

**AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY  
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**TASMANIA BRANCH**



Interviewee: **TARA EDMONDSON**  
Interviewer: Jean Elder  
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Tara Edmondson, Australian Garden History  
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interviewed 21 March 2022 by Jean Elder.

0:00

**This is an interview with Tara Edmondson who is being interviewed about her role as Estate Gardens Manager, Office of the Governor, Government House, Hobart, a position she has held since 2019, having first joined the gardening team there in 2004. The interview is taking place on Monday 21 March 2022 in the Conservatory at Government House, and as part of the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Program. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our sound recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.**

**Tara, can you please state your full name and date of birth.**

Tara Mary Edmondson. Born on the 20th August 1979.

**Wow. So, you grew up on Tasmania's East Coast in the town of Orford, and you describe your childhood as being one of lots of outdoor exploring coastlines and lots of bushwalking. Can you tell us more about these early days and what your gardening family and gardening friends were at that point?**

Yeah that's correct. I grew up in Orford on Tasmania's East Coast, from a large family. I'm one of five children and we spent so much of our time outdoors, particularly on the beaches. My father's a very keen fisherman. We spent a lot of time in the bays around Triabunna and exploring Maria Island.

My parents were keen gardeners. No formal qualifications but they built two homes in Orford, and they were very hands-on. They did everything. My dad was involved with putting up fences and laying driveways. My mum had a natural ability to design gardens and she had quite a flair for plant selection, and they laid out some lovely gardens there in Orford.

But I think the biggest horticultural influence in my early childhood came from family friends who lived in Triabunna, Gwen and Puck Vaughan. During the school holidays we would spend a lot of time at their house. They had a large property, were self-sufficient. They grew a lot of produce for their own family and friends and also they had extensive ornamental gardens as well. Gwen was very keen on growing cut flowers. They had a small vineyard. Gwen was also a landscape artist and we would often go on walks into the bushland or again on the coast, and she would paint scenes. We'd also collect orchids from time to time and she would take those home to create botanical illustrations. So they were absolutely my motivation I think and my inspiration behind pursuing a career in horticulture. I think they drew my attention to small details and encouraged observation of the environment.

**And obviously your love of cut flowers and growing fruit and vegies.**

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

**3:56 So, beginning your horticultural career in 2000 you began an apprenticeship with the city of Hobart. Tell us about that.**

That's right. So, I was very keen early on to pursue a career as a gardener. I had, prior to working in the industry, I was working in hospitality and I started some evening classes. I then around the summer of '98-'99, did some work for

a local wholesale nursery and that really cemented the choice that I'd made, and I was very keen to pursue further education. And at that time an apprenticeship with the Hobart City Council was offered and I was, yeah, fortunate enough to get that job and it was based in their nursery actually, in Warrane, and we grew all of the street trees, annual bedding plants, ornamentals, perennials for the parks and gardens throughout the city of Hobart.

So, it was a great introduction and a variety of plants we were growing there which, yeah, introduced me to so many wonderful plants. And again, inspiring me to continue further. I was also given the opportunity whilst working there to do some work within the Town Hall, working as an urban vegetation officer from time to time, and that offered a different perspective of the role of the council and I was able to be involved with some street tree planning and also taking a few complaints from ratepayers, you know, with overhanging vegetation issues and those types of daily interactions that the council have with the general public.

**Was the Significant Tree Register established at that time, or that came later?**

It was established at that time.

**Yes. In terms of trying to protect trees, the significant trees in Hobart, including the trees here at Government House because then they get lodged on the Local Government Planning Scheme as well, which affords them greater protection than just being listed somewhere.**

That's correct. So, the introduction of the Significant Tree Register was to raise awareness around the significance of trees and their importance within the urban environment and they've attached that to the Hobart City Council's Building Application process, and that was a really important thing I thought, for the Government House Estate to be registered with.

And so, we've been working on that over the last twelve months, identifying particular significant trees, those of significant age and size, but also unusual varieties, species that aren't common within the Hobart area and we're moving through that process now and are hopeful that we can have quite a few of our trees (we have over 400 mature trees here) and many of them would align with the criteria that meets the significance.

