

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

TASMANIAN BRANCH



Photographer: Amanda Kay

Interviewee:	CATHERINE SHIELDS
Interviewer:	Jean Elder
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0:00

[JE] This is an interview with Catherine Shields recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking about her life and work as a garden landscape designer. The interview's taking place on Monday the 12th of September 2022 in Hobart, Tasmania. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.

So, welcome Catherine. My first question to you is just to tell us about your early years. Where were you born, and in which year were you born?

[CS] Yep, sure. I was born in 1963, in the north of England, in the sort of, cultural wastelands of suburban England. A long way from here.

When I was born it was just Mum and I, so for the first seven years my father wasn't with us and she got married when I was seven. So, for seven years it was just Mum and I, and we lived in one of those very classic little British two-up, two-down houses, back yard, no garden at all. So, I didn't have any really – oh, that's not true actually – my grandparents had a lovely garden and my grandfather had a huge allotment, which was often what they did during the war when they grew a lot of food for themselves. So, they still had their allotment and so I do remember being with grandad in the allotment.

Was that a shared community one?

It wasn't, actually, that one, it was theirs. But they must have produced a lot of produce from it. And granny's family lived close by so I'm sure they shared the produce around.

So, did this start your love of gardens or did that come later?

No. [Laughs] No, I was pretty resistant to gardening. As I grew up – when Mum got married when I was seven and we then moved into a very classic, sort of, suburban situation, with a small front garden and a slightly larger back garden. It was a very northern British situation and Mum would have tried to get me to garden but I hated weeding. I wasn't interested at all.

So, I didn't get interested in gardening until I went to university and had my own garden. And then I suddenly, it was like somebody had pressed a button and I suddenly became really passionate.

About gardens?

About gardening.

But what I did have when I was growing up was, Mum, she was a country lover, really. Even though we lived in, you know, big sprawling towns, she took us out to the countryside as often as she could. I can remember picking bilberries on the moors and learning about the birds and the wildflowers. And so, I had a love of landscape and the natural environment from a very, very young age. Through Mum.

A wonderful backdrop growing up then?

Yes.

And then you started at university in physics, and then made the switch to landscape design. How did that come about?

Mm, I did. I actually started in medicine, and that was obviously not for me, and then I switched to physics at Manchester University. And I quite enjoyed physics. It was a great degree. It was an exciting time to be at Manchester. The nightclubs were great. It was the time of The Hacienda and it was a really very vibrant city – still is. But physics, I did physics, quite enjoyed it but it wasn't going to lead to anything that I really wanted to do. Back then it really led to research or, computing was in its early days. I got a job as a computer programmer but that wasn't ever going to be for me. And I was a bit floundering around after I finished my degree and I ended up, very luckily, getting a job as an administrator for the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. And I believe there's an Australian organisation over here that does the same sort of work.

And we took unemployed people into, sometimes the countryside, sometimes more inner-city areas, and we did conservation work with them. And although I was mainly office-based, I still had that contact with the countryside and it was during my work there that I just happened to do a weekend course that was called 'Designing a Wildlife Garden' and it was just run by somebody teaching the design aspects of bringing wildlife into your garden. And that, for me, was the moment when I just thought 'Oh, wow. That sounds like an amazing thing to do'. And I'd never heard of garden design or any sort of design like that, so as soon as I realised that, that just opened something up in me, then I went back to study for a few years.

5:33 And you graduated with a Masters of Landscape Design from Manchester University?

That's right, yes.

So that was a really pivotal point in your life?

Yes it was. It was a little weekend course and it changed my life, yes.

Wonderful. What were the highlights then of your first positions after you graduated? You were working in England. Were there any particular highlights at that period of time?

I have to say, there was a lot of dullness in it because I was trained as a landscape architect and that's commercial work. I did a lot of carpark work I have to say, yeah roadside work wasn't very interesting. I did really enjoy – I worked for Groundwork Trust – and they do very inner-city work. It's a charitable organisation and we did design work for very impoverished areas in Manchester. But it was... [laughs], we designed a playground and we had it built and while we were building it there were two gangs of children coming in every night and bashing the equipment and it was really crazy. And because it was just so difficult we couldn't

plant any plants because they would just go. We couldn't use any material that could be burnt, so everything was built out of metal. And there was very, very little room for any innovative design. It might have changed now.

