

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



Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton March 2023

Interviewee: **WILL FLETCHER**  
Interviewer: Jean Elder  
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Will Fletcher, Australian Garden History Society, National Oral History Collection, Interviewed 28 March 2023 by Jean Elder.

**[JE] This is an interview with Will Fletcher recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking with Will about his life as a nurseryman and teacher and his passion for bonsai. The interview is taking place on Tuesday the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2023 at Ridgeway, 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 Will, can you please tell me your full name and date of birth?**

[WF] Well I was christened Wilfred and then as soon as I left home I decided to be Will and I was born in 1954 at Katoomba, New South Wales.

**And tell us about early childhood in Katoomba, in the mountains.**

Ah Katoomba was just a handy place to be born because there was a hospital there. My parents were actually missionaries in Central Australia and they came back to New South Wales in time for my birth, which I don't actually remember. Then we moved back out to Central Australia when I was four, till when I was 12.

**So eight years spent in Central Australia. Tell us about that – whereabouts?**

It was at a mission called Ernabella, which has now got a different name. It is known with its Aboriginal name which I can't remember [Pukatja].

So I grew up running around bare-footed in the sandy creeks and the desert country and my mother taught us – there was five kids in the family – taught us by correspondence school, but not School of the Air, which I rather wish that I had been involved in because that would have been a bit more exciting than being taught by mum. [Laughs]

**It was very remote?**

It was very remote, yeah. It was, I think, 200-300 kilometres from the railway line that went up to Alice Springs. So it was in the north-west of South Australia, a long way from anywhere (that we normally know about anyway).

**So you grew up with Aboriginal children as well?**

Aboriginal children as well, played with the Aboriginal children. I didn't get to become fluent in Pitjantjatjara which would have been nice 'cause I could have had more of a connection I think. Some other missionary friends up there became fluent in the local language – Pitjantjatjara – and I think they would have probably got a lot more out of the experience than we did. But yeah it probably left some pretty strong impressions. I know the sound of the Aboriginal choir singing in the church resonates with me still today and when I hear that music it takes me back – their magnificent singing voices.

**Was there much artwork taking place then?**

The artwork was just starting to happen, I think, when we were there. It's taken off in leaps and bounds since then.

**And after you turned 12 where was the next move?**

Back to my parents' farm in New South Wales which was near Canowindra – which is between Orange and Cowra – the central west of New South Wales, and so the rest of my schooling days were based there.

**Were you interested in particular subjects at that stage at school, or school was a chore? How was it for you?**

Certainly, getting used to 'civilisation' was difficult, having spent eight years away from anywhere and scholastically I was reasonably adept and that wasn't a problem. I certainly felt my lack of sporting ability, not having grown up with any of the games that the other children grew up with. I liked the landscape of the farm. We had paddocks and creeks and hills and at that stage in my life I probably thought I might be a farmer but then I decided I didn't like animals, didn't like sheep or cows so that probably cut that out. [Laughs]

**5:12 So the farm was mainly sheep and cows – cattle. Were there any crops grown?**

Oh yeah, we did grow oats and wheat and when my parents moved on and retired to the local town my young brother took over the farm and he, in moving with the times, planted a vineyard, put in a huge dam and then gradually sold off the farm in bits, smaller sections [laughs], ending up with just about five acres himself in the finish, but that was all fine.

**By then you'd moved away. Where was your move?**

I moved to Armidale to University – University of New England – after school. That was as much as anything because I didn't know what I wanted to do. University seemed to be the next sort of step. But in the end I decided it wasn't for me and I left before I graduated.

**What did you start studying?**

I studied a course called Natural Resources which sounded really terrific but the first two years I found it dead boring. It was just basically science. I was wanting to get stuck in to perhaps some ecology and other things to do with the landscape but in the end, I think, looking at some of my fellow colleagues from the day who moved on with their studies and gained their degrees and gained jobs, the direction I went, in hindsight, was probably the best fit for me because I went on and made my own career without going through and getting degrees or taking a strong science involvement. I was happy to be outside working in the garden really.

### **When you left Uni what was the next step?**

I travelled around and then decided I hadn't been to Tasmania so I wanted to come and have a look at Tassie, whereupon I thought I might then travel overseas, which was traditional when you drop out of Uni [laughs], and I landed in Launceston and actually got a job at Allans Nursery, just coincidentally. I was looking for something to engage in and I got a suggestion to go through the Yellow Pages and find something I liked the sound of and then follow that, and that's what I did. I opened the Yellow Pages and leaped through and got to nurseries and I thought outdoor work, should be alright, I might try that. Rang up a few nurseries and the next week I was employed. [Laughter]

### **Those were the days.**

Those were the days.

