

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



Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton May 2023

Interviewee: **MARK GEEVES**  
Interviewer: Jean Elder  
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Mark Geeves, Australian Garden History Society, National Oral History Collection, Interviewed 3 May 2023 by Jean Elder.

**[JE] This is an interview with Mark Geeves recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking with Mark about his life as an educator in horticulture and a Tasmanian native plant and exotic plant expert. The interview is taking place on Wednesday the 3rd of May 2023 at Claremont, Tasmania. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.**

**The Australian Garden History Society acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.**

**So Mark, you were born in 1958 and in Geeveston, Cygnet, tell me about those early years.**

[MG] Well I was born in 1958. My mother and father had been married nine months to the day before, so I'm a wedding night baby, and the first grandchild to both sets of grandparents. My Dad was an only child and my mum only had one sister, but it was ten years between them, so Aunty Kerrie and I are closer in age than my mother and my aunt really. So it was like having a big sister really.

We had a very interesting childhood at Port Huon. We were very encouraged. We had a mother who was brilliant really, you know, very clever and really encouraged my brothers and I – and I have two of them, both younger than me – to be interested in, particularly, the natural world. We had enormous collections of things like fossils and shells and scraps of bark and feathers and God knows what. I remember once we found a snakeskin and we put it, we had a big specimen cabinet in our spare room at home and Mum opened the drawer and nearly dropped dead [laughs], because of the snakeskin. But, you know, we were really encouraged, but we were also encouraged to draw and paint and create.

And we were dragged around the country every weekend looking for plants because Mum was a very keen amateur botanist, but I think I had no chance to escape an interest in horticulture because when Mum was breastfeeding me, that's when she learnt her botanical Latin. So she used to feed me and sit with the book propped up on the table and she'd be learning and saying her Latin while she was feeding me. So I learnt Latin very early [laughs].

We had a childhood that most children wouldn't experience anymore. You know, we were away from first thing in the morning till almost dark with the dog, building huts and exploring the countryside. We didn't have a lot of close neighbours (my Nan and Pop lived next door) and we had apple orchards, so our whole lives revolved around the apple industry and otherwise we were pretty set free really.

**And your mother was, (it sounds like an amazing childhood) your mother Kay Geeves was the foundation President of the Society for Growing Australian Plants – which later became the Australian Plants Society of Tasmania – and she was awarded an OAM for her services. So gardening, as you've said, and garden and growing plants and**

## **understanding plants and their Latin names was very important to her and to you?**

There's a long history of gardening in the family. So, my great, great grandmother, whose name was Harriet Lomas, she had an extensive garden at Huonville, and it was at a time when the palette of plants wasn't as big but she always grew really unusual things. So we grew up with stories about her, but I was lucky until I was 12 to have a great grandmother, and her name was Ethel Kruse, and she was an amazing gardener as well. They used to laugh about her – she'd go out to empty the teapot and Grandpa'd be waiting for breakfast and two hours later she be out pulling weeds in the garden – she didn't come back. But she loved alpine, and she grew things like auriculas and gentians at a time when most people didn't have them, but also she had this huge fernery at the back of the house where they grew *Dicksonia antarctica* but also, when we were little kids there was probably, well there was a mature sassafras and she grew myrtle. So they were interested in plants. And then by grandmother (Mum's mother Mary Darcy) was another great gardener and then, of course, Mum.

But very early on my two brothers and I were given plots and we had our own little gardens and, you know, Nan encouraged us to grow cuttings and she'd give us bits and pieces. And when I was young Mum was still into exotics, so we had exotics and then the natives started to creep in.

### **6:02 How did that occur?**

Well I think it was Mum's association with the Society for Growing Australian Plants. How it came about is my great grandparents – my mother's grandparents – she used to go and stay with them and there was a magazine (I can't remember what the magazine was) but in that magazine was an ad for the Society for Growing Australian Plants in Victoria. So Mum, being interested, actually contacted them and she became, what they called, an enloan [?] or country member of the Victorian region of the Society for Growing Australian Plants. And through that she met like-minded people here. There were people like the Simmons' from up the north of the state who were very interested in *Acacias* and then wrote books about them. She met Melva Truchanas very, very early on, through that same thing. And for a while she corresponded with them and wrote for their newsletter and then Thistle Harris, who wrote a lot of books on growing Australian plants, became very friendly with Mum and encouraged her to start a Society for Growing Australian Plants group here in Tasmania.

And the first meeting was (I think it was) 1963-64 and that first meeting was held at Essie Huxley's house, down at Longley and out of that they decided that they would start a group here. Mum was the first President, Melva Truchanas the first Secretary and I think Allan Gray was the first Treasurer but there are other people still around who were at that first meeting. And out of that they formed a group in Hobart, and it was just called the Hobart Group of the Society for Growing Australian Plants and eventually that grew, and they had a Northern Group and a North-

Western Group and that's still the same today. But then we became a region in our own right so now we have a State Council as well.

**Wow, a remarkable story, remarkable history there.**

Mmm, there is.