That sounds quite soul-destroying really.

In a way. [Laughs] In a way it was, but I mean also, I felt like it was really important work as well, and that those children, even if they were just bashing the play equipment, they were releasing something and letting something out and that was really important for them. And just the fact that somebody was caring and doing something for them was important too. But yeah, it was difficult in that respect, it was difficult work.

I can imagine. So, what was it that drew you to Australia? Was it after that experience or other calls to Australia because it was shortly after that that you first came here wasn't it, in 1994-95?

That's right yes. That was really just a classic young person's desire to go travelling. [Laughs] And so I did a very strange thing and bought a one-way ticket to Hong Kong and went through Asia and ended up in Hong Kong. And just before Christmas – and I don't know what I was thinking really – I had intended to go home for Christmas but I didn't have enough money to get the return flight because I hadn't bought a return flight, [laughs] strangely enough.

And I was very, very lucky. I went round – I think there were eight English-speaking landscape architect companies in Hong Kong – and I went round them and they said 'Oh well, come back next year'. You know, 'We might be interested next year'. And then the last one I went to was an American company, Belt Collins, and they said 'Can you start tomorrow?' So, I worked for Belt Collins for some time and that was a very amazing experience to work in Hong Kong, where everything is built on huge concrete slabs. So, they're building 50-storey-high apartment blocks on a concrete slab with all the carparking underneath, and all the landscape goes on top of the concrete slab, with the building. So, it was really a very incredible thing to do really.

9:30 With its own challenges, I'm sure.

Well, huge challenges, yes. But I mean, I guess they've been doing that for so long, there was a system of doing that and I actually got the job of writing quite a few of the planning reports in the office because I was the only native-speaking English person in the office. So, it was fun. Hong Kong's incredibly energetic and vibrant. You can feel the energy in the air, and I lived on Lamma Island which is off the main Hong Kong Island. I used to get a little fishing boat to work in the morning and then arrive on Hong Kong Island with all this bustle and energy and, yeah, it was very exciting.

And then at some point during that time, somebody mentioned something about Australia and said that you could get a working visa up to the age of 31, and I was 30 at that point. And I just thought, 'Oh well I'll

try for that'. And so, just before I turned 31, I got that visa and came to Australia.

And you worked first of all in Sydney, when you came here?

I went to Sydney, because I knew one person in Sydney [laughs], who was a landscape architect and I got a job with the state government, working at the Public Works, working in Sydney. And I did that for a while and again, it just didn't quite suit me. I found Public Works quite slow work. It was so much protocol to go through and I'd been working for private practices before that where everything happens quite quickly and you're always on a timeframe and then I found Public Works very slow. So, I knew that wasn't for me either.

And then Tasmania?

And then I came to Tasmania, yes. So, I met somebody in Sydney – did the classic thing [laughs] – of arriving in Australia, met somebody, started a relationship. They were already on their way to Tasmania so basically, I followed them to Tasmania. And again, lucky enough to get work in Tasmania.

So those early projects I think included Vaucluse Gardens, the New Town Rivulet. So, you had some interesting projects to get involved in?

Yes, that was with Sue Small mainly, and Katerina Nieberler. And I was working for them, so I was, you know, the junior designer. So mainly working on the drawings and specifications for those projects.

But it gave you a taste of Tasmania and the wilderness?

Yes, it certainly did, yes.

But then you went back to England briefly, for a couple of years?

I did. I hadn't been back for five years, so I really felt like it was time to go home. And at that point I had been given a Temporary Resident's Visa for Australia, and what they do is they give you a visa for five years and you have to spend three out of those five years in Australia. So, I decided I would go home and just see what it felt like to be back in Britain. And, actually, that was great. I ended up getting a job with Hillier Landscapes in Devon, which I really loved. And that was the first time I did any garden design. I set up and ran an office for them in Devon, and I was working for Sarah Eberle at that point. She's an amazing designer and she often does really, really well at the Chelsea Flower Show. She's a very good designer. So, I learnt a lot from Sarah, and a lot from running an office at that point. It was very exhausting, but great, really, really great experience.

