

# AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

WEST AUSTRALIAN BRANCH



Photo by Patsy Vizents January, 2022

Interviewee:

**KINGSLEY DIXON**

Interviewer:

PATSY VIZENTS

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0:00

**Today is the 26<sup>th</sup> January, 2022. I am recording Kingsley Dixon on his recollections and research into Wyemando Nursery. Thank you for doing this Kingsley for the Australian Garden History Society and perhaps you can start with your introduction.**

Kingsley Dixon; I'm a Botanist and [I'm] 68 years old, I did my PhD at UWA and my Undergraduate there, and my Undergraduate, Postgraduate life and my research career is researching native plants.

So, my first contact with Wyemando was in the summer holidays of 1965/1966. I was then a 12-year-old and didn't have anything to do in my summer holidays so I would go with my father, who was the bulldozer driver for the West Midland Rubbish Dump. On the way between our house in Bayswater and the West Midland Rubbish Dump, we went past Guildford Grammar and out the front, there was a sign to a nursery, Wyemando Native Plant Nursery. I saw this day after day and finally built the courage up to ask my father, could I possibly stop there and he said, I'll drop you there in the morning and will pick you up at the end of the day, which was rather epic. I was fine, I had my lunch and if necessary, I'd just sit there somewhere so, in I walked, cold turkey, unannounced, and knocked on the back door, which was the entry to the main house. I remember Nan Harper came out. She was always the one that as a young child, I found her a little stern but it was just her wonderfully proper style, and all I remember was, she had her reading glasses on and she looked over her glasses and she just said "Yes!" looking down at this boy. I just said, Hi, I was hoping (hello then), I was hoping there might be something I could do around the Nursery. I didn't know what else to say.

It must have been very confronting to see this little person standing there wanting to work in the Nursery, I didn't want to be paid for it. We sort of hit it off and then Sue came to the door to see what was happening. I spent the day with them with potting mixes and all sorts of other things and I kept seeing all these wonderful native plants everywhere, things that I'd only known from the bush which you never saw in local nurseries.

I wasn't a precocious child, I was very shy but when it came to plants all bets were off because I just loved plants and clearly, *they* loved native plants. So, we just bonded immediately and they stayed life-long friends [with Kingsley] until they both died.

### **Where was it?**

So, it was between the Preparatory School of Guildford Grammar and the main school. So, sitting along Great Eastern Highway, between the two schools.

### **So, you could see it from Great Eastern Highway?**

Oh yes. . . It was a big property. So, they are the Granddaughters of Charles Harper who of course, set up a newspaper, set up Guildford Grammar, was a parliamentarian and they would have originally been in Woodbridge, but they probably would have been very small children, into the main house, that is

Woodbridge was actually a long time before that, and then a grand old Victorian house. Yes, so they were in a single storey, but very expansive fabulous early Federation house.

### **Do you know where that was?**

Yes, on Great Eastern Highway, the Federation house was, which is now – all the gardens are gone, most of the very significant trees of that fabulous garden have gone and it's now part of Guildford Grammar estate. So, it's just incorporated in that estate.

### **Sorry, carry on.**

So, those early days were extremely formative for me because I then started to learn propagation, soil mixes, native plant diversity and I could talk to people about native plants and I started to get exposed to Latin names which I found totally overwhelming, mystifying and it frightened me. I somehow thought this was a secret language that I will never understand because my grandparents and my parents loved the bush. We were always in the bush, always on picnics and they always used common names. That will be the sheoaks, kangaroo paws, blue bonnets it was always the common names, never ever the Latin names. Suddenly, not only were they talking in Latin names, but there were plant labels with Latin names on them.

5:56

And gradually when somebody is talking these names a lot, you begin to try to practice. That was really the toughest part of it. The rest of it like propagation and helping them out, it was hard and it was heavy work sometimes and particularly because I used to get into the garden and prune trees and all the rest of it, during the summer holidays. Then I kept turning up regularly. They never really got to know my parents, they were always only Aunty Nan and Aunty Sue. These two amazing women.