**Now in all this busy-ness of having a wonderful life as a kid did you actually get to school? Where did you go to school?**

[Laughs] No we did go to school. We went to the little Catholic school at Geeveston – Sacred Heart – and my aunt taught there, my Mum was pretty involved with the school and the year that I reached Grade 6 the school went out of Secondary, so there was a lot of thought about what would happen and what we'd do but Mum decided that we'd go to Cygnet to St James over there because they went to – I think they went to Year 12. Anyway, I was there for a couple of years but my brother – my middle brother – who was a very bright boy, Mum and Dad sent him to Dominic College and he was a boarder. He was there for a year before me and then there was a bit of a plan by my grandmother and my father (so it was his mother), that I would go to the Mill to work – at APM. And Mum went, 'Mmm, I don't think so.' [Laughs] So Mum couldn't get me to boarding school quick enough. Then I went to boarding school, I was three years at boarding school and loved it and I actually never went home because I actually then got my first job in horticulture. I worked for A.J. Connor and Co. and they had a garden centre and I worked there, that was my first job.

**10:29 Tell us about A.J. Connor. Were they a department store?**

They were a department store where Spotlight now is in the city (or I think they might have even moved out of there now), but they were there, and they had a garden department and I had just finished school and I was 18 and that was my first job.

After a couple of years I actually then went into hospitality and had a whole other career before I came to horticulture.

**After Connor's though did you go to Westlands...?**

So while I worked for Connors, Westlands used to supply all our plants, so to help my knowledge I used to go and work for them on the weekend, up at Pottery Road when they were up there. Every weekend I worked up there and learnt a lot about plants.

**So it was a second job as it were?**

It was sort of a second job. It was really good fun actually; I learnt a lot.

**And that's where you learnt so much about growing?**

Yes, that's when I first really started interest in growing plants myself but then I went off on another tangent and went to a different career altogether.

**Just finishing, before we talk about that, were you with Westlands when they moved to Seven Mile Beach?**

No, it was before they moved to Seven Mile Beach. At that stage old Mr Van der Staay was still in the business and he and his wife lived up in Pottery Road and the rest of the family all lived there as well at that stage, and then later they moved down to Seven Mile Beach.

**And you said then you did a sideways move (I don't know if it was sideways but a different move, to hospitality) how did that come about?**

Um, well I used to go to a restaurant called Beaujangles...

**It's still there.**

... which was a bit of an institution in town, and they were looking for somebody and I used to go in there for a drink or a bite to eat and one day David Seaford, who owned it, said to me 'Have you ever thought about working in hospitality?' and he said, 'You know, I'd give you a job.' And I thought, 'mmm, that sounds like fun.' So I did, and it changed my entire life. So I was there for, probably, a couple of years and then moved on to other things – joined the hotel industry here in Tasmania and then travelled. So I used to work for the Four Seasons Group, and they were opening a new hotel in Jabiru in the Northern Territory, the Crocodile Hotel, and I was asked to go up there as a manager.

**Had you had any training in hospitality at this point?**

In-house, yeah, yes. Lots of in-house training. And I went up there and it was the most amazing place. It was the first time I'd lived away, and Kakadu was just mind-blowing really [laughs].

**And very different plants there as well.**

Very different plants, but, when you've got an interest in plants you soon recognise – you mightn't know the plant but you'll know the Family or you'll pretty well pick what things belong to. It was, the thing that amazed me about Kakadu, was the change between the Wet and the Dry and what happens when the Wet starts. So you get all these amazing species: arum lilies and all these incredible things that flower (triggered by the Wet), but you know, there's some amazing, amazing things there. But also the wildlife's just, there's nowhere else in Australia where you look out and there's a million geese on the billabong. It's just the most incredible place.

So I had two years up there and then I moved across to Port Douglas and that was at the time when Christopher Skase had the Sheraton Mirage, so Port Douglas was a very glamorous place. We had distant family in Port Douglas who I'd never met before, but also the rainforest up there is just so incredible, and I had the opportunity to do a fair bit, moving around Port Douglas and getting often out and into the wild, up on the Atherton Tablelands or up into the rainforest. And you know, I'd never seen plants where the flowers came out of their trunk and all that sort of stuff. So that was a pretty amazing place and I had two years up

there and then went to Sydney and worked for – I moved over to, well I'd been working for Radisson, a big American company, that was where they were in Port Douglas – and then I went down to Sydney with them.

**16:18 So by this time, you were late '20s, having all these extraordinary experiences?**

Yes, that's right.

**How did it come to end, that you moved from hospitality back to horticulture?**

Well, I said to myself if I ever started hating the customers it would be time to get out. And, you know, hospitality in many ways is a young person's life and it can be very rewarding but it does take a toll, and I'd just had enough I think, so I resigned and came back to Tasmania [laughs] and went 'Oh my God, what have I done? I haven't got a job, what am I going to do?'