### **This was 1976 roughly?**

Ah yep, that's right.

### **What do you recall from that time? What was Allans – it was one of the biggest nurseries?**

It was one of the bigger nurseries in Launceston. What I recall is the freezing-cold mornings when my fingers got chilblains because of the frost. I hated that part of the job. I was just a labourer, having had no training at all, but I was quite keen on the idea of moving further into the business and in fact Bill Allan offered me a position to run the new garden centre that he was just building, but he wanted me to say that I wasn't going to go travelling. He wanted someone secure in the job. And, in my naivety, I said 'Well I can't give you that guarantee', so I didn't get the job. The bloke who got the job lasted six months and then he went off and opened a chicken shop – hot chickens! [Laughter] So, so much for hanging about.

But I became interested in landscaping at about that time, so I moved away from Allans and into some landscaping and I was just feeling my way.

### **In Launceston?**

In Launceston. I was just feeling my way into it really. I didn't know much about what I was doing. I didn't charge a lot but I experimented on people's gardens. [Laughs]

### **9:57 So you ran your own business as it were?**

I ran my own business, yeah.

### **And how old were you then Will?**

This'd be early 20s, 23 I suppose.

**And your style of landscaping then, how would you describe it?**

Fairly organic, and certainly I favoured native Australian plants and I used to go to Neale Farrell's nursery out at Underwood as often as I could. In fact one day I got wholly embarrassed because I was out there saying to Neale 'Oh I love this part of my job'. I was virtually saying I'm under someone else's employment and I'm getting plants for their garden and I'm being paid to do it, and I turned round and there was my client right behind me. [Laughter] But he kept me on, I finished the job.

**You obviously didn't upset him too much. Did Allans do native plants at that stage?**

Allans was a general nursery, mainly exotic plants, they had some native plants including something called a brown boronia which my nose does not smell at all, and I'd been potting up these little daggy plants with no real delight and I couldn't understand why they were popular, because I couldn't smell the flowers. So there were a few natives but not a lot.

**The popularity was just beginning to grow.**

Yeah, I guess so. I mean, Neale Farrell covered quite a lot of it at his nursery with the native side of things.

**So was that, partly that contact and interest in native [plants], the reason you decided to do Horticulture at TAFE in Launceston?**

Yes, I started to, I wanted to meet a few more local people as well, so that was part of my socialising in Launceston. I started studying Horticulture at TAFE and also took to some bushwalking with the Launceston Bushwalking Club. Once again for the social aspect, but also to start to explore the island, which I found enchanting and was quite amazed that there were all these magnificent plants in the wild that you could not buy in a nursery, which came to play later in my life.

**Coming back to the TAFE course, what was the syllabus like then, what sort of things were they teaching you?**

It started off just doing basic horticultural learning: propagation, plant cultivation, pests and diseases, a bit of landscaping chucked in there as well. And then when I moved to Hobart a couple of years later, the person who was conducting the courses in Launceston hadn't noted anywhere what I'd done to date so when I got to Hobart I expected to just be able to continue but I had to repeat a year [laughs], because he hadn't filled in the paperwork.

**Oh dear.**

Mmm, but that was alright, because once again it was quite good fun and just meeting a whole lot of other people interested in horticulture was good.

**And a similar sort of course there in Hobart?**

Yes it was a similar sort of course, just the same sort of horticultural, gardening, nursery topics.

**Were there any teachers that stood out for you?**

There were, but this one in particular in Hobart but I can't remember his name – that's pretty poor isn't it? [Laughs]

**That's alright. Why did he stand out?**

He was a very good teacher. I remember, we'd have a subject for about an hour (I can't remember what subject it was) but he'd invariably be very busy and get there ten minutes late but he'd finish ten minutes early and you felt like you'd just learnt so much, compared to some other teachers that waffled on. Yeah, but I can't at the moment remember his name.