But then I had to decide – because my visa was running out – whether to come back to Australia or whether to stay. And they actually offered me a partnership at Hilliers. And it was a huge decision. It was a huge decision. All my family were in Britain. But the wilderness was here in Tasmania. [Laughs] So, it was a really big decision to make. But Tasmania won out.

So, the second pivotal moment in your life really, major pivotal moment?

Yeah, yeah.

And coming to Tasmania then in 2000, you went to work with Jerry de Gryse, on a number of projects here in Hobart?

I did. I worked for Jerry for a short time when I came back but I knew by that point that my heart wasn't really in public works anymore. And I'd had the taste of working in garden design and I just really found that I loved working directly with people. There's a huge difference. I just felt that's who I am, that I'm much more of a personal, one-on-one person, than doing the big jobs.

14.59 Which are somewhat impersonal – the public works jobs?

They can be. And you're often not really, well you're not in direct contact with the people who are going to be actually using what you're designing. So, I just found that there were quite a few steps removed. And you have to satisfy architects and engineers and there's a whole process.

Your experience in Devon and then your keenness to have that one-on-one contact led you to really thinking you had to go out on your own? That's how it went?

Yep. Well, and I was lucky as well, in the fact that both Sue and Jerry working in the public realm, they do some private work, but not a lot. So, if there was overspill or they were too busy, a few times they would say to me 'Would you like to do this project?' So, I did a few gardens that way and then it's Tasmania, and once you've started on something [laughs] the word gets around.

Word of mouth.

And it was just word of mouth and it was incredible. I never advertised, never really did anything – the work just came in, the phone just rang, and it was amazing. So as soon as I'd done a few gardens it just took off really.

So then, over the next 20 years, you've undertaken a great range of commissions, mainly private but some public ones. Perhaps the two best known private gardens from the public point of view are the ones you did for the former Greens politician Christine Milne – a city garden in Hobart – and the Glover garden at Patterdale. There are probably others but I'm wondering whether you could tell us a little about those two gardens and the challenges of design?

Mm, sure. It was lovely working with Christine. She (I don't know whether she still does), I presume she still does, lived in Lower Sandy Bay. It was quite a small garden and it wrapped the whole way around the house, so each side of the garden had a different aspect to it. And it was also quite a steep block and we did it in a few stages. We worked on the side and the back and then we worked on another side and the front at the end. And that was – it feels like a long time ago now – it was before I had a

contractor who I could really depend on and I actually ended up doing some of the work myself. [Laughs]

The physical work?

I can remember being there on Christmas Eve. I was determined – she had a little stone fire pit – and I knew her mother was coming for Christmas and I really wanted them to be able to sit out by the fire pit if the weather was right for it. And I was there on Christmas Eve putting a few stones in and just finishing that off. [Laughs]

And I've seen a photograph of that in an article about that garden and it looks absolutely gorgeous, yes.

Okay, thank you. And she was a keen vegetable grower so we had some raised beds for vegetables and, obviously, quite a lot of native plants.

And then many years later Carol Westmore commissioned you to look at doing the garden at her property – the Glover House in Patterdale.

That's right. Yes, many years later. [Laughs] Much water under the bridge in between.

Yes, I met Carol because of my friend Hilary Burden, who is a journalist and writer. She went up to the Glover House, not long before it was being opened and was staying with Carol and invited me to come up. So, I went up and met Carol and we had a good old talk about what to do with the garden. Carol had already – from a painting that John Glover's son had done – had a good idea of how the beds were laid out. So, she'd put those in but she just didn't know what plants to put in them. And she asked me if I would do that. And it was an incredibly tight timeframe. I mean, I already was booked up fully and, I think this was in February, and the garden was open to the public in June. [Laughs]

So, it was quite an incredible process. I just didn't take an Easter break that year and I just worked on that project. Yes, it was very interesting, in the fact that, the garden's very well-known through John Glover's painting of it. And the obvious thing to do was to just look at those plants and plant those, but when I had a good look at the painting a lot of them are weeds. We just simply couldn't plant them now. There was broom and – I forget now what else there was in the painting – but it just wouldn't have been responsible to have done that. And it started to open up the door to other possibilities. Plus, the use of the garden's very different. It's now open to the public whereas it was a private garden. The scale's completely different. Carol's only recreated a portion of the garden, not the whole garden. And we don't know if he was painting, I mean, he painted a garden all the way to the horizon basically. Maybe that wasn't actually the case. [Laughs] Maybe that was a bit of artistic licence?