**The Trees Register.**

Yes.

**7:47 Before coming to asking about when you joined the garden staff at Government House, I thought I might just introduce a little ... the house and gardens. The Government House and gardens in Hobart have been described as one of the best examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century English landscaping in Australia and now, 165 years after the gardens were first laid out by William Thomas, they feature avenues dominated by mature evergreen trees as you've described Tara, over 400 mature trees with vistas to the River Derwent and the lake, which was originally the quarry site for the sandstone used in building Government House, a neo-gothic**

**style, early Victorian country house. The gardens, as we look around, still retain the elements of a country estate with surrounding paddocks, formal gardens, kitchen garden and a flower picking garden and much more.**

**So in 2004, Tara, you were employed as the first female gardener at the Office of the Governor. This must have been a very exciting time for you, as a young woman to join the gardening team. Tell us about that. Take yourself back to 2004. What was it like? What were the first things you got involved in at this time?**

Yeah it was an exciting time. My apprenticeship with the Hobart City Council had finished and it was their practice to then introduce new apprentices into their educational programs, so the job I got here was well-timed. I couldn't wait to get started actually. The role was primarily in the food production area, but I was also involved with cut flowers and one of the areas that I had to look after was a rose garden. And then in addition I did work in the Quarry Pond Gardens as well, maintaining the ornamental beds there.

**So how many gardeners were there at that time when you joined?**

At that time, I think there would have been seven gardeners, and at that time in contrast to now, all of the gardeners were employed full-time.

**Describe the kind of routine that happened then, and you said you were in charge of some of the productive garden and the rose garden. Were the roles assigned?**

It's always been the case that gardeners quite independently manage their areas and then from time to time when there is larger project work, we get together and do teamwork. Steve Percival was the Garden Manager at that time. And the garden, actually when I took over there hadn't been anyone in that role for around six months. So as you can imagine, there was a lot to be done. There was organising of new plantings to be done, to prepare beds, and talking with the kitchen to liaise and find out the types of foods that they were wanting to receive and the types of quantities as well.

There's always been food production on the Government House Estate and that has evolved, depending on the demands of the kitchen, but also the community more broadly. The garden bed that I took over is still in that current position, was moved in the 1980s. And it was during a period of rationalisation and where traditionally Government House would have produced large quantities of staple type produce; potatoes, carrots, peas and brassicas. We've now moved to growing a much larger range of produce and in smaller quantities that the kitchen can cope with as they've got confined spaces, as well as their storage ability.

**Because historically the gardens have produced for all sorts of occasions. The Patriotic Garden was used during the war? Was that right?**

That's correct. During the Second World War the western paddock, which runs along the boundary of the Lower Domain Road, was in produce to assist in the war relief. The gardens have also provided food and still continue to provide

food for community organisations, charitable groups and we were able to continue that during all this Covid 19 pandemic. Excess produce that we had as a result of reduced functions and events at Government House itself were able to be distributed out to the community.

**13:00 That's great. The gardens, in terms of changing, sustainable horticultural practice, what has happened of recent ... I'm thinking more of climate change and how that's impacting on the garden? Is that meaning different ways of working?**

Yeah that involves quite various elements. We are conscious of the climate change and needing to improve some of our practices and that has included the types of products that we use on the site. Moving towards softer chemical applications and combining cultural and biological controls in conjunction with softer chemical applications. We've been renovating the food production space particularly over the last five years to include soil regeneration – that area having been used for decades, you know, the soil's quite exhausted so we're just trying to add a lot of nutrient value, biologicals back into the soil there – resting and cover cropping and those types of practices in that space as well.

There is a need, as we think about planning towards the future, to perhaps increase our canopy cover and particularly the area that we're looking at over the eastern arboretum towards the Tasman Bridge here. That space has been on my mind for development into the near future. We've recently installed an irrigation system. Historically there was no irrigation in that space, and we were dragging around sprinklers and hoses to try and establish new plantings. So we now have an irrigation system there which covers the plantings that we have already and, of course, we can add onto that as we increase the plantings. I'd like to think that we can start with a natural, native-type planting closer to the highway and River Derwent and bring that back to the exotic plantings that we currently have.