**14:46 And did you do landscape architecture as well as horticulture in Hobart?**

Yeah I did. When I first moved to Hobart I decided to have a go at landscape architecture – that was up at the Mount Nelson campus. The course was loosely called Environmental Studies I think (no, can't remember). But they were training architects, landscape architects and town planners. So I started off in the landscape architect stream. It was a very experimental system they had where you, as a student, you could choose what subjects you wanted to do and then make a decision at the end of the year whether you'd passed or not, it was basically up to you. [Laughs] That was very difficult my first year because I didn't feel like I'd worked as hard as I could of, but I felt that I was at the right stage for the next year and I found it quite difficult to decide whether to continue with the second year or not, and in the end I went back to Launceston – where I still had a house – and got back into landscaping and decided that I'd go back outside again and leave the indoor landscape architecture to others.

**Right, that must have been quite a difficult decision.**

It was tricky. [Laughs] In the second half of the year I organised a big social do for this small faculty that I was in – Environmental Design it was called – so I organised this, got a band organised, organised a venue and had everyone come along at the end of the year and that was my main successful part of the second half of the year, and I wasn't really sure whether I should count that as part of my studies or not. [Laughter] And I had an advisor, so I talked to my advisor and he was advising me that I could do whatever I wanted and in the end I couldn't get back on to a Commonwealth Scholarship if I didn't continue on and I decided I should continue but I then (like I just mentioned) I decided not to in the end.

But at the same time I learnt a lot in that year. I learnt a lot about designing gardens and met a lot of people that became friends or colleagues over the next dozen or so years. So it was worthwhile doing

but definitely continuing my habit of starting courses and not finishing.  
[Laughter]

**And you went back to Launceston. Was that around '78, '79? Was that just briefly then and then you came back here to Hobart?**

Yes, I came back to Hobart. My then girlfriend had moved to Hobart and that was the reason I came back to Hobart, just for a change anyway. So from then on I was landscaping, mainly peoples' private homes around the Hobart area.

**Any of them stand out, can you recall particular....?**

I did some work for some landscape architects, who I met doing my course. Some of those were good fun and a nice result, but nothing particularly stands out as head above the shoulders. A lot of nice areas that ended up changing in a positive way and that was what I really enjoyed about landscaping – looking at a site and working out how to turn it into something delightful and functional within a budget. Mind you, my quoting was abysmal, I never quoted enough. I always felt that I was charging too much. [Laughs]

**You weren't making a fortune then?**

[Laughs]. I wasn't making a fortune. I was sort of scraping through from one job to the next. Not my forté being a businessman, from that point of view anyway.

**So native plants to the fore in this kind of landscaping or a mix of....?**

Oh, native as much as I could but I've always enjoyed deciduous trees for their stature and also their shade in the summer and their sun in the winter, so it'd have to be native plants plus deciduous trees that I mainly used, yes.

**20:12 You did this for four or five years and then you described having (what you call) a 'light bulb moment', while you attended an Indigenous plant seminar in 1998, [1988] I think it was. Tell us about that.**

Yes, it would have been. The landscaping work (because I worked on my own with occasional help), every time I'd start a new job that's when the heavy lifting's involved, digging in the dirt and moving the big rocks and this always seemed to happen in the New Year, so I'd have a break, four or six weeks off over Christmas/New Year which was a good time to have a break in that trade because other tradespeople had the time off as well, and if you wanted to go and get some gravel or sand or product they might still be closed, so I used to have the time off as well.

So I'd always be starting a new job in mid-summer, which I admittedly in Hobart is not very hot but I decided it was pretty hot and after a while I thought I'm getting a bit tired of this heavy work in mid-summer every year and in my mind I was thinking I might like to do something else, but I hadn't thought what it could be. But at this seminar I went to, which was discussing using local plants in local landscapes....

### **Do you remember who it was run by – the seminar?**

Um, I remember Jerry de Gryse was there – a landscape architect – but I'm not sure who actually organised it. But my attention span in lectures is about ten minutes and after every ten minutes in a lecture I'd be doodling on my notepad until I covered a complete page and then I'd start a new one, but I suddenly thought 'Oh, gee it'd be good to have a native Tasmanian plant nursery', and then I thought 'Well why don't I do it?' [Laughs] And it was actually a light bulb moment. I suddenly thought 'Gee that's a good idea, I'd like to do that', and instead of doodling I got the biro and started writing notes fervently on the page and getting quite excited about this concept and it was really like an epiphany almost. I thought 'That's my next move, that's what I want to do next', and I even worked out a business name (which I later changed because it was too close to another business name apparently).

