a large garden and how much effort it's going to take to keep it looking really lovely.

*Yes, there are certain plants that take a lot of time and then there's other plants which seem to go on forever with very little maintenance, so I'm trying to get as many of those in the garden as possible, but you know it's always going to be a certain amount of maintenance on a 5-acre garden.*

Now, you referred to colour as being important in your design. Are there particular colours that you like to use that are eye catching?

*In some areas of the garden I like quite strong colours. I love the very dark leaved cannas with the orange flowers. I like very strong blues and purples, yellows. I don't go so much for the softer pastel colours and we're very lucky here with the soil, and we get very strong colouring in hydrangeas. It's the stronger colours that I gravitate to.*

They're actually very eye catching when they're strong.

And you have the purples and greys and a little bit of green.

*Yes, I have the strong-coloured miniature dahlias in the parterre. They set off the rest of the display.*

What would you call a 'normal' day in the garden?

*A normal day I would spend maybe pruning one or two hedges, spraying for weeds, mulching. If I get a bit bored with too much pruning, I'll go and start potting-up plants for the Botanic Gardens. It sort of breaks up the day. I get bored very quickly, just general maintenance is um, I'd rather be developing the garden but after so many years in horticulture, I realise I can't keep adding garden beds so I keep the work down to a minimum.*

Have you reshaped some parts of the garden because it became too heavy on maintenance?

*I'm always looking at ways that I can still have the effect but reduce the maintenance on the garden . . .*

So, are there many natives in your garden?

*We've got quite a few natives. I love the longer-lived native plants or the ones that will take pruning and rejuvenate. I don't want anything that's short-lived.*



Is that common in the native plant world?

*A lot of native plants are short-lived, but there are a lot too that are very long-lived plants so I tend to head towards the longer-lived plants.*

And you mix those in with other plants?

*Yes, they mix very well.*

19:58

Good. What is your favourite area of the garden and why?

Do you have one?

*I've got lots of favourite areas. My main area would be the parterre garden. Then, in the Autumn and Winter it would be the grass garden and during Summer it's around the dams with the Gunneras and different plants growing. So, it depends on the season.*

So, your whole garden is designed to have something of interest and colour at all seasons, is what I'm hearing?

*Yes, at present one of the things I'm trying for is to have a garden that is very exciting during the middle of Winter, and I've been adding lots of coloured stem plants, grasses, a lot of New Zealand Carex, different colours and just to add more interest in the winter garden. But it's been more of an effort than I thought.*

So, all those lovely burgundies, the reds...

*Yes, and the black stems, the orange, the grasses and then the dried grass garden, it looks very good in the winter with the straw coloured leaves and the old flower heads, seed heads.*

Oh, the birds would love that.

*Yes, it all adds a bit of interest to the garden.*

It makes it fun to go out into, it's not like, 'Oh I have to go into the garden and it's not very interesting.'

*Oh no, and adding perfume to the garden. I've got a lot of perfume plants in the garden, and specially in Winter with the fragrant honeysuckle, the shrub honeysuckle, and also daphne all through the garden, and then any plants I can find that are perfumed, it doesn't matter what time of the year, I'll put it into the garden.*

It always gives a lovely feel to walk through a perfumed garden, it's very calming.

Yes.

So, do you have 3 favourite plants?

*Yes, I've been thinking about favourite plants. The Ginkos would have to be one of my favourites, hence we've got 7 or 8 of them near the house, but they're tip-pruned to look like giant bonsais and to enjoy the Autumn colour against the grey of the house.*

And what colour do they go?

*They go a bright yellow in Autumn, and I've always loved the Ginko. Another plant I love are the American Kalmias, a shrub. The ordinary Kalmia latifolia is the floral emblem of Pennsylvania, so we've got lots of varieties of Kalmias which are lovely. They flower in October.*

Do they have a perfume?

*No perfume, but an incredible flower, a lovely shrub.*

*The other one would be the Gunneras, around the edge of the dam.*

Yes, they're very architectural.

*Yes, I enjoy those. But there's a list of maybe 50.*

Yes, trying to identify the top 3 is hard, but I just had to ask, as every gardener is generally drawn to one or two or three plants that they just love and couldn't imagine a garden without them.

*Yes. Well the Ginko would have to be my favourite.*

What are your future plans for the garden?

*It's mainly maintaining the garden as it is now, replacing anything that might start to get a bit overgrown, but really, it's just maintenance. There are no other areas I want to develop. You're always changing bits and pieces and then all of a sudden something will turn up that you've just got to have, and so you've got to adjust the garden to fit it in.*

That's wonderful. So, Les, on behalf of the Australian Garden History Society for agreeing to this interview. However, before we conclude, are there any things about the garden that we haven't talked about today, or any experiences that you'd like to share with us?

*I don't think so, I'm not sure, all I would say is that I am constantly reading up on plants and then I will go out and if I can, find the plant and try it, but it's happening less and less now. Once you establish a garden and you're happy with it, I don't get excited over a lot of new plants, I like to see how they go in*

*other people's gardens, because there are a lot of plants that are released these days that are not as good as they're promoted in the beginning. So I like to get to know the plant first.*

You do a lot of work with the Botanic Gardens too, so that's a big interest of yours?

*Yes, and that introduces me to a lot of new plants. So there's always something coming up there that makes me think, 'Oh, I've got to try that.' On the whole I'm happy with the way the garden's turned out, and it's just a matter of maintaining the look that I wanted and being very strong to keep the open spaces, because that's one thing I'm very passionate about, is the amount of open space to set off other parts of the garden.*

Right, otherwise it could get very overcrowded and dark.

*Yes, I find a lot of gardens get overplanted and you can't appreciate the trees and the shrubbery that you have because there's no sort of breathing space, there's no relief from the plantings. So, the open space is just as important as the plants.*

Well, it's more relaxing. I can understand that.

Thank you again, it's been very interesting.

*Thank you.*

*Interview ends: 26 minutes 09 seconds*