**Going back to the horticultural practices. Do you use the biological, the insects and things to control scale – like ladybird bugs to eat the white fly and things like that? Do you do any those?**

We haven't purchased insects with the purpose of pest control but – the using less chemicals and you know – encouraging cultural practices, of course builds up the beneficial insects and that's what we've been trying to do.

**Yes, that's the approach.**

Yes.

**I want to just ask you about the visitors over the years. You've had many famous visitors come to the gardens, including the Queen who came and planted the two magnificent Blue Gums, one of which has suffered a little but they're still going strong, and they were planted in 1954 or '63?**

Her Majesty the Queen has been here three times. We have an oak on the main drive that was planted in '53 ... sorry that was '54. In 1963 they visited with Prince Philip and planted two eucalypts on our southern terrace. They are quite dominating in the view, looking down the River Derwent. And then they

were back again for our Bicentenary and planted some native plants in our native garden – Huon Pine and a Blackwood and a Myrtle.

**17:30 And over the years there have been some amusing incidents. I do remember you describing once an ambassador visiting, or word had come that the ambassador was coming back to visit, but unfortunately the tree that had been planted earlier had suffered somewhat. Can you tell us that story?**

That was an amusing story for the garden staff particularly. We had an important ambassador here – there was a lot of security around his visit – and we planted a tree, actually into a pot under a marquee tent, which was then later planted out on the grounds. The area that it was planted was particularly harsh and perhaps in hindsight the plant chosen wasn't entirely appropriate and it did suffer over a summer period with drought and eventually died. We received notice that there would be another visit by this ambassador to Government House and very quickly we ran around and removed the sad dying tree and replaced it with a new one. And it was commented in his speech in the Government House Ballroom during his visit that the tree was flourishing like our relationship with his home country. [laughter]

**Excellent. Well saved. [laughter]**

**I'd like to talk to you now about 2016 when you were instrumental in the design and construction of what is now known as Lahaye's garden at Government House – this being a recreation of the lost 18<sup>th</sup> century vegetable garden established at Recherche Bay by Lahaye when the French expedition under the command of D'Entrecasteaux, where he sheltered there after being blown off course in a fierce storm. Anyway, tell us about this project. How did it come about and why did you choose the eastern paddock as a location for this garden?**

Sure. The food production space in the lead up to 2016, we had been developing and opening that space up to the public more for tours and increasing the types of produce that we were growing and focussing a little bit on heirloom varieties. The previous governor, Professor Kate Warner, was really inspired and loved the Recherche Bay story of the French explorers coming here and planting out an experimental vegetable garden, and it was her that asked that we represent that piece of history here within the grounds of the Estate.

I was certainly conscious at that time that I didn't want to impact on the existing landscape. One of our best attributes here in the garden is that it remains in its very original state, and I didn't want a French vegetable garden to impact on that, so we did choose an area on the Estate that was quite remote, along the boundary on the east, sort of north-eastern paddock with the Botanical Gardens. But it was still in line with our existing production spaces, so that ease of maintenance and tapping into irrigation systems – it was all very handy in that site.

**And you laid it out in the French style with four stone-walled gardens?**

That's correct. There is some controversy around the alignment of the French vegetable garden at Recherche Bay and if, in fact, what was discovered in 2003 during a process of getting World Heritage recognition of that site. The alignment that I chose to use was that that was discovered by Bob Brown and other conservationists during that 2003 period and was reported to be the lost French garden of Recherche Bay. So that was what I chose to recreate here but it is an imagined recreation. We don't have enough research available to be able to confirm all of the detail. The garden, you know, is quite small. It's just a modest vegetable garden and we were able to represent other elements of the history of that site through the design.

So not only do we have the stone alignment, the four quadrants depicted at Recherche Bay, but we were able to incorporate the interactions between the French explorers and the Aboriginal community and we represented those by using native grasses that were common to that area and we encircled those around the French vegetable garden. Many of those grasses were also collected by Labillardiere and Lahaye and the other naturalists. They were on D'Entrecasteaux's expedition and taken back to Paris. So they're really important in terms of the herbarium specimens that were taken back and the collections that the French were able to depict.