And I realised that I hadn't taken much notice of propagation – when I was doing my TAFE course I wasn't very interested in propagation. I was more interested in the landscaping so I'd let that slide a bit but I thought well other people can propagate plants, I guess I can propagate plants, which is an important part of a nursery. So, yes I got back home at the end of the day and said to my poor wife, 'Guess what, we're going to open a native plants nursery'. 'Are we?' she said. And then the next six or 12 months, I'd be on the kitchen bench after our son went to bed, with potting mix and cuttings and seed and started the whole thing from home.

### **And that was 1990 you opened Plants of Tasmania.**

September 1990 I opened the nursery.

### **And that was from your home or not?**

No that was – we found a block of land. Our home site wasn't suitable for it, for bringing people in. So we found two quarter-acre blocks of land in the middle of Ridgeway which were owned by different people but I managed to buy them each and sort of have the half-acre space available to me. But the block was covered in gorse up to about a metre and a half high, it was a real mess and I got in there with a 20-ton excavator and ended up burying most of the gorse under the level areas that we levelled out there.

So for 18 months I was madly propagating and constructing, building, landscaping the new site. I felt it very important to have extensive gardens to show off the Tasmanian flora because a lot of people weren't familiar with it and so that was part of the fun of this new project and the propagating was also good fun because it's like magic. I hadn't realised the value. I bought myself a 6x4 heat frame for doing cuttings and misting and filled it full of cuttings in a couple of weeks, of about maybe three dozen different plants and then was absolutely enthralled that I could pick up a punnet and there's roots coming out the bottom. It was just like magic. And what was also very interesting was propagating plants that I had no idea whether I could do it or not and having some



terrific successes, and some that didn't work, and that's what you find as you go in an entirely new range of species – you're going to have some that work and some that don't.

**26:09 It sounds like enormous amount of work. So that 18 months – you were doing this before you actually opened in 1990?**

It was lucky I was a young man. [Laughs]

**Did you have any help at that stage?**

I got a bit of help, a bit of labouring help when I needed it and professional help like building the buildings and I had a bricklayer friend who helped out there, so I've managed to find assistance when I needed it.

**And there wouldn't have been many other native plant nurseries in Hobart at this stage?**

No. There was an outlet at Margate: Robin Red Breast Nursery and that was the only other native nursery around the Hobart area, and I had friends with a native nursery at Buckland, Liffey, and out of Wynyard. So there was four of us. We got together and got on very well together and decided we should form an organisation (tongue-in-cheek) and I decided to call it SNAIL: Small Nurseries Association including Les (didn't want to leave Les out) and we used to get together once or twice a year in a different part of the state and go for walks and talk nursery talk. So that was fun.

**Did you share plants at this stage, propagation, in your SNAILs group?**

Yeah we did, because I wanted to identify as many Tassie plants as I could because there were so many native plants that were Australian natives, but not Tasmanian, that were not part of my repertoire. I needed to build up as much variety as I could so that people would come to the nursery and be able to satisfy their horticultural requirements with what I had in stock.

For example, the Grevillea family, a lot of people Australia-wide know grevillea as an Australian native plant and a delightful plant to bring honeyeaters into your garden. Well there's only one species of grevillea that occurs naturally in Tasmania. Strangely it's called *Grevillea australis* and it's got a tiny white flower, it's too small for nectar-feeding birds. So I would get people coming to the nursery wanting some grevilleas to bring the birds in and I had to say 'Well I'm sorry, but I can offer this perhaps, this melaleuca instead'. But our native grevillea is pollinated by native bees which are lovely I'm sure but people don't sort of notice them very much. Yeah, that's just one aspect of the nursery.

**And how long did you cooperate – the SNAILs group, the four of you? Did that last over several years?**

The SNAIL group went on for at least a decade or more probably, 10-15 years. It was very tongue-in-cheek. At one stage one of the members wanted to make it more serious and put in an expression of interest. I

think the Nurserymen's Association Australia-wide was trying to introduce something (I can't remember what now) but we never did get serious, we were just enjoying just having fun really.

**30:07 As a very specialised nursery how did you manage staffing it?**

Well we started off with just me on weekends only or by appointment, which was okay and then as we'd gradually build up, I went to be open five days a week, but lots of people couldn't remember which days I was closed of course, and they'd come up to Ridgeway and the gates are closed and that wasn't very good for business. Finally I decided that I could afford to have it open seven days a week and have someone there and I could have some time off and I hadn't realised how much I was tied to the nursery until we had that seven days opening. Because before that I still had to be around to water, even on the days off it was closed I had to water it, but then with a staff member there I didn't have to be there to water it and I hadn't realised that was going to be such a big factor. And I sort of suddenly released myself for two days a week, which was great. And as it turned out trade picked up at virtually the same time and easily covered the wages for the extra two days.