### **Aunty Nan?**

Aunty Nan and Aunty Sue.

### **Is that Nancy?**

Nancy and Susan. I then discovered lots of things about them and their passion for native plants. I saw their catalogues, which were fabulous. I've managed to see some of those catalogues to remind myself that this was right at decimalization, when we went decimal and there were plants for 8/- and 6/- [shillings] and so on, quite expensive plants. But that was some of the big container stock that they had. They had an extraordinary diversity of things, both western and some eastern states species and in the main garden around the house, I remember some of the impressive specimens they had. They had *Brachychiton acerifolium*, probably the biggest I've ever seen growing in the back garden; a gigantic plant. The plant that I fell in love with *Allocasuarina torulosa*, the beautiful weeping eastern sheoak which used to go the most hauntingly magenta colours. Plus, they had extraordinary rose

gardens and a big collection of exotic trees; the biggest Gingko I think in Perth at that stage, I'm not sure . . .

### **The biggest what?**

Gingko, the maiden hair tree. And they told me, this is the tree with knees which is the Taxodium with the wonderful autumn foliage from the Mississippi Delta. This was all part of opening my botanical knowledge because up until that stage, I had only had grandparents and parents who had great veggie gardens, grew lots of fruit trees and had a small shade house but the first impressions I had when I was walking through this front garden, I remember turning to the left and there was a vast green house; it was a lath house. It was enormous. Now we had a little shade house which was made with Zamia fronds on the top and vertical lath on the side, that was tiny. This was big and full of all these fabulous ferns and was really cool and I remember walking past this and going, gosh, this feels like a really nice place.

Gradually over time, I got to do more and more work in the fern house, mostly exotic species but it was still really interesting. In amongst there were two plants that I fell in love with. One was an orange crucifix orchid, I hadn't realized that I had orchid genes in my blood, but this was the awakening of those genes and they had Phaius tankervilleae which is the nun orchid from Australia. That became a very significant plant because it was undoubtedly brought over from the east as a plant by probably their great grandfather because they used to be widely found around Sydney. Now, they are a listed threatened species because it has been over collected. That original plant, I remember, I was in charge of dividing it and I did get a piece of it and today there are many dozens and dozens of pieces both in Kings Park and all over the place from the original Wyemando stock. But they were the plants that started to influence me.

It was the propagation and the general work around the nursery and that extraordinary diversity that I kept seeing that just impressed me so much. I wanted to go and find the magical places they were talking about like Lake Grace, and I'd never been there. We'd been out in the wheat belt a lot with my father, a professional poultry shower. So, we used to do all the near-by wheat belt shows; Beverley, York, Brookton shows, Armadale shows, showing chooks. But, we were always going to the show grounds, never to the bush, so if there was a little bit of bush, I'd be off having a look. I didn't know what I was looking at because as a young kid being interested in native plants, they were still clearing a million acres a year at that point,

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having an interest in bush-land plants was a little bit odd. But of course, in springtime, my parents would always go out and we would go out orchid hunting. We'd do the Wheatbelt and we would do the northern banksia woodlands, the sheoaks, and go for the white spider orchids and donkey orchids and all of those things. I always wondered why they never had bush orchids growing in their Nursery because in those days I didn't realise in those days, they were very complicated – at that stage, but we now know it's about mycorrhiza and a whole lot of stuff. Propagating from seed is really complicated and that's something I've done in my career.

But overall, I just thought the Nursery diversity was astonishing and bewildering and so bits and pieces from the Nursery started to appear in our garden in Bayswater. The very first plant I put in was a plant which I thought was the most bizarre gum tree I'd ever seen, which was the weeping princess, or silver princess, *Eucalyptus caesia*. We put this in and this thing launched up like crazy, and it's still there today. I think I got that plant in about 1968/1969, still there today, still growing, still flowering, a gigantic individual. They would have got that of course from Boyagin Rock, the original seed, saw the value of it, and grew that particular cultivar because it's a *caesia* with a number of subspecies, depending on which taxonomy you go by, but the silver princess is the dramatic, architectural, leaping *Eucalypt* which flowers almost the whole year.