20:52 And flowers of all seasons I understand?

And everything was flowering at the same time. [Laughs]

And now there's an elm and hawthorn hedge down one side of the garden. There's a big oak tree that wasn't there then and so, it's vastly different to what it was. And I just felt like, okay, if we can't plant what used to be there, let's really think about this and what can we do. And so, I tried to employ a few tricks like, the broom was very vertical in his painting and bright yellow and I chose a grass to represent that. So, I chose *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster', which has a purple flowerhead when it's young but goes a very straw colour and it's a very vertical grass. So, I just tried to do some little tricks like that to give a flavour of his painting, without actually being able to use the plants that he used.

And have you been back to see the changes over the last three years?

Mm, I have been back a few times.

I'd love to see it more. I've never actually seen it in the peak of summer, but I've seen it in the autumn and the winter. And Carol sends photographs, and she has a lovely Instagram page where you can follow the garden as well.

It grew incredibly quickly, which was the benefit of using the perennials and the grasses. Because she was opening it to the garden [sic] [public] so quickly – I also wanted her to have something that was going to be fabulous quite early on, which it was, yeah. I'm amazed, I mean, I didn't perhaps realise quite how much interest there would be in the garden when I did it but there's been a lot of interest and I'm very pleased to say there seems to have been a lot of positive feedback about it.

Absolutely, and the article that you prepared for the Australian Garden History Society's journal has been very well received, yes.

Were there any other, in that period, this last 20 years, private garden work that stood out for you? As you said there's a lot of water under the bridge – some good experiences, perhaps less happy experiences. Are there any highlights/low points of that last 20 years?

I have to say the hardest part of the job has been finding people to build the gardens and to do that well, and then to find people to maintain them. Because this is Tasmania, and I don't know, when you look at gardens on the mainland and they're all immaculately built and immaculately maintained – it's not the case here. And it certainly wasn't the case when I first came. People didn't have gardeners, so I had to be very mindful that people were maintaining themselves, and often that wasn't perhaps to the standard that I might have liked. It's totally fine for somebody's garden, of course. It wasn't until quite some time into my building – I mean I did have some really good contractors, but it was finding the consistency, and their availability wasn't always possible because they had other projects on as well.

I did eventually meet Alistair Houston and he built my gardens then for about 10 years. So, he did all my gardens for about 10 years. And that worked fantastically, from my point of view, because we got to know each other's work really well and how we worked and that was a really

good working relationship. But he's left the industry now, unfortunately. So, I'm working with some of his guys who used to work for him and hopefully we'll build up a, you know, good body of work between us too.

So that's been the trickiest thing.

25:04 **And is it partly some of the private client's lack of understanding about a garden that many people think you just plant the plants and there's your garden? You don't have to worry about it any more so, not complete misunderstanding, lack of understanding about maintenance, that gardens are constantly changing and evolving?**

Mm, possibly. I think that is partly true and people are busy and they might think that they are going to be able to do it but then the reality is, you know, time slips by and they haven't cut things back or weeded when they wanted to.

I'd also found, when I first came to Tasmania, everybody was asking me for English cottage gardens, and they are very high maintenance. So, I mean, very early on, I tried not to do that but to give people a basis of evergreens, so that keeps the work down, it means there's something there all year round and then try and have flowers and colour that comes and goes.

So, for me, there was certainly a process of learning how to do that. And also learning what works here compared to Britain. I mean, it's quite like Britain in its climate but the soils are very different, and it probably took me a little while to really get my head around that.

So, in some ways – you've talked about the changing style of gardens – it's either influenced you or you've influenced the style as you've gone? People asking for cottage gardens, then gradually the style's evolved?