**And Labillardiere ended up having one of the grasses named after him?**

Yeah, the common Poa we put just inside the fence as recognition of his role in the expedition.

**And you sourced some French seeds to plant the actual vegetables?**

That's correct. A really fascinating part of the story for me was the seed story. Tons of seed were brought here and broadcast through other stops on the way to Recherche Bay. They were supplied by a company that still exists – Vilmorin Seed Company – and they supply agricultural quantities of seed throughout Europe. We were able to, through a recent publication of the lost garden at Recherche Bay and also an industry friend, Richard Weston, who owns a farm out in Brighton. He was already importing some of the seed and so between us we were able to cross-reference the list that originally was purchased for the D'Entrecasteaux expedition, and we were able to come up with a list then of our own. Varieties that were still available that we could then plant in our garden here. We did have some quarantine issues and, of course, the variety list is much reduced in the last 200 years. So we came up with a list that we felt were popular in use in France at that time.

**Are there any of those vegetables used by the Head Chef?**

Yeah absolutely. So, the produce that comes out of the French garden, we do continue to grow the Vilmorin varieties, and it becomes a part of the whole system of produce that's available for the kitchen for use. Regularly, and mostly at the beginning of the week, the gardeners in that production space are liaising with the kitchen about how the produce can be used, upcoming quantities of produce and the French garden produce becomes a part of that list as well. It has become an area as well that we can include as the gardens open up and we have more community interactions. It has also become part of the education as well throughout the produce space.

**26:41 That's wonderful.**

**We've talked a bit about when you were promoted, the work you've done since 2019 when you became the Estate Gardens Manager and we've talked a little bit about preparing for climate change now that that's really upon us. What are the issues, that Hobart, being the second driest capital city in Australia – there are issues of water. This obviously must be forefront of your mind. What's happening with the water planning?**

It has been on my mind, yes. We've, like a lot of large estates, need to prepare ourselves for drier climates but also a climate that presents large rainfall followed by periods of drought. Something that I've been really wanting to improve during my short time as Manager is improving our irrigation systems. Many of our systems were still manual-operated and also many of the systems actually didn't cover the entire area of the beds that they were intending to be. We did a lot of hand-watering. We moved, dragged a lot of hoses around to connect in sprinklers and laying soaker hoses down which I just felt was so inadequate. They were really band-aid measures, trying to get plants, trees through the summer periods particularly. So we have done a lot of work extending lines, improving systems, automating systems, and getting water to areas of the garden that didn't previously have it.

There are other things that I would love to be able to achieve here in the garden in terms of water storage and our use of water. We don't have any rain tanks for instance. Our previous spring was very wet, and it would have been wonderful to be able to capture some of that water because now in the later stages of summer, heading into autumn the garden is very dry and we're doing some heavy irrigating there. We're connected to the mains town supply water for Hobart, and I think there's also room there to be able to connect into recycled water that actually travels straight past the Government House main gates. And one day it would be, yeah, a bit of a dream of mine to be able to connect into that and use recycled water throughout areas of the Estate, but within the requirements and usages around recycled water.

I already spoke about increasing canopy cover as well to be able to cool the site and also increase our succession planting. It goes towards future-proofing for storms and water flow through the Estate and also, soil health more generally right through the whole Estate. You know, if we can have a soil that's able to hold some of that water rather than losing it, it's so important as well.

**30:28 Just before we move on.**

**In talking about succession planning with the very significant old trees that do reach the end of their life – are there issues around that in terms of replacing those trees or alternative trees that are going to be more sustainable in the longer term? What happens around that? Have you had recent debates over some of the old trees?**

We have a Tree Report that I use to program tree work throughout the Estate, and it documents the health and life expectancy of many of our trees and unfortunately the majority of the trees that have been planted, even in the last 50 years, have been those for ceremonial plantings to recognise visiting



dignitaries. We've not done really the amount of planting that we should have to fill the gaps that we're going to see in the next 100 years. Many of our oaks and elms in particular, are you know, 180, 160 years old, so perhaps what we're seeing and what we're experiencing now is the trees at their very best for the next 50-80 years, and we certainly need to be doing some more planning and securing money, funding, budget to be able to do those large-scale plantings that I believe we need.