### **What address is the Bayswater house?**

That's in 2 Lovell Way, Bayswater. They've still got that original tree growing on the north-eastern side.

### **It's worth going, driving by.**

Yeah, just to see one of the original Wyemando Nursery . . . Over the years, they followed my career, they were really supportive. We used to go to Wild Flower Society meetings from time to time together, and gradually I went on to do Botany at UWA, did a PhD, stayed in touch with them and then joined Kings Park. At that stage Wyemando clearly was struggling financially, it was a difficult gig. Two women setting out to set up a major native plant business; they weren't the first, but they were one of the earliest. They were still very early in the piece and remember, there weren't great demands for native plant tree scapes in civic plantings. There weren't the huge demands that are there today for restoration; they are knocking bush over because it was inexhaustible. So, I think it was always a financial struggle. I never understood that. But they still had a very loyal following and I think they clearly influenced the thinking of many people but simultaneously, the Lulfitz' had arrived and started working at Kings Park about 1965 and there was this almost underground movement of people who were passionate native plant growers and propagators and they found a venue and an outlet through the Wild Flower Society. Nan and Sue were not only in the [indistinct] Society but also the Darlington Branch of the Society and they were always regular people up there.

### **Can I ask you when they started the Nursery? Do you know?**

I thought it was somewhere around 1960, 1961.

### **That late?**

Yes . . . Late '50s, early '60s. There were the three sisters; Nancy, Cecily. Cecily was only occasionally at the Nursery when I was working there, but Nan and Sue certainly; it was their life.

### **Did they have an interest in the Wild Flower Society before the Nursery started?**

Don't know, we didn't talk a lot about that because there were other things we were talking about as well. They had this very keen interest, having both been trained nurses and seeing the disadvantaged indigenous children, they started to develop interests, in addition to their native plant interests in Aboriginal child health. So, I started listening to them, because for me as a young kid, I didn't know anything about Aboriginal people, didn't know an Aboriginal word, didn't know the extraordinary health issues, particularly with young children and babies. They did, they saw it so, Sue went back and got further training and was working in the Midland area trying to help Noongar children with very serious health issues. So, I actually became involved in that. I became I think, the youngest card-holding member of what was called the New Era Aboriginal Fellowship – NEAF, which they set up and they ran from their house and had a whole group of people. I remember helping them with the printing machine; print off Roneo sheets for posting out. But I didn't talk about it at home, no one was really that interested, it certainly wasn't something that you spoke about at school, so this was something that influenced me in my early life and has stayed with me ever since. Extraordinary and impressive women and when you remember that they both lost their fiancées in World War Two, and, I suspect as a result, never married. People ask did they ever speak much about the old days? I think the old days for people like that, were times you didn't want to remember. They lost brothers and fiancées in two world wars, history wasn't a very pleasant place to be.

### **They would have been born in the 1920s?**

Yep, very early.

17:28

They always stayed very connected to the bush and when they sold up Wyemando, or sold back to Guildford Grammar, they then moved to Darlington, set up a big native plant garden and my time at Kings Park, we were working on a whole range of things like native rushes and sedges [indistinct], we cracked the difficult propagation, so I was always dropping by with spare propagations and they started having lots of these things in their garden which was really great. I was giving back to them a little of what they gave to me. I'm not certain, it's long-since sold and what's happened to that garden is unclear.

### **I'm going to ask, do you have an address for that?**

I don't have the number but it was in Alpike Street in Darlington, on the upside of the hill and it would be fairly obvious, you'd see some remnant native plants. But I remember visiting them and greatly concerned when they said, have a look at what we've got, we've got a camper van. I knew Sue, who did all the driving had a lead foot. They used to have this little Subaru and they used to roar around Perth. I remember, they roared passed us once on Riverside Drive and I said, that's Nan and Sue. It looked like Nan was holding on for dear life with Sue driving. So, they got the camper van and they went off exploring the countryside and looking at native plants. We used to share great stories of wildflower country.