So I did just a little bit of casual hospitality work until I saw an ad for a horticulture course at TAFE, and I thought well I've always been interested in horticulture and Mum and I talked about it and she said 'You know, you gotta do what you want to do.' So the day that they were doing the application I arrived, and luckily I arrived early because it was the biggest intake they'd ever had and there were huge lines of people wanting to get in to horticulture and not everybody got in. But I was about third in line, so I did, and I did two years.

**What years was this?**

This was in the mid 1990s, so '94, '95. I did a Certificate of Horticulture, then an Advanced Certificate, and the then Manager of Horticulture said to me, at the end, 'Well what are you going to do?' And I'd already been working casually up at Plants of Tasmania nursery but they could only give me two-three days a week.

**That was the era of Will Fletcher?**

Yes, Will, I worked for Will Fletcher and I learnt a lot working with him. But it wasn't enough to keep me sustained, [laughs] to earn a living. So Laurie Miller, who was the Head of Horticulture said to me 'What are you going to do?' I said 'I don't know.' He said 'Well you'd better stay then', and he gave me a job [laughs], and we used to laugh, I said 'One day I'm gonna have your job you know.' [Laughs] Anyway, that's what happened in the end. So I became the Head of Horticulture, with people who had been my teachers, I was now their manager. But I really enjoyed my time in Horticulture.

**Can I come back and say who were the key outstanding teachers for you at that time? Do you remember?**

So I worked with Lindsay Campbell, who's now a very well-known landscaper. Laurie had worked for the Ag Department and he'd done a lot of work on vine weevil, which is a big problem in Tasmania especially in the nursery industry. I learnt a lot from him around how to manage that

and the use of things like Suscon Green and so they were my big influences within Horticulture, and I suppose what I got really interested in was plant identification, which is probably one of my specialties, and propagation and design.

I also took over from Lindsay. They were running a thing called Tasmanian Native Plants course, and because I was with the Plants Society I used to be able to encourage young people to do Tas native plants but join the Plants Society, so it was a double benefit. And, you know, I've got lots of people out there now who work very seriously in horticulture who started off in that Tasmanian Native Plants course. Catherine Shields is a perfect example. Catherine is a very talented garden designer, but she didn't know about Tasmanian plants, so she came to me and did the Tasmanian Native Plants course.

**20:59 Can I just interrupt you because I want to quote – because it was such a lovely quote that Catherine gave when we interviewed her and she is talking about – I asked her how she learnt about ...and she said *'It was hugely important for me because I came here from Britain, about to start designing, and I can remember [JE - she's laughing] driving in the car with somebody and they were talking about the plants they could see as we were moving at about 80 km 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 green and I thought 'How am I ever going to learn about these new plants. So, you know in Britain an oak tree and a beech tree they're significantly different, whereas here I felt 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 the course at TAFE and that's where I learnt everything about 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.'***

**So there you are that's accolade from Catherine. It obviously was very important to a number of other people as well, I think.**

Yeah. Yes, you know, I've got lots of people I still correspond with, or are close to, who did that course who have gone on to do amazing things and it's very heartening to know that you had that sort of effect on people.

**Yes.**

And that's the reward of teaching. You know, as an educator, the satisfaction is seeing people grow and achieve. I've always enjoyed teaching. I enjoy sharing the knowledge that I have and, even today, Catherine is still one of my best friends and she will ring me up and she'll say 'I'm doing this job here – what will I plant?' or 'Will this work?' or 'Can you suggest...' you know trees that we can use – natives. She's a very talented girl.

**Just stepping back Mark, you were talking about lots of people trying to get into the course way back then in the mid '90s. What was the context for that? Do you understand why so many wanted to get into horticulture then?**

I don't know. I think it was just about demand. Still, the numbers (and I don't know now exactly how many) but I think they're still pretty busy. It was just one of those periods when there were lots of people who were interested in horticulture.

**And possibly native plants? Because that was just taking off in the '70s and '80s wasn't it?**

It was, and I think there was a consciousness that just... there was a new awareness of the use of natives. I've laughed with Mum a few times about, you know, the Society for Growing Australian Plants actually did its job very well and now you would very rarely see an exotic planted by council or on road-scape because the natives perform so well. And in some respects we've actually met our aims, but now we've moved on to other stuff like conservation and disseminating important plants and studying plants. A perfect example would be *Lomatia tasmanica* from down in the South-West, you know, it's only one plant and it's pretty rare. But we went to visit that because, as a family, we were related to Deny King and Deny had found this plant – I think probably in the '30s – but he took a group including Mum who he knew very well, and he was collector as well for *The Endemic Flora*. He took us to where it was growing and we actually saw it in flower and nobody – you would be very hard-pressed to go and visit it now.

**Perhaps for those who might be listening to this later, describe where Deny King lived, it's a pretty remote part of the world in Tasmania?**

Yes, so he lived at Melaleuca which is right in the heart of, you know, round the Macquarie Harbour area. But he was a tin miner. His mother was a relative of my grandmother so the Kings were distantly related to us, and we used to go down to Melaleuca.

**26:22 Did you fly in?**

Fly in, yeah.