**So how long after you'd established the nursery did you move to seven days? Was that a decade later or....?**

It was probably about five or seven years down the track.

**1997-98, yes.**

Something like that, yeah.

**Were there any disasters on the way? It's a difficult climate up in the mountains with the wind and the frosts?**

I don't remember anything cataclysmic. There was the little mini problems of course when you'd germinate a tray of something and then it didn't get enough water and it all dies. I mean that sort of thing comes and goes, it's par for the course really, you just try and do a better job next time.

But what was really exciting for me was to propagate plants that were just wonderful, Tasmanian native plants. For example, the pandani *Richea pandanifolia*, which is such a striking plant in the landscape, very fine seed. I discovered it would germinate quite easily as long as you kept it moist. The plants were slow but they became magnificent pot plants and you could keep them for 10, 15 years in a pot quite happily. Wonderful, wonderful plants. So it was really nice to get that propagated and available in pots, and then other plants, for example like the deciduous beech *Nothofagus gunnii*, which has such a wonderful show of coloured foliage in the Autumn up in the high country.

**Every Anzac Day we're all up there, aren't we?**

Every Anzac Day. That was such a difficult plant to propagate and also then to keep going. For something that grows in really harsh, rocky conditions, you'd think it'd be as tough as, but it doesn't like horticulture.

Once you get it established in your garden it's not too bad but they don't seem to last forever in pots, and they certainly haven't been good for bonsai because they keep dying, which is not what you want really. So that was an example of a plant that I would have loved to have tamed, but in a way I quite like it that it's untamed. I don't think we should be able to tame everything.

**And other plants that stand out from that time. You propagated, Huon pines and Pencil pines and others?**

Yes the Huon pines and the Pencil pines – both lovely to propagate. Huon pines will propagate from a branch stuck in a vase of flowers if you leave it long enough. I found that out when I had a customer who bought a Huon pine and he said, 'What's this dangly bit off the side?' I said, 'You don't love that bit?' He said 'No.' I said, 'Do you want me to cut it off?'. He said 'Yes.' So I cut it off and I stuck this branch in a vase of flowers that I had on the bench. We'd keep changing the flowers every week just to have something to show people when they came in and the branch stayed there and about three months later I pulled it out and it had roots on it. So I thought 'Oh Huon pine's not too hard to propagate.' Very easy from cuttings, Huon pine. A lovely bush in a pot, lovely weeping foliage. It takes a bit longer to get a timber tree. I haven't got that far yet. And the Pencil pines – an iconic tree from Tasmania's high country, grows easily from seed and pretty easily from cuttings as well and in fact, my pseudo-Tasmanian alpine garden out here has got about a dozen Pencil pines that I'm going to try and keep fairly low, as a landscape garden.

**People describe – I've heard it said, I don't subscribe to this – that native plants are rather boring (Tassie natives) and not colourful but having visited Plants of Tasmania over many years, there's such a diversity of colour and form and structures and flowers that people don't seem to recognise.**

Yeah well that's true. But we're spoilt in our western culture really in that we've got access to plants from all over the world, and of course the bigger the range of plants you have the more colour and variety you've got. But certainly enough in Tasmanian flora to create beautiful gardens. But having said that, from a flowering point of view our Tasmanian flora, 90% of it flowers in Spring, so it does make the rest of the year a bit quiet flower-wise. And once you go further afield, if you extend to the Australian mainland, you can find native plants that flower every time in the year, every month and with almost any colour, so the further you expand your horticultural availability of plants the more variety you can have. But there's plenty of structure, leaf shape, beauty of trunks, which comes out in the bonsai, becomes very important.

**37:25 So Will we're just starting to talk about bonsai, but before that I just want to go back – finishing Plants of Tasmania. You managed and ran that for nearly 20 years and then you sold it to one of your customers, is that right?**

Yeah that's correct.