**32:16 Another big project you're working on is redevelopment of the Quarry Pond Garden. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?**

That was a project that's been going on for many years now actually. It was Steve Percival, previous Head Gardener, who began really the large-scale weed removal in that area. There was a lot of blackberries, cotoneasters, vinca, you know, all the nasties that he started removing, and literally truckloads were taken out of there. The next Head Gardener, Ben Essex, he continued that project and he started focussing more on the ornamental beds and continuing that removal of vinca, and thinking about future plantings. And it was Ben that engaged local landscape architect, Lindsay Campbell, who came in and offered his advice and recommendations in terms of the concepts around the planting style and subsequent planting lists that then, during my time, we have planted out.

So, there's been a lot of work. The weed removal continued, the irrigation system was completely upgraded to an automatic system, and we also had to re-establish some of the stone walls, renovate garden paths. There was also a lot of tree work that had to happen throughout that space as well. There's many old eucalypts and pines, cedars that needed dead wooding before we could really get in there and start doing that work at the ground level actually. And we've now planted over a thousand new ornamentals and yeah, continue to develop that space.

There was a lot of thought about the style of planting that we should have down there and we chose, with Lindsay Campbell, to recognise the earlier plantings of our Tasmanian Tree Ferns. So we've increased our collection of those within the plantings. And also, calmed down the plantings in terms of their floral showiness and chosen plants that are actually much more about their foliage colour and softening the space, and perhaps drawing attention to the beautiful views rather than showy specimen plants.

**35:15 So it's a whole new concept really.**

I think it's really taken it back to what was intended actually, rather than the subsequent plantings that have happened. So often the garden beds have been managed by many different gardeners over the years and their own styles and tastes can be passed onto the plantings. There was a lot of variation and a lot of different varieties of plants that were being grown in that space and we've simplified it a lot – reduced the amount of plant species chosen and really chosen to create a space that ...

**It seems that it's a landscape design that you're drawing on the history a bit of that area too which is wonderful. When I said a new concept, it is actually drawing on the history as well.**

Absolutely. Governor Weld, very early on, was so excited and fascinated with our own Tasmanian fern species and it was him, with diary entries that were recognised by Professor Kate Warner in her writing of the history of Government House, that we chose to draw on those chronicled histories and reflect that in the new planting and, you know, it's wonderful for the garden to have a story and a depth behind the decisions that we're making.

**37:04 Indeed. Now I want to talk a bit about Government House being opened to the public and the community interest. Because I look back over our Australian Garden History Society newsletter, *Blue Gum*, and in 2011 – well over that period there were a series of articles – and one of them goes back in history, and it wasn't until 1989 that the public were allowed in Government House. So since that time the respective governors have opened more and more frequently and now probably this is the era where the gardens are being more widely used than ever before. Can you talk about what's the kind of community involvement at this point?**

Community involvement with the garden, particularly, has evolved quite slowly. I think, in my opinion, it was the late Governor Peter Underwood that perhaps first talked about opening up the gardens. Not only to showcase our colonial history and Government House itself, but also the opportunity for Government House to be involved as an educational resource. And that was certainly backed up during Professor Kate Warner's time at Government House. We traditionally offered a Government House Open Day and that was an annual event. It was decided to reduce that to a biennial event but then include in the Government House program regular tours. And we started out with an Ornamental Garden tour which was a monthly tour offered to the public. And we then extended that into more focussed tours – our Significant Tree tour and then also the Garden Produce tour. And they've all been received really well. They're very popular. They often book out prior to those tours.

There was also, in 2019, we intended to introduce a new event to the Government House calendar and that was a Winter Series of horticultural speakers. And this was another way for Government House to connect with the gardening community of Tasmania through a series of lectures that we would host in the Government House Ballroom. Unfortunately, we were hit with Covid and it's only now this year [2022] that we are able to offer that again. And I do hope that into the future we can continue to do that. I think there's room within that space to extend what Government House are doing as well. We have a huge variety of plants, of horticultural techniques that have been practised here that we can offer perhaps professional development for people who are already in the industry, with our own staff hosting events or offering the space for industry professionals to come here and offer educational experiences to the public. I think there is a lot of room there.

**To build on. Government House horticultural practices are a huge resource.**

Absolutely.

**41:00 Coming back just to the day-to-day world of working in this garden. Do you have a favourite time of the year, of being in the garden?**

Favourite time of the year? We are just now heading into autumn and I do love this time of the year. It feels the pressure of summer and keeping up with the maintenance slows down. I love the changing of the autumn colour throughout the garden and we have a wonderful, shared backdrop looking over to the north to the Botanical Gardens. There's a stillness in the garden in autumn that I love and looking over the river some days it can be, it's a beautiful view right through the Estuary. Springtime is incredibly vibrant. The garden beds are full of colour and leading into spring, sorry, into summer, we've got magnolias and camellias flowering and lots of bulbs coming, sort of emerging through the garden beds as well. So that's an incredibly vibrant time but if I was to think about my favourite time it's probably now as the garden becomes quieter and we lead into that slumber of winter.

**I think that's so often the favourite time. What is it? "Seasons of mist and mellow fruitfulness" [laughs] – the famous poem.**

**You talked about the Botanic Gardens. Is there a close relationship between Government House and the Botanic Gardens? How does that work?**

Both organisations are actually quite separate in that they're managed by different departments. But of course they're our neighbours and we do have some interactions. We often buy plants from them through their plant stalls that they have and their tomato sales, particularly at the beginning of the growing season. I go to their managers for advice about management of the garden here also and, only recently, we've decided to have a co-hosted garden tour event which will include their Royal Botanical Garden's French Reconciliation Garden and it will lead into our Lahaye's Garden produce area. So that will be the first time, that I'm aware, that we've collaborated on a tour program.

**That sounds exciting. They might be the beginning of many more.**

Yeah, I hope so.

**44:20 Finally Tara, I want to ask you whether there is anything else you wanted to cover and then I want to ask about your own garden at home which I gather is totally different? But tell me are there any other areas you would like to add to our conversation?**

I think if I look forward to the future of the gardens, we have to encourage greater community interactions and I hope that we can continue to develop our tour programs and the types of experiences that Government House can offer. That community appreciation of the gardens goes such a long way towards the conservation of the Estate as a whole and yeah, I really hope that we can continue to encourage more people to Government House, and it becomes perhaps part of their own life stories, you know, visiting Government House regularly and I think it's still in some ways seen as a closed space that only dignitaries visit and I really hope we can expand that opinion of the gardens.

**Make it much more accessible.**

Yeah.

**Because you're right, in the long-term if more people know and understand and appreciate it they're more likely to want the garden being financially able to be supported long-term.**

**Now, come to your garden, your home garden. Having the great responsibility of looking after a historic garden, and then what do you have at home?**

My garden is quite a contrast to the Estate garden here at Government House. Our house is a cottage built in the 1960s and my family and I, we sort of love the aesthetic of mid-century modern design and I think we've reflected that in the way that we've redesigned the garden, introducing lots of gravel gardens and rocks in the landscaping and also a lot of ornamental grasses, succulents, and even cactuses. I love that desert, modern aesthetic. But I'm not restrained enough to be able to fully ... [laughs]. I line the garden with ... I'm too tempted at the nurseries to buy more and more [laughter].

**So, have a great diversity instead.**

Yeah that's right and we're in Richmond. It's an arid zone to grow a garden and we're influenced by very dry summers and very cold, frosty winters. And I think that suits the palette – the plant selection that I've chosen. And maybe it's a way that Australian gardens will move. Rather than showcasing perhaps European-style spring gardens, you know, maybe we'll recognise the aesthetic beauty of a late summer garden.

**I think that is going to be the future, given climate change – less water, more extremes.**

Yeah.

**We're going to see different kinds of gardens.**

**Well, thank you so much Tara for your time and for contributing to our Oral History Program.**

Thank you.

*Recording ends 48 minutes.*

*Interview ends.*