**Land on the beach?**

Well, if we went to Melaleuca we landed over where they did the tin mining but then we also used to go out to Cox's [Cox] Bight, so we had several holidays at Cox's Bight. Deny used to do things too like take us to Bond Bay and drop us off there because there was a hut there and we'd stay there and then he'd come back and pick us up. His sister lived down at Clyde [Clayton's] Corner as well and we'd go and visit them as well.

**Did Deny identify other rare plants?**

He was a very good observer but he recognised that *Lomatia tasmanica* was different and, you know, it's a bit of a relict flora. It is the only



*Lomatia* in Tasmania that has red flowers, all the rest are cream. It is probably more closely linked to the South American *Lomatias*. It appears in fossil record but, you know this one plant it covers a, sort of, a woody thicket but it is one plant and it's sterile.

Mum, we collected material at that time and Mum actually – because it was so precious – she put the leaves in and the leaves actually calloused and then formed fruits but she grew plants. We had one in the garden and it flowered but – at some stage – I think it was through Thistle, Brian Halliwell, who was the Director of Kew Gardens came out to Tasmania because he had heard – he knew about Essie Huxley and he knew about Mum – and he came to the garden and Mum gave him a plant of *Lomatia tasmanica* which he took back to Kew. That plant thrived at Kew in their glasshouse and eventually someone stole it, but they had taken cuttings and there is still a plant of *Lomatia tasmanica* at Kew in their glasshouses, but it came from Mum.

**Wow, that's quite a story.**

It is. And there's a few interesting things like that about plants that were found that we've continued to pass around.

There's a very rare *Milligania* called *Milligania johnstonii* that occurred on the beach at Lake Pedder and Dennis Morris who worked for the Herbarium here and was another family friend and a friend of Winifred Curtis (and we'll get on to that later) but he found a pink form of this *Milligania johnstonii*. It was, and it is, the most beautiful thing and it's only small but the flowers are little racemes and they smell of honey, so strongly of honey, but generally, you know, the type specimen's white, but this is beautifully pink, and Dennis collected it and he gave me a little piece. Well we've kept that going for probably 30 years or more and Sally Johansson – who is one of my very close friends – I gave a plant to her (and it loves to be divided) so she divided and divided and then she gave a whole heap of it to Plants of Tasmania, so they were selling it for a while. But, you know, it's the story of a plant, it was one-off but through association and the Plants Society and that interest you keep these things going.

**30:35 It's a great contribution to our native plant life, yeah. You were talking about Winifred Curtis – tell us that story.**

Well it was probably a highlight of my mother's life but it was for us as well. So Tasmania – I will answer but it's a bit roundabout – is quite lucky in that it has a published endemic flora. Many countries don't have that, but Lord Talbot de Malahide who was an Irish aristocrat, had property here in Tasmania on the East Coast, and there's a big property here called Malahide. He was very keen on publishing an Endemic Flora and eventually it came out in six volumes. Margaret Stones, who was an Australian botanical artist but was living in London and working at Kew, did all the paintings and they now – the originals – are all sitting in the museum in Launceston and, you know, if you can get a look at them – they are pretty amazing.

But Winifred Curtis who, again, was a friend of Mum's and met through – she was an Associate Member, not an Honorary Life Member of the Plants Society – so she enlisted the Plants Society to help collect for *The Endemic Flora*. So we would have lists of plants that they wanted and some of them were pretty obscure and some of them, you know, you had to do a lot of travel to find them. But Mum was a very serious collector and there were other people who (Deny was a collector, Essie Huxley was a collector) and there were lots of Mum's friends from across the state who collected, and if you look in the *Flora* every plate acknowledges who the collector was.

We would spend a lot of time out and about looking for perfect specimens – so they had to be perfect. What happened is the specimens were collected by the collector, they were taken straight to Winifred who did a description and then they were flown straight to London to Kew and Margaret would be painting them – and she had Brian Halliwell over her shoulder going 'Hurry up, hurry up, because I want the cutting material'. [Laughs]

So a lot of Tasmanian plants came into cultivation in Britain because of the work with *The Endemic Flora*, but our flora was appreciated in London, or Britain, a long time before it was appreciated here. You know, back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century things were travelling from here in Wardian cases back to Britain and, particularly in places like Scotland, they were growing a lot of our things. If you look at some of the introduction dates, we're talking about the 1830s-1840s, but we also had a very close association with Kew because of Joseph and Dalton Hooker, so there was a lot of material moving backwards and forwards very early on.

**What period of time was this and how many, roughly, would your mother and all of your family have collected?**

Ooh, I reckon there's probably 15 or 20 plates that Mum was associated with. It was in the early '70s. I'm not 100% sure of the first date but it went on for quite a while because the volumes came out one at a time, and you know, they are beautiful things.

**35:07 Wonderful.**

**Again, we're jumping around – but when you were working ... with Tasmanian Native Plants – did you also have work with the Jubilee Nursery, with Ted and Joy?**

I did, I did.

