AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

WESTERN AUSTRALIA BRANCH

photograph by Patsy Vizents 15 May 2024

Interviewee:	DR MARION BLACKWELL AM
Interviewer:	CAROLINE GRANT AND PATSY VIZENTS
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0:00

We are here today to interview Marion Blackwell, landscape architect, eminent botanist, teacher and mentor to many writers of books about plants. The interviewer is Carolyn Grant and the technical producer is Patsy Vizents (PV), both members of the Australian Garden History Society.

Marion, welcome and thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the oral history collection of the Australian Garden History Society.

First question. Could you please tell us how you became interested in the Australian Garden History Society?

I don't know when I first became interested but having been to a lecture by them, it seemed to me this was an area of knowledge, of interest, it was quite valuable for people and should be fostered.

Next, some questions about your upbringing and your interest in ecology. Could you talk about where you were born and your upbringing in the country in New South Wales?

Well, I was born in the mountains, the northern part of The Great Dividing Range, only about 100 miles south of the Queensland border, but snow country. People don't realise that you could get snow, not every year, but probably every third or fourth year you'd get a fall of snow, which ofcourse was the greatest joy to us, for the children; you could go out and build snowmen, have lots and lots of fun.

So, did you go to school or was it Correspondence?

No, we did Correspondence School, which was followed in part, by School of the Air [indistinct], and that was fantastic, both were fantastic. They were, I think, very with it, you might say. They were a great means of educating children who were living in isolated situations.

So, they were good at it?

Oh, excellent. They were innovative. We might have had droughts or floods or landslides that would stop you getting anything up to six months. You'd have to climb over the ridge and extra roads, it was very steep and very difficult, the road, from the river up to our property, steep. It went up a thousand feet. It was just wonderful, wonderful, beautiful country and I loved it but of course it was an impossible block, allocated to soldier settlers to buy. It was chopped off ends of big stations. There was no good country because it was very difficult to manage. If you were mustering sheep in the back paddock, which we called bottom holding, you had to ride along the mountain; the crest of the mountain, and send your dogs down

the valleys to rout the sheep and then you pick them all up at the bottom. You couldn't fetch much of them on horseback, it was too steep.

I've heard you took yourself off on trips up and down the mountains and that was how you learned about plants. Is that . . .

I don't know you could call them trips, I used to walk. I think as soon as I could walk, as a child, I investigated, I walked around. I was very lucky, we had a wonderful Aboriginal stockman, quite an elderly man, by the name of Yim and if I wasn't home, when I ought to have been, my mother would send him to find me. He was always able to track where I had been.

So, which parts of Australia did you become familiar with as a child?

As a child, very little. Mostly the neighbouring towns and the properties in the mountains.

5.02

Did you study Biology specifically at school?

Not specifically.

What made you interested in going to university?

Well, it's very funny because as a child I didn't really think about university, I probably didn't even know about university, but when the inspector came out at the end of my primary schooling, he came and I had to do an intelligence test, with 100 questions in a certain time. I can remember him being astonished having only one wrong and he said to my father, "this girl must go to university". He said, "Well, I've been thinking about that but it is difficult".

So, you went to study Botany at the University of Sydney?

That was one of the subjects I did, yes.

And then, didn't you specialise in Mycology?

Well, I didn't specialise in Mycology, what happened was, when I graduated, well, no, when I finished my course, I didn't actually graduate until next year; they gave the graduation ceremony were set, that's when you actually graduated. So, I hadn't even graduated when I had this request to apply for a lectureship in Mycology. It was my Professor [indistinct] (7.58) said "this is something I should do." I should have argued with him, but I did plant physiology not mycology. He said, "it will do you good, you will learn a lot." [laughter]

So, that's funghi?

That's funghi, that's funghi.

And you had to teach it.

Yes.

Can you tell us what it was like to teach something you didn't know much about?

Well I suppose I did know quite a lot about it but it wasn't my special field. I was most interested in the physiological processes within plants; how they grew and why they grew, where they grew and that had always fascinated me since I was a little child, but when I started to concentrate on funghi, he was quite right. They are the basis of all life and living, what goes on in the soil and where the habitats of plants and trees, or shrubs, everything else; they are a very important integral part of the livelihood of a lot of organisms in this land.

Do you remember any significant gardens that influenced you when you were young, maybe a homestead or town?

No, I wasn't interested in gardens at that stage I was interested in trees. I used to ask people "what tree is that", and there was nobody that knew what any trees were or they'd say, "oh, that's a rubber gum or a yellow box" or some common name. Then you'd ask the people on the next property when we went there, and obviously it was the same tree, but they had a completely different name for it. None would be scientific. There had been no major work done on the genus Eucalyptus. So that is a very, very significant part of Australia. It is the only nation that is dominated by a single genus of trees and they are from ground covers, when you wouldn't call them trees, but they go right down [indistinct] (9.55) and they are up to the tops of the mountains, the highest mountain up to the edge of snow country. Also, we have Eucalypts which are the tallest angiosperms in the world. So, they are a very significant genus [indistinct].

10.18

So this is, before you were in your twenties that nobody was talking about Eucalypts? Is that right?