That was towards the end of their time in being mobile but what a great way to finish what I think was an extraordinary contribution to Western Australian life, to Western Australian nurseries, to our native plants and conservation and to indigenous communities. They are both buried in Guildford Cemetery and I went to both funerals. It was a very sad time for me because it was the passing of a very extraordinary time. I was just so thrilled that they were able to influence my life in such a positive and supportive way that had I not walked through that front gate in 1966 . . . Maybe I would have got to the same spot, I think I got there a lot faster with greater and more compelling tutors.

**That sounds absolutely fabulous because at the time when you, you've mentioned at the time there was no real interest in West Australian native plants,**

That's right.

**There they were, and they probably went, oh my goodness, he's interested, yes, come on board.**

Yes, because there's nothing taught in any schools so you wouldn't know anything. It was all very invisible. I still reflect on all sorts of plants that . . . I remember they had *Marsilea drummondii*, this is an aquatic fern, it grows in rock pools in the arid zones. All the time I was looking at this thing and thinking, oh my gosh, it's a four-leaf clover and I'd heard about four-leaf clover from Ireland but never a native version. Of course, it's not a clover it's a fern. There were plants that, and I still grow it today, and different species too to what they had.

**In the bush tucker context that we just use as a side line, in Wyemando, did they actually have a section . . .**

No. No not at all. These were all ornamentals. Conservation was not a high issue at that time so native species were about gardens and gardening. Bird-friendly gardens hadn't really been invented at that stage, it was just fabulous diversity. I remember one of my first tasks was being in charge of planting the bury them half way in soil. Then I watched as the little radical came out and up came this little thing. Little did I know that if any of them were still alive today, they would still only be quite small plants because they are very slow growing. They just collected these things even though they were plants of the local bushland. So, they were really good at getting out and about and growing even common bushland plants that we took for granted. They were well ahead of their time as those common bushland plants are now mostly gone from urban reserves.

22:56

**Were they feted by people like The Wildflower Society, were they asked to talk about their exp [eriences?]**

Nan and Sue were very modest and withdrawn so they were never self-promoting. Always supportive of native plants, always quietly working in the background.



### **Not like the Naturalists Club?**

No. They did put on displays in early Kings Park Wildflower Festivals, it used to be called the Wildflower Display when it used to be on Fraser Avenue in a big hessian square tent, with lots of wild picked flowers, because that was what happened in those days. They had a couple of years where they exhibited and I managed to find in Kings Park, in the skip bin, the Wyemando Nursery sign that they would have used and forgot to pick up. So, I've still got that. So that's an important momento of Wyemando Nursery, in fact I think other than the catalogue, the only material item remaining from that Nursery period.



photograph taken by Sue Monger at the AGHS WA presentation on Wyemando Nursery by Kingsley Dixon, 6 October, 2021 in Guildford.

**Would you mind if I use that photograph, which I think was taken at the talk you gave, I do have a copy, and put that in the [transcription].**

Yes, yes.

**Oh it's a beautiful thing.**

Yes. At the time I took it home; what do you want that for? Because it was the Nursery that I went to.

**You knew.**



I knew, yes and it's a marvellous *Banksia menziesii* painted with I guess, Dulux paint, but brilliantly done back then. So, they had wonderful sign writers.

**You mentioned particular trees that were at the Nursery, did anything remain after Guildford Grammar took over?**

I guess I was a little shocked at how the whole garden was demolished and the rose garden is gone, the fern house is gone, the *Brachychiton* 'Illawarra Flame Tree', I think they would be fairly crestfallen to see the way that really fabulous garden has been so changed. Certainly, there are no remnants from what I understand of any of the old Nursery structures.