**Was that the same era?**

It's the same sort of era, yes. Joy and Ted became friends and they used to come to my (I had a big garden) ... I grow a mixed garden of exotics and natives but I have some very particular interests and that's in Gondwanan flora and also species flora from South America, North America, Yunan in China, and a few other places that interest me. So Joy and Ted (when they were up next door to Plants of Tasmania), that's how I really first – I used to buy off them. But then they realised some of

the things that I had, they'd come and take cuttings you see and then they got me to do a little bit of work for them every now and then because they knew my plant knowledge was pretty good (if I do say so myself).

So, they used to get me to identify things for them as well and because I had a broad network across Australia and even overseas, getting unusual plants, there are things in my garden that Sally says I'm probably the only person in Tasmania who's got that, and there's quite a few like that. But I also was very lucky to meet some really interesting people who had nurseries overseas and was able to get things in. It was easier then to get things into Australia than it is now but somebody I dealt with a lot was Dan Hinkley from Heronswood in North America, and then he came out here because he's a friend of Sally's and she brought him to my garden, and we took him bush and ... I've met a lot of really interesting people that way. You know, Sally's very well-known across Europe and North America as a great plants person and I've met a lot of those people.

**So, your garden at Port Huon in Southern Tasmania, how long have you had this particular garden, or have you had several gardens?**

I have had several gardens but the one at Port Huon, the first plants went in in 1995. I was looking for a block of land because I wanted to see my trees mature and my grandmother put on a little turn and said 'There's plenty of land here', and I thought 'What's that mean?' So a couple of days later I decided with Mum I'd sit down and talk to her and I think (this is Mum's mother and father) always thought that when – because we all lived on the farm and Dad and Mum built on the farm when they were married in 1957. As a wedding present Pop and Nan gave them a block of land. Anyway, Nan and Pop always thought that Mum and Dad would move into our big old family home once Nan and Pop weren't there but I think as things went on and my grandfather died, (and my grandmother was on her own for 20-odd years), she realised that Mum and Dad were very comfortable where they were and weren't probably going to move down the road.

So she said to Mum 'Well, he wants land, I want someone to have the house, what can we do?' We talked it through and I said to Mum and Dad 'Well, there's only one way this is going to happen, I'm going to buy it because, you know, I've got brothers to think about and I don't want any rankle over... so when Nan went into care I bought the house. But I was already gardening around it because Nan had said... to me 'It keeps on growing Mark, it keeps on growing you keep on moving the fence further and further out.' [Laughs] But now I'm very blessed because I have some *amazing* things that are mature and, you know, people walk round the garden and go 'Oh, my God what's that.' [Laughs]

**40:05 How big is the garden? How many hectares?**

It's two hectares. So it keeps me out of trouble.

But I get a hard time from my friends. We have a little group that we call the Garden Angels and they say to me 'You are forever creating.' Because that's the part I like, and Sally says I'm about the best plant hunter in Tasmania. If I want it...

**You'll track it down.**

I'll track it down. And they get me to track stuff down as well. But you have successes and you have non-successes. Nobody sees the non-successes. You know, I've tried lots of things that are...

**So that garden now, since you've had it is how old? How many years have you...?**

We started planting in 1995, so there are quite a few things that are 30 years old, 40 years old and they're decent trees now. You know, things like *Halesia monticola* which is the American Snowbell is (and I'll have to talk in the old) about 25 feet tall, flowers every year and it's probably, you don't see it here very often. But I'm still trying new plants. I love the hunt and I love to see whether they'll work in our environment.

**So a mix of exotic and natives?**

A mix of exotic and natives, but my big bent with exotics are with a Gondwanan sort of feel. So you know, I love things like *Embothrium* and those sort of plants that grow in South America which have a very similar, same Family, as we do in Tasmania or Australia. There's a few genus that I'm really, really interested in. *Nothofagus* is one. I've got all the North Americans; I'd love to be able to grow some of the ones that appear in New Caledonia but we're just too cool here. But I do like to push the boundary of what will survive and if something survives it can really surprise you. I grow a species rhododendron. I don't particularly like the frillies, but I am very keen on species. I grow more species than I do... most of the exotics I grow are actually species, not fiddled with, and there's nothing wrong with that but it's just where my interest is. And species oaks is another area I'm really, really interested in.

**What range of oaks then?**

So mainly North American I'm interested in, but I've got quite interested in – the new frontier is Mexico – so I'm growing three Mexican oaks, new to cultivation and they're doing incredibly well. *Quercus rysophylla* is new to cultivation, very spectacular, probably only been in cultivation 10 years, doing very well and *Quercus candicans* that has huge leaves, reddish-bronze new growth and white indumentum on the back of the leaves and is shiny, shiny on the tops of the leaves, is just the most beautiful thing and everybody goes 'Oh Mark, I can't believe you got that.' [Laughs] We had some people here from Hermannshof in Germany last year and they walked around my garden – Sally brought them down – and they just kept on saying to me 'I can't believe you've got that! I can't believe you've got that!' [Laughter] So that was a bit exciting.