**And by then you had already started your interest in bonsai. Tell us about that, how did that come about?**

Yes, I think my initial interest in bonsais, probably like a lot of peoples', either bonsai or playing guitar or something and you think one of these days you might get round to doing. So I remember thinking over the years, I like the look of bonsai and I might have a go some time, and never did. But I was having a holiday and I was in Canberra visiting friends and went to the Botanical Gardens and picked up a booklet on bonsai in Australia and took it back and read it and I thought I should give it a go when I get back to the nursery and I did.

I got back to the nursery and I was looking around for a suitable tree and I found a myrtle, *Nothofagus cunninghamii*, that had been damaged by something else falling on it and it had broken off and I thought that looks like it could be a bonsai, it looks a bit tortured already. [Laughs] So that was my first 'bonsai' – No. 1. And I've still got No. 1, so I've had that now probably for maybe 15-20 years. At one stage it got a very bad case of scale and covered in sooty mould because I wasn't diligent with my nursery hygiene and I got sick of it and decided to completely de-foliate it. And this is the evergreen myrtle, not the deciduous one. So I completely de-foliated it and I thought well if it comes back, it comes back. And it did and I've still got it to this very day, and it's out there in the shade house with a No. 1 on the label. I ended up with over 700 constructed bonsais when I had the business, but I've still got No. 1 and I'm quite proud of that.

**It's been said – this is describing bonsai – 'In a sense bonsai can be compared with the Japanese haiku. A miniature poem of 17 syllables, haiku expresses with a minimum of words a vast wealth of poetic creation. In this sense both bonsai and haiku have something in common – a method of embracing much in little.'**

That sounds pretty good. Certainly with bonsai you pare it down to the basics. The trunk becomes very important in nearly every bonsai. The connection of the trunk to the ground, like a flared trunk going onto some visible roots perhaps gives you the impression of age and strength. The branches and the foliage – you do pare things down to simple aspects of the tree. In fact one of my friends in the bonsai club in Hobart is very, very good at simplifying his trees and you see something that he's designed and you realise that he's pared it down to the most simplest part of the tree, in a way. So that statement's very true.

**Having just seen your wonderful private collection here at Ridgeway, they are works of art and in such a simple form. The trees, the trunks, the rocks and some of the other tiny ferns you have with them, they are truly, truly works of art.**

It is like if you take a photo of a plant in your garden or in the wild, when you look at that photo you don't see the rest of the garden you just see what you've highlighted in the photo. It's the same thing with bonsai really.

So having mentioned that – I certainly my whole bonsai career – I’ve tried to design the plants to look like they fit in an Australian landscape. And it’s been quite a challenge to try and work out how to have a plant that looks like a little tree but not like a Japanese little tree. I remember a couple of satisfying moments when I had my bonsai nursery, I had at one stage there, I had a bunch of young lads come in (well teenagers probably) and just one of them had an interest in the trees and one of the guys there who had no idea about what he was coming to look at he just said, all of a sudden he turned to me and he said ‘These look like little trees.’ And I thought ‘Ah, beauty! It works, the collection works.’  
[Laughter]

And the other time that I felt a great sense of satisfaction was when I had a couple who had been living in Japan for quite a few years and I was very busy with customers at the time and didn’t have much of a chance to talk to them. But they came to the front door of the nursery and just stood there and looked at the collection with a great look of satisfaction on their face and I said ‘Hello, how are you? Are you enjoying it?’ and they said, ‘Look we’ve been in Japan for the last six years and we didn’t really like the bonsai but we LOVE this.’ So I thought well there you go. It must have been – I think – I captured that Australian spirit in the trees so it didn’t look like a collection of Japanese bonsai, it looked like a collection of Australian bonsai and that for me has being very satisfying.

Having said all that, I remember I was going to give a talk about Tasmanian tea trees as bonsai to a bonsai club in Canberra and I thought well I’m going to go for a five-day tour around Tassie and just take photos of tea trees. You know, look for inspiration for bonsai and to my astonishment I found it very difficult to find anything that looked inspiring from a bonsai point of view. Your typical Tasmanian tea tree are scraggly, are thick and dense and have no real shape and it was quite astounding and so I realised that in many ways the plants, if I was taking a tea tree to bonsai, I would be generally making it look perhaps neater and better than it did in the wild. But nowhere near to the extent that someone who wanted to do a Japanese-style would do to the poor thing, they’d trim it to within an inch of their life and have it so neat and tidy that it would look almost plastic. So I was trying to capture that slight neatness and at the same time a whimsical and wild look to the plant.