Yes it has, it really has. And thankfully, because I didn't want to come here and do English cottage gardens. [Laughter]

I felt like I'd left that behind. But no, the style has definitely changed and people – I guess it is a symptom of things being available on the internet, on Instagram. So, Piet Oudolf, you know, who's become world famous for his gardens and the New Perennial movement and the grasses look, and that has very much become what people have been asking for in the past few years. Which I've loved because I've always used grasses in my designs and I really love that style but, again, it isn't perhaps a very low-maintenance garden, so I've also included evergreen shrubs in that feeling as well.

And I've really felt like in the last year – I don't know if it's a COVID change or something's changed, or it's a climate change realisation – but people are now asking for a lot more natives in the gardens. Which is great. I think it's really great. I think we've really underutilised our Tasmanian plants here.

When I go back to Britain – it was interesting the last time I went back – I went up to Scotland to look at some of the gardens, and they took plants

from Australia over there in the 1800s and have been fiddling around with them and learning how to use them. So, you know, I saw some amazing things with tree ferns, and an espaliered *Correa lawrenceana*, which is the Mountain correa, espaliered on a wall. And I'd never seen that –

You'd never see that in Australia!

Who would do that here, you know? [Laughs]

So, I just think it's really exciting. I think we've got a long way to go with native plants. We've got a lot to learn still, and it feels like the right thing to do. It's the right way to go. They're all evergreen apart from – we've only got one deciduous shrub in Tasmania – so all the trees and shrubs are evergreen.

I think we just have to learn how to use them intelligently and how to maintain them better than when there was the style of using them in the '70s, where they weren't maintained probably very well.

29:34 Is this part of your philosophy? You talk about gardens in unity with nature – is that partly what you're drawing on? That's just the plant style or it's a broader, kind of, philosophical approach – gardens in unity with nature?

It probably is a broader philosophical approach.

You know, I'm very, very interested in – well, the natural environment is still my main driver for everything. I just don't think we're ever going to do it as well as nature does it. [Laughs]

And I'm really interested in the aesthetics of being out there looking at the natural environment but also, you know, we're just learning how the plants communicate with each other, under the ground, and how the mycorrhizal networks are so important. And that isn't any different for a garden, and I'm often looking at, well, how does it work naturally and how can we apply that to what we have around us, closely, and can we be a little bit more intelligent in the way that we do garden.

So, there's partly an aesthetic, it's probably partly a spiritual thing as well, that I feel nowhere more at home than when I'm out. The wilder the better, really, for me. [Laughs]

So that's part of your inspiration for designs.

Yes, absolutely, it is.

Now we've talked about your philosophy of gardens in unity with nature and how important that is to your work, but you've also been inspired by people over your career. You talk about the work of Geoffrey Jellicoe and his use of allegory. Is this still important to you?

It is. That was a revelation to me when I discovered Geoffrey Jellicoe and how he layers and layers meaning into his designs. And although the allegorical part is – you might not pick up on that at all. You might not even know that, but it's there and somehow that gives it a depth of

feeling and meaning that wouldn't otherwise be there. So, it's not just about the aesthetics, it's about the story and the meaning of the place as well.

And yeah, when I first came across his work and started to have a look at what he'd done it really struck me. Because that was just a whole new way of seeing landscape and I love it. And any time I can put some layered meaning into a garden I will do.

Can you just elaborate on what a layered meaning might be?

Okay, so one garden that just sprung straight to mind. There was a garden in Sandy Bay where the client was very intelligent and when we sort of had the process of getting to know each other, we talked a lot about psychology, spirituality. It was obvious that she was very interested in those sorts of matters. And it wasn't a very big garden, but the garden that I designed, it has to work practically. It always has to work practically, there's no point otherwise. So, it has to work with what the site is dictating as well, but I had – because she had a very shady spot outside the back door and the ground dropped quite dramatically outside the back door – I designed a bridge that would go across a whole heap of ferns. So, you'd come out the back door, across a bridge to a seating area and then wandered on down the garden to a grove of trees. And for me the allegorical context of that was the house being the container, almost like being your mind, and as you journey spiritually there was this, sort of sense of having a bridge into a new way of being, and learning and experiencing things as you go along, and then down at the bottom of the garden it was wilder where the grove of trees was, and that was the spiritual journey.