**44:31 Oh very exciting. Coming back to your Garden Angels, who else is in that group? Can you tell us a bit more about that group.**

Yeah, yeah. Well, the Garden Angels are fun, and it has morphed over a period of time. So originally it was myself, Catherine Shields and Sally Johansson and then Lindy Campbell joined that.

Sally had Plant Hunters nursery up at Neika and is a sensational grower and is a unique influence on me. She is very generous and every time I admire a plant she gives it to me, and she's given me things to try to see how it goes. We always try to have an insurance policy between us, so you've got to share the rare things because, you never know, things just drop dead overnight.

Catherine is a landscape architect and I know that you guys have interviewed her. She is a very, very talented girl. We spend a lot of time making lists together of things – like things that flower on bare wood and all that sort of thing.

And then Lindy Campbell who owned Island Herbs, she's just retired, but Lindy (although we call it Island Herbs) she grew a lot of really unusual perennials and she's been a big influence and a person who's given me lots of things to try and again, insurance policies.

I had a plant that, well, two things that I've shared with Sally for instance *Milligania johnstonii* we've struggled to keep because in 2018 there were fires down in the Huon and we were forced to evacuate and we were evacuated for three weeks. We had a shade house full of the most incredible stuff. We came home to find most of that dead because there were 40-degree days and the smoke and we weren't there to water. So Sally had *Milligania johnstonii* from me. She was able to give that back to me and, you know, if we hadn't shared it, it would be gone. And there's a big grass, it's *Ampelosdesmos mauritanica*. It comes from Mauritania and the African coast of the Mediterranean. It is the most spectacular grass. I had one plant, Sally loved it, so I shared it with her. Then I lost it and she just gave it back to me.

So Garden Angels is very important to us. It used to be that we used to go and work in each other's gardens. We do less of that now, we do more of going to look at gardens or going to do things in the wild. We've just had the most incredible experience last summer. The Hartz Mountains, down the Huon, is our childhood stomping ground because my mother loved Hartz and she led the first excursion for the Society for Growing Australian Plants to Hartz, back in the early '60s. So we've tramped that area a lot but there's always new things to find.

The Garden Angels went on a walk out to Emily's Tarn which is sort of under Hartz Peak (not visited that much). Anyway, we came over – there's a piece of Bolster heath – and Sally had gone down towards Emily's Tarn and there's sort of a soak. It's a little creek and you dip down into that and I said to her 'What's that plant beside you?' Because there was this thing with the most incredible sort of mushroomy-pink – I suppose – quite pink, bells, and I said 'I don't know what that is'. And so

she said, 'Come down.' So I went down to have a look and I said 'I think I know what this is. I think it's an *Archeria*.' Anyway, we photographed it and I still have a student who had done Australian native plants with me who actually works at the [Tasmanian] Herbarium so I contacted Matt and said, 'I think this is this, what do you think?' And he went 'It is Mark. It's *Archeria comberi* but it shouldn't be there because it's never been recorded in Hartz.'

So that was a great discovery by the Garden Angels. I wrote it up for the *Australian Plants Journal* and it appeared on the cover, so that was quite memorable.

But we've had another one too... Very early on Mum lead a walk to Hartz with the Plants Society and there's a plant called *Milligania densiflora* which is a very spectacular lily. It's whitey-cream but at that time there were pink ones and they were on the plain, going across towards the top carpark and there was great excitement about these pink *Milliganias*. Anyway, a couple of people – Essie Huxley contacted Mum afterwards and said, 'Do you think the wallabies eat *Milliganias*?' and Mum thought 'What's that all about?' She said, 'We couldn't find those pink *Milliganias* again.' So, no, obviously they did eat them, but we've never seen a pink one there again until the last Garden Angels walk, and here we found a little group of pink *Milliganias*, out on the way to Emily's Tarn.

So you know, the nice thing about Garden Angels is observation. We also do garden visits and nursery visits. We've just recently been up to Red Dragon up in the North-East which is a fabulous nursery and Andrew's very, very knowledgeable. Sally and I have been up there two weeks ago, on our own, and we were taken all out the back and saw what was in the stock houses and all that, so it was very exciting. But Andrew's very keen to spend a bit of time with me because...

**51:55 Maybe he's going to join Garden Angels perhaps [laughter].**

Well, he knows a few things that I've got that he's quite interested in. He's very into conifers and I particularly like *Abies*. It's fairly new to cultivation (one from Mexico) which is called *Abies religiosa* and the reason is that it's a very Catholic country and they cut it and bring it in to the church, so that's where it gets its name *religiosa* and it has the most incredibly blue-lavender cones so Andrew's very keen to get that off me. [Laughter]

But that's these associations – that's what it's all about.

**Yes, so important.**

**So Garden Angels has probably been going 20 years?**

Oh yes it must be about 20 years or so, yeah.

**Wonderful.**

**Now I wanted you to talk a little more about convergent evolution. Tell us about this.**

So this is another thing I'm really interested in.