**46:11 And having seen your private collection I think you’ve achieved that, absolutely.**

**So you ran Island Bonsai, your nursery dedicated to crafting Tasmanian indigenous bonsai for how many years – 10, 12 years?**

I have lost track, but probably about that, yes. And now I’ve passed the mantle on, another colleague – a younger man than I – has taken on the bonsai nursery business up at Collinsvale and a lot of my plants that are no longer required by me have moved on to him.

**How did you document those, your bonsai? Did you document them over that period of time? Did you take photographs, keep a written record?**

I kept a very small written record. I'm not very good at keeping records but I have a tiny book – a bonsai-sized book – that I write a few notes in like the date of the propagation of the tree, whether it's a cutting or a seed. Sometimes the plants have been collected from the wild in one of the Forestry coupes. Our club can get a permit to go and have a bit of a dig on the side of the road, which I always thought was cheating because I'd always grown my plants from seed or cuttings and felt that that was the ethical way to grow trees rather than dig them up. But these coupes where we can get a permit to dig are coupes that are going to be slashed and burnt in a few years to come, so everything gets obliterated anyway. So you don't feel like you're stealing from the wild.

**Several of your notable bonsais have ended up as part of the National Bonsai and Penjing Collection of Australia at the National Arboretum in Canberra, including I think, a Woolly tea tree (which you can tell me it's correct name) which you started in 1991. Is that specimen still going?**

That tree is still there, looking a little bit neater than when I had it but that's one of the interesting things about that collection, as an exhibition. If you go to an exhibition of someone's paintings or photographs what you see on the wall never changes, that's it, that's the finished product. I sent a number of plants to the Canberra Bonsai Collection there and of course they grow and they change and they need fertiliser and watering and they get older and the trunk gets thicker and the specimens will change and have to be looked after. And I was hoping to keep the trees as casual as possible, but knowing full well that they'd gradually become more and more stylised and less like what I had envisaged. But that's what you have to expect.

Anyway I sent the Woolly tea tree, which is *Leptospermum lanigerum*, and the particular form of tree was one from the West Coast near Granville Harbour, which had spreading foliage rather than upright foliage, and the spreading nature of the tree does lend itself to bonsai work. And I also sent them a Huon pine which unfortunately, after a root-pruning exercise, it did not survive, so we lost that one. But it lasted for several years, probably three years before that, in the freezing cold Canberra winters and the boiling hot Canberra summers, so it's just a matter of the care and attention required. I mean the Huon pines grow in Tassie with their feet in the water, along the edge of the rivers, so that gives you a clue as to how much water they like.

But I was very honoured to be able to have a tree or two in that collection at Canberra, which is one of the highlights of the Arboretum. Because the rest of the Arboretum are still young trees in the ground, the bonsai collection is a finished and very exciting place for people to visit and it's always very popular. There's a mix – they are wanting to get a larger mix of native plants, I believe. There's a mix of natives and exotics in their collection.

**51:41 Now I want to turn to some of your work in terms of publications and writing that you've done over the years, Will. You certainly prepared a guide to Tasmanian bush foods with Kris Schaffer – any other publications that stand out for you?**

I wrote some short articles for giving talks to various clubs. I certainly did the newsletter for the nursery and tried to make that as 'newsy' as possible.

**And that was a lot of work. You produced one how often?**

It was every year. I don't think it was any more often than that. And I've also prepared talks on bonsai with Tasmanian plants to give to various clubs over the years.

**Are there any particular gardens that stand out for you now, in terms of native plants and/or bonsai, apart from your own here which is truly wonderful?**

My front garden is, for me, the standout and that one I've crafted now with a lot of Pencil pines as the mainstay, and shrubs and rocks and water features, that's my personal standout garden.

**And we can see the results of your passion as we look out the window, yes.**

**I just wanted to ask a final question about the impact of climate change from your perspective, having been a nurseryman and now gardener for so many years. Do you think it's going to have a major impact on our horticulture?**

It will have to. It'll probably sneak up on us a bit like the boiling frog principle. Yeah, unfortunately it will impact. Over what period of time we don't know yet.

**Are you seeing any impact here?**

Ah, I haven't noticed an impact, no, not yet.

**Not yet, okay. Well on that note we might finish Will, unless there is anything else you would like to add.**

Nothing that jumps to mind, no.

**Let's finish at that point. Thank you again for your contribution to our National Oral History Collection.**

Thank you.

**54:46**

*Recording ends.*

*Interview ends.*