That was the spiritual journey.

The spiritual journey, absolutely – the classic spiritual journey, yes.

Mm, really important. And other designers that you admire? You've mentioned Dan Pearson and Bernard Trainor and here in Australia, Fiona Brockhoff and Rick Eckersley.

Yes. Yep, love Fiona's work. She's an absolutely fantastic master of using native plants, of course. I've just got her book, which is really lovely.

And then Bernard Trainor's been hugely influential on me. There's something about his design. I mean, he was from Australia and he's now working in California. And he, I don't know, he just uses the light and the space in such an amazing way that his gardens look very simple but they're actually quite complicated. And he uses the native plants over there, very, very successfully. And I'm just, really, really drawn to his work.

And Dan Pearson in England – just an amazing designer. Again, very embodied in the sense of place and just really, it's the philosophy of those designers as much as their work that really influence me.

So, I'll gobble up anything I can find about them. [Laughs]

36:14 And Andy Goldsworthy sculptures and the photography of Ansel Adams and Peter Dombrovskis have also been an influence?

Yes, it's that cross-disciplinary influence as well. It's not – I don't just look at other designers – but I guess anybody who is drawing inspiration from the natural environment is a potential inspiration for me.

And I have done quite a lot of stone wall work here. People used to say that my work was quite like Edna Walling's. But people have also said that I have a touch of Andy Goldsworthy in my work too, because I will often use walls in a very sculptural way. They might curve down and they might curve round something.

That's very Andy Goldsworthy.

That's quite Andy Goldsworthy, yes, yes.

Apart from those design influences and your philosophy about the importance of the unity with nature, but you also had to learn a lot about Tasmanian native plants. So, you did a course with Mark Geeves, very early on. How did that impact and what (I'm going back a bit now), but how did that influence your work?

It was hugely important for me. Because I came here from Britain about to start designing and I can remember [laughs], driving in the car with somebody and they were talking about the plants they could see as we were moving at sort of 80 kilometres an hour through the landscape. They were talking about the shrubs at the side of the road and I can just remember feeling a huge sense of despair because to me they were just all evergreen shrubs and I just thought 'Oh, how am I ever going to learn all these new plants here and they're all just green'. [Laughs]

You know in Britain an oak tree and a beech tree, they're significantly different, whereas here I felt like everything looked a bit similar. So, it was really important that I learn, as quickly as possible, and I was very lucky that Mark Geeves was running a course at TAFE, about learning about the native plants here and I did that course, and the advanced course the following year. And Mark Geeves is just, I mean, he's amazing. His knowledge is second to none. He knows so much about exotic plants and native plants. And it was a wonderful, wonderful thing to do. I met people on that course who were really interested in plants like me. We're still really good friends now. We get out there in the bush as much as we can and we go off on these little botanising trips. And yeah, it was such a great springboard really into learning about the native plants. And now I'm the person who can drive down the highway and point out what all the plants are, at 100 kilometres an hour! [Laughter]

So, I did it. It was amazing that course.

Mm, driving down at 100 kilometres an hour – that's a great achievement. [Laughter]

So, what does it mean to you to create a garden in Tasmania now?

Wow, that's a huge question.

I've always been really fascinated and interested and thought about what does it mean to be designing gardens and creating gardens in Tasmania, compared to anywhere else. What is it that makes it so essentially Tasmanian and is there a style that's Tasmanian? And I think, when I first came here, people were still hankering after the British style. That has changed now and it is changing. It's changing quickly and I think that, we are an island, we have limited resources here. We've just lost two very excellent nurseries in the south of Tasmania – that's a big blow to the industry.

You're thinking of Woodbank?

No.

No?

Sally Johansson's nursery the Plant Hunters Nursery. I probably used to get a third of my plants from her. And Lindy Campbell's the Island Herbs at Snug has also closed, and I would have got a lot of plants from her too.

So, in a way, this is a very interesting thing to have happened, at the time that people are asking for more native plants. We do have good native nurseries. So, I think, I personally, would like to see a lot more native planting but we do have to learn how they respond to the soil that we have and how we maintain them. Because you can't just put a native plant in the ground and it isn't necessarily going to perform as, you know, some of the basic exotic shrubs that we might use. We really have to learn where they perform the best.