Convergent evolution is a recognition that, for a particular environment, different plants adapt the same strategy to survive. A perfect example would be the Tasmanian cushion plants that you get up in the high alpine. You have the same mechanism in New Zealand where they have their vegetable sheep [*Raoulia eximia*] but also the same strategy is adopted in South America by *Bolax*, which is a totally unrelated species and, here, we have more than one Family who've adopted that cushion plant strategy to cope with the conditions.

But another group – and they're in different Families again – in Tasmania we have what's called climbing heath *Prionotes cerinthoides* which is a spectacular heath that actually climbs in our rainforest, but in South America there are three other plants – *Lapergeria* being one of them – that are not related but adopt the same strategy. And there are lots of other examples. It's all about unrelated species adopting the same strategy to survive in a similar environment – it's actually really interesting stuff.

**Mmm. Have you visited some of these other – in China, South America?**

More growing them.

**Growing them, right, so that's how you've been learning about them.**

Yeah, and I first learnt about convergent evolution when I was doing the native plants course and I worked with another teacher called Janet Stephens and Janet used to teach that part of the native plant course. I used to do the propagation and the plant identification and she did that side of how things developed, what the mechanisms and all of that were and Janet and I are still friends and she, of course, got me into that and I just got more and more interested.

**Mmm, that's a fascinating area – in terms of what's happening and the links across the world isn't it?**

That's right, that's right, and it's just not about plants either. I was trying to think of the name of this plant (and I can't) [laughs], well it's not, it's a fungus. There's a fungus that we call Orange Fungus that occurs only on *Nothofagus* here in Tasmania but there is an almost identical one that occurs in *Nothofagus* forest in New Zealand and South America. So you know, there's all these links. And of course, many of these links are because of Gondwana, before you had the split up of the continents – that's an area that I'm really, really interested in because flowering plants started in Southern Gondwana and we're Southern Gondwana.

**Throughout your horticultural career you've also done – which you never talk about very much – but a heap of teaching through Adult Education (not that that exists any more in Tasmania unfortunately) but you must have done that for quite a number of years?**

I did. I don't know how I first – I think it was because I was working for TAFE and at that stage Adult Ed sort of sat under our umbrella before it

was taken away and given to Libraries Tasmania. They were looking for teachers. They knew I ran the Tasmanian Native Plants course and they asked me (or I think they might have asked Laurie Miller first) whether I'd teach. Anyway he came back to me and said 'It's a really good way to hone your skill because you're dealing with a completely different cohort.' You know, anybody who did Adult Ed do it because they really want to learn something or it's an interest. So I started teaching for them and I did quite a few things: I did propagation, landscape design, plant identification. And I taught for the for a number of years (probably five years or so) and then of course Adult Ed sort of underwent a challenging time and it never really thrived when it went to Libraries Tasmania – it wasn't their core business really. But I had a great time.

**And as a beneficiary of one of those courses I can absolutely agree. You had a great time, and we learnt a lot in garden design, thank you.**

**I guess we're getting towards the end of the interview and I'm interested in your thoughts (a) about the future of native plants and gardens generally, given the impact of climate change and environmental changes. Have you got comments on that?**

I have. Tasmania, at the moment, is surprisingly unscathed but I don't think that will continue forever and I'll explain what I mean. Tasmania's native flora – particularly our alpine flora - is what we call a relict flora, so it is a relic of an earlier time when we were wetter. So a lot of things retreat as the climate changes, they go higher. A very good example would be – not here in Tasmania – but in Queensland there are a couple of *Eucryphias* that occur on Mt Bartle Frere and Mt Bellenden Ker – *Eucryphia jinksii* and *Eucryphia wilkiei* – they only occur there because they've migrated up the mountains, but unfortunately with climate change they're going to reach a point where they can't migrate.

I've – over the last couple of years – they're probably the things that I've noticed that really suffer from the heat are things like *Eucryphia*. They'll drop dead overnight if we get these 40-degree days. We are probably still lucky in Tasmania that we tend to get a respite. We'll have a 40-degree day but then it doesn't last for a fortnight or whatever. If that starts to occur things are going to be very hard on the flora.

Things – adaption to climate conditions – takes a long time, but with the rapid rise in temperature and (I think the world's fiddling while Rome burns) we're going to get to a tipping point where we can't control. So that is going to really affect what we can grow. I notice at home I grow heritage apples because my family were the first people to grow apples in Geeveston, so I've planted them. A copy of the things they grew. I noticed – which never happened when we were children – we get those hot days, those apples cook on the tree. I don't think we really realise yet the sorts of implications that can come. You know, things in the garden bolt to seed in the vegetable garden, that sort of thing. But I'm very interested in this, and I keep a sharp eye on what's happening in Europe, and you see quite a bit now of people saying 'Okay what will we be able to grow in five years, ten years?' In the latest *Gardens Illustrated* there



was (what's his name? – the guy from Hermannshof) has a list of plants that they think will do well in climate change in Europe. I think we need to start thinking about what is going to be able to survive moving on. I think our gardens will change. I'm not saying we won't be able to garden but I think the palette of plants is going to be somewhat changed.