**It's a shame, that fernery sounded fantastic. Was it large?**

Yeah. It was the size of a suburban house. Big, big rectangular thing. You walked in one end and it had a path that meandered and there were big *Blechnums* and creeping ferns and native hair ferns all over the place, mountains of water being sprayed everywhere of course.

**And they were relatively close to the Swan River.**

They were set up high, so they were on heavy clays which are always difficult. They complained about that because the really good stuff was down on the flood plain which was right at the foot. That's where you could grow the most extraordinary gardens but you had to be prepared for the regular inundation [laughs]. So, gardening up there was difficult. I was always raised on *Banksia* sandplain so I found this clay stuff completely bemusing as a kid. I thought it was rather fun.

**So, you were aged 12? Did you continue there through your high school years?**

So, I kept in touch with them, I kept getting dropped off there, not that frequently. It was difficult, particularly when Dad moved jobs and from time to time, I caught the train to Guildford and then walked up there. I must say, it was a pretty long trip which was, getting to the station at Bayswater or Bassendean, train, and then walking all the way, I do remember some of the walking . . .

**Hard going in summer.**

Yes. But there was always the reward of the scene at the end.

27:38

**I'm grateful for you to talk about it. Have you got any other thing that . . .**

Oh, I think it's important to reflect that they were important in some of the amazing plants that we still have today and the one that really comes to mind was, they mentioned to me because they had a place called Mardoo, which was the Busselton beach house on Geographe Bay, so that was the Harper summer holiday house. I never went there but north facing on the Bay. That's where a local farmer took them

to his cow paddock where there was the famous pink *Anagozanthus flavidus*, the green kangaroo paw but a bright pink variant. That has of course, given us a whole lot of amazing hybrids. I still grow some of those pink hybrid ones today. They are really quite astonishing. So, I think they were really important for that. They were important for bringing in lots of Eastern States correas, the little bells. They really liked them. And I can now look back and go, yeah, that's because they were green, soft leaved and pretty flowered.

I also remember and counted up in one of their catalogues, 21 species of Eucalypts. Sure, we've got 600 species here, but it's a pretty good effort by any stretch of the imagination. And the plant I thought was fabulous, and was thrilled to see it growing in the wild on one of our summer holidays, rare summer holidays to Augusta, was the grey melaleuca, *Melaluca incana*. A tall shrub with big weeping grey foliage with little terminal creamy white flowers. That was one of their premier plants that everybody wanted. It grows in Busselton area so that's where they would have got theirs.

### **Does it grow here [Augusta]?**

And it grows all around Augusta in the wetter areas. It's a lovely thing and now there's a dwarf variant grown almost as a cushion plant.

So, extraordinary diversity, Australian plants but mainly Western Australian, great propagators. I never got to share at their nursery, the discovery of smoke for germination because that was to come in 1995, by which days, they had long-since exited the Nursery business. But they followed the smoke discovery and were so thrilled because that meant germinating plants they could never germinate.

We continued talking and sharing botanical knowledge always until they were in Aged Care.

**Well, I hope that they are acknowledged for their contribution because the more we become aware and value the native plants, but this whole thing about importing and bringing [in] and Nurserymen that have been part of our European history, is quite amazing.**

And they came of course, from the landed gentry; the very wealthy end of town. But it's fascinating that they had such a connection to the bush and to indigenous communities in the most astonishing way. They invested much of the family fortune in setting up the Meerilinga Trust, were great supporters then of a very young PhD student called Fiona Stanley. So, they invested in the Meerilinga Foundation which, part of what that was about was rediscovering language as a way of rebuilding their fractured and broken societies. Which of course is fundamental. If you don't have a language base and you are using someone's borrowed language, you are really denying your heritage. So, they were well ahead of the curve in realising that language was a fundamental part of rebuilding stronger indigenous communities.

32:19

### **Can I ask you to spell Meerilinga?**

M-e-e-r-i-l-i-n-g-a, Meerilinga. They are still going today but Nan and Sue invested heavily in setting this up.

Fantastic. Well thank you very much, I do appreciate that.

Interview ended: 33 minutes 4 seconds