Yes.

Did you notice anything change when you went to university?

Just that there was still no interest and because they didn't have names, nobody could tell you about "that one". The man who is currently the top "eucalyptologist" in Western Australia is fantastic at tackling this problem. He used to be I think, a travelling salesman for Elders and he would visit these stations around this huge state, which if you look on a map you see the extent is, and the wives would say to him "what's that tree?". Particularly the wives, it's true the wives loved the trees but

they'd say "what tree is that?". So, he got very interested and he became seriously interested and my first acquaintance of him was when I was the person in charge of publications at the Wild Flower Society of Western Australia and and he came in, very shy and there was this man saying that he had written this book but he couldn't afford to publish it. He had written if for the wives of the station owners in this wheatbelt area of Western Australia.

Is it Malcolm French?

And his name is Malcolm French, yes.

There have been some wonderful books from him recently.

Oh, he has been fantastic. I just thank him for the most scientifically accurate and beautifully written in a language that people can understand and the absolutely marvellous and amazing thing is, he gives credit to all the people who have given questions and information to him. It must have been a terrible situation in WA, I suppose about once in seven years, you'd have a visit from the "eucalyptologist" that live in Sydney or Melbourne, they come over, they've been here for three days and they're done. They take all your stuff but you wanted to know what the names were but never ever did you hear any answers back. It was so frustrating. You've lost your specimens and they didn't have the answer for the trees, so that was an absolute blessing that he came in with this book. And I said to him, I remember saying to him, "I'm Publications Officer, I have to read this, read every book that comes in, to see whether it's a suitable book for us to publish. It has to be on the flora of Western Australia."

Well, I read the book, well, I was absolutely . . . it was fantastic and it was written in every-day language; it wasn't stuffed up with scientific names or scientific acts, it was written so the every-day person could read it and understand it and become familiar with which tree was what.

Can I take you back to Sydney for a moment? I want to know, when you graduated, did you go straight into designing gardens? When you finished your teaching at Sydney University, or finished your degree, did you go straight into designing gardens?

Designing gardens had nothing to do with my degree.

Oh [laughter]. Well you did have a lot of plant knowledge.

I think I probably had a lot of plant knowledge without scientific background and without accurate names from when I was little. I can remember one way I earned my pocket money when I went to university was designing the gardens for friends who wanted to . . . maybe they had cottoned onto the fact that I could design gardens and I used to just, it was very amateurish I'm sure. I can't remember much, whether there'd be any records of them but they were scattered, probably mostly on the North Shore because that's where I was living.

There's more land there for gardening?

Yes, the gardens were bigger gardens, not exclusively there but that was when I actually started drawing up plans for people to develop up their gardens.

16.15

So, you are self-taught?

I suppose I was. Well, in those days there really was nothing available except horticultural knowledge of European plants and garden designs, I expect you would call it which were very tight and set out mostly in straight lines or registered curves and all the ones mainly were hydrangeas and roses, the plants that people knew and loved and the knowledge that came with them from overseas. Chiefly from England but where ever else they originated and it took a long time for any Australian plants to be recognised. "That scruffy old stuff from the bush", they used to say to me. They actually prevented me from becoming a member of the landscape group here, I was crossed off the list because I used that old scruffy stuff.

Well, you were just ahead of your time Marion. Now, why did you move to Perth?

Why did we? Because John was offered the job with Professor ? (18.00) who was present when the new Medical School was formed in Perth. We thought about it and we were sort of yes/no, yes/no and it was about a year, thinking about rooting up our family, of course I had a young family at that stage.

Do you know which year that was? And how many children did you have then?

I had one and three quarters [laughter]

A difficult time for women to be uprooted and moved.

Yes, it is not easy and I don't have usual pregnancies so that was quite a trauma but . . .

You had four children but what was the first job you had in Perth or that you gave yourself to do?

Goodness only knows, I have no idea. Just people asking me about plants or what could we put there or what would grow there and it sort of developed, gradually developed further into drawing the design.

One of the things that impresses many landscape architects in Perth is that you have been known to collect seed and put it in your own designs. So, did you start doing that quite early or . . . ?

Yes, the reason is native species were regarded very badly by the general population. I don't know who set up this syndrome and [indistinct] (19.51) that is what they kept saying but nobody looked at their beauty or their sustainability and they'd be watering and fertilising. Gardening was they had the same attitude that they had in Europe. What I was trying to do was to develop local character with the absolutely beautiful species that were here to teach people what they were and how to grow them and that they woudn't need watering once they got them established and that they would stay alive whereas the others; they keep on having to replant or put something else in. It took a long time.

How old were your children when you started doing surveys for mining companys and other organisations?

20.55

Once they went to school I could do that. Prior to that, I mostly taught at university. The Professor here was short of staff and he begged me on bended knee [laughter] to come and I'd say, "oh no, not till my children go to school." He convinced me first of all to come one afternoon a week and take a prac class. That's how it started.

When you started working in the remote area surveys, what was it like? I mean, we think of it as a man's world.

Why?

Well, because most people, male or female (Eurpean) didn't venture into some of the places