Sally and Catherine and Lindy and I have been talking about sitting down and doing a list of the things that we think will do alright. We haven't done that yet but it's on the agenda.

Yes, I think climate change is a very pressing, gloomy disaster on the horizon.

**61:03 Mmm, the Australian Garden History Society – at the national level – have got a National Strategy re climate change, so in terms of our membership, they are trying every month now information comes out in terms of things that are happening, ideas around the impact, which is important.**

**I wondered about the role of the big commercial nurseries – have they got a role in this in terms of future plants and whatever?**

Well I think that's about dissemination. The nursery industries are dominated by fashion. I think people are more conscious now about water conservation, what will do alright, and that is the job of those big nurseries to disseminate those plants, and you walk around a nursery now and you see a lot of things that we may not have seen here in the past.

The other thing that I think – from looking at somewhere like the Plants Society – Mum was saying to me before she died that she thought that she and Dad had the best of it and there were plenty of challenges ahead but we'd been noticing – Mum was a great observer – and commenting about how things were flowering out of season or the flowering season had changed and what effect that must have on the wildlife who rely on that plant. There are plenty of challenges ahead.

**Did your mother document (I mean many of the things she's collected have been documented) her observations in other ways?**

When Mum died it was pretty traumatic because Mum was a very bright person but she got Lewy's Body Dementia and Mum was gone in three months. But we [laughs] Mum had kept extensive records on everything she did but she was a great filer so everything in her office, you know exactly what's in that folder, but also there were seven banana boxes of handwritten diaries that she kept every day. She was also a great documenter using film. She walked in my garden every day, but she was a great observer in the wild. There are about 100,000 photos I reckon... including slides but all meticulously – every box, every slide has written on it where it was, what it is. So there's this record going back to when we were children really. And Mum was a great observer of the natural world. As she got older it was harder to write because of arthritis, she

then moved to birds and was a great bird observer and wrote that up every day.

**So what are your family going to do with these wonderful records?**

They're in my cupboard at the top of the stairs and I have been wading through them. ... We've been working with the Plants Society because there's a lot of history around the Plants Society and we are going to work with the – there's a thing you can do, you can set up a repository which is called an Eminent Person's File, so we'll work with the Archives, the State Archives.

**Oh wonderful.**

Because a lot of that history, there's lots of stuff because Mum was also a representative on the South-West Committee. There's a whole nother history there about the work she did there. She was on the Save Lake Pedder Committee, she was very – Melva Truchanas was one of her best friends and Olegas (before he was drowned) – we used to go to Pedder with him, so there's all the record about that as well and there's another whole bit around Elspeth Vaughan and Max Angus and Patricia Giles, they all used to paint and they'd come to Pedder and so that's how we met all of them.

We had a very charmed life with my mother. [Laughs]. And my father just agreed, so we'd be driving somewhere, and Mum'd go 'Stop, stop, stop! There's a plant' and he'd just sigh and pull over. [Laughter] But he was a good observer. Dad was a bushman, a very good observer, so he encouraged Mum a lot which was really good.

**Some remarkable stories Mark.**

**Now, before we do conclude are there any other things you want to add? We could probably talk for another hour, but I'm just wondering if there are other things we haven't covered in terms of plants, horticulture, the future?**

Well I am sort of coming to the end of my working career. I am working on a project at the moment – we're building a new campus for the team that I now work for. That's a very significant project, a \$30 million build and we get the keys in a week. I've said that we'll bed that in and I've told my bosses that I will stay until I'm 67. I'm 65 at the moment so I've got a couple of years working but I do want to spend some time in my garden, and there's plenty of new plants that I want to try and there are plenty of things to find out there. The one thing that amazes me about the Tasmanian flora is there's always a new form, there's always a bigger flower, there's you know, we still have a lot to learn about our native flora.

I'm toying with the idea of – when I retire – that I'll go and do something at the Uni [University of Tasmania] around botany. Because I'm still, I'm an amateur botanist, but I know a fair bit about botany and Latin but it's always in the back of my mind. I always think that we used to go on these walks (and I won't say who it was) but this person used to (we

were kids) and would correct our pronunciation of botanical names and Latin. And one day Thistle Stead was there and she said to this person 'For goodness sake leave them alone, it's a dead language. It doesn't matter how they say it as long as we understand what they mean.'

[Laughs]

So I love passing on my knowledge and I'm learning every day. In my garden I keep extensive files on the plants. When it was planted, where I got it from, then a description and the Family. But also I have notes on how it's performing and there's quite a few that say 'died' [laughs], but I like observing that stuff and I do like sharing the stuff I've got.

**That's quite amazing Mark, and I think I would conclude the interview and say you've made such an enormous contribution – as an educator and I can say that as a recipient of that – and continuing your knowledge of native plants.**

**We hope – in retirement – you document and publish more about that, and we also hope that all your mother's records get preserved. What an amazing history, absolutely wonderful.**

**So thank you again and thank you on behalf of the Australian Garden History Society Oral History Programme.**

Thank you.

**72:58**

*Recording ends.*

*Interview ends.*