And I think also that materials, we have a very limited selection of materials here. We have only a certain number of quarries. We only have a few types of stone here. That leads to a limited palette of materials and so, in a way, the simplicity of what we have creates the style of what we can do. And we can use those materials in lots of different ways, of course, but it's not like being on the mainland where you can go to Eco Outdoor and they have stone from Italy or Australia and other places, or China and Vietnam. We do have one stone importer here but we're much more limited in what we can access, if we don't want to be importing. I think, if possible, it's really nice to use the local materials because it's a lot less energy to get them here and to use them. And because they speak of the place that we're in.

43:03 And that is very important in terms of your work, and for most gardens – to speak of the place.

Yes, I feel it is.

What about the impact of climate change on our gardening future in Tasmania? Are you seeing evidence of that already?

Yeah, I think we're all seeing evidence of that. [Laughs]

Yes, we're having the extremities – we're having it today. [Laughs]

It's almost snowing out there!

It is almost snowing.

We're having – I think this is what we're going to have to get used to – is the summers will be hotter and the winters will be wetter and the winds will be stronger. You know, we have to use plants that can adapt to that. We have to start possibly to use techniques that help the plants to adapt to that.

I'm very interested, at the moment, in the idea of perhaps collaborating between different professions. I feel like what we do a lot of is working on our own, and that is possibly because we're a very small industry here.

I'm getting really, really a bit on my high horse about soils. I just think there's a lot coming up that we really need to think about. I feel like it's time to think about how we actually build gardens, how much energy goes into the gardens, how much concrete goes into building a garden.

It's quite shocking sometimes, to see topsoil being stripped and taken away or tonnes of concrete being poured into places. And I would really like us to think about what we're doing in the industry. And I would like to – I'm on a mission for people to stop calling soil 'dirt'. It seems to be an Australian thing. [Laughs] And to call it soil and to treat it with the respect that it really needs, because if we haven't got the soil right, we haven't got anything right.

One of the things I would really like to do in the near future is to – I'm not quite sure how I'm going to do it – but I'd like to just try and gather people together so maybe people who build gardens, to get their perspective, people who do permaculture, gardeners, designers. And I'd like to start off, kick that off, by talking about soils and if we can get people's perspective from all areas of the industry: the people who supply the soil; the people who build the gardens; the people who then have to garden them; I'd just like us to say 'Well, what have you learnt in your industry?' Can we then just gather it all together and be more intelligent about the way we actually do things.

46:22 Then we create more resilient gardens, in the face of climate change.

Yes, exactly.

I really believe if we can treat the soil right and get the soil right, our gardens are going to be a lot more resilient.

So, we can learn a bit from the agricultural industry? Is that what you're thinking?

Totally. I've been reading a lot about regenerative agriculture and wondering, well, how can we apply that to a garden-scale. Because it's becoming very evident, to them, that the soils are really important and that we have to look after our soil. And, you know, maybe turning the soil

over and ploughing it isn't the thing to do, it isn't the best thing for the soil.

So, I feel optimistic that things are changing. I'd like them to change quickly. [Laughs]

Maybe we just need to get together and not all work individually and separately, but really share our knowledge and see if we can come up with something. I don't know, I'm just going to try, I'm putting it out there and I'm going to try and start inviting people to have conversations.

And see where that leads, yes.

Just see where that leads, yeah.

And with your own garden, what are you doing there? Are you experimenting with ideas, or do you have any time for your own garden when you're working flat out?

[Laughs].

So, my garden is a non-garden. I did have a garden in Cygnet – I had an old house in Cygnet – with the third of an acre and I did it all beautifully and then I realised I had a dream to live much closer to nature than that.

And so, I sold that and I bought a 33 acre bush block. So, I'm living in wet sclerophyll forest. It is pretty wild. It isn't managed. I'm learning now that that might not be the best thing. [Laughs] But I have about two acres probably, of fairly cleared ground and my experimentation there is to not have a garden in the sense that people might expect to have a garden. But I'm really trying to work much more with how nature wants to do things. So, I just let grow what wants to grow and then I take out what I don't want. So, we're having a little, we're working together a little bit. But unless I fence, I can't grow anything that doesn't grow there anyway because I have beautiful Bennett's wallabies and pademelons and quolls. You know, you name it, they're all there. And it's their home and I want them to enjoy living there too and be able to live there.

So, I have chosen not to fence anything off. The snakes come right up and the Tassie devils and I'm just really – how to put it – I just feel like I'm living there by the grace of nature really. And I'm the imposition on the land, not all the animals.

I've been there for 10 years, and it's been very interesting to see what's happening if you just leave a piece of land and you manage it almost just by removing, rather than adding. So, it doesn't look like a garden, it looks like a wild landscape. I do have grass, but only just, you know the wallabies do eat it down to the bare minimum. [Laughs]

I couldn't even plant, you know, say I have the dogwood, I have *Pomaderris apetala*. I couldn't plant a new *Pomaderris apetala* because it will be growing in compost from a nursery which will have made the nutrient level in that plant different and that will get eaten. But if one seeds itself there, then that will grow.

So, I've just really been observing. I've been observing for quite a time there and just learning from what happens.

And maybe this is also something we can start applying to gardens and maybe we can let go of a little bit of control, that we have over everything. So, it's all ticking away.

And it reaches a new balance, as it were.

Yes, maybe.

51:18 You've almost just answered my question, which was getting towards the last question which is – what is the garden for? I can now understand what it is for you, but is there a broader thing about what you feel what a garden is for? It is a bit about the feeling, rather than the physical garden?

It's all about the feeling, for me. It really is about the feeling. I think, what gardens can do for us, however they are, if they're tightly controlled or not, they are the place where you can step outside from the box of the home and be much more in touch, not only with the external environment but, I think, being in the external environment puts us more in touch with our internal environment.

So, I think we're actually more at home outside than we are inside but we've sort of lost that contact. I'm very keen that however people are drawn out into the garden or the landscape, it doesn't really matter to me what somebody's garden has to look like for them, but if it's doing the job of putting them closer in touch with the environment, that feels to me that's a good thing.

I think that's really important. Well, I think we're reaching the end of the interview. It's been wonderful, Catherine. Is there anything else that you want to add that we perhaps haven't covered?

I don't think so, thanks. It was a pretty good romp around a few subjects.
[Laughter] Thank you.

That's wonderful. Thank you again for your contribution to the Oral History Project at our national level. It's wonderful just to hear about your philosophy, the influences and the importance of gardens and their links with nature. Thank you.

Thank you so much.

[Postscript]

Catherine I think you wanted to talk a little more about the importance of revisiting Tasmania's historic gardens and what's happening now in the light of climate change and the ageing of our existing, very old trees, some of them? Is that something you'd like to comment on?

Sure, yes. I've been very fortunate to have been working on the garden at Mona Vale for a few years now and, as you say, the trees there were planted 150-200 years ago and so there's a very important need to look to the future and what's going to happen. Because those trees obviously

will come to the end of their natural life, but also, the climate conditions are changing, and we are getting some diseases now that we didn't used to get. I mean we have to be mindful that they have box blight in Britain, which may come here at some point. You know the elm beetle devastated the elms in Britain, and we depend very heavily on elms in the historic properties here, because it's done so well.

So, there's definitely some work to be done around thinking about the future for the historic houses. And I've also noticed – I've just been visiting Brickendon recently at Longford – and they had some of the same issues that Mona Vale has with its trees. And I suspect it's because we've had 10 years of pretty drought conditions in Tasmania, and the Midlands are very prone to that. But some of those trees are really starting to suffer. You know, hopefully, there might a little bit of pick up with the wet winters we've had recently.

But I just think we need to really think about that. I'm about to start work at Malahide in the Fingal Valley, which is another one of those beautiful old houses, and I'm no expert on trees and ageing and diseases of trees and what we can do about them, so I think it's another one of those areas that I would love to see some sort of collaboration with experts happening. Because it's, you know, they're so important to our landscape and our heritage here, as well.

I think we can only agree.

Mm. Thank you.

Interview ends.

56 minutes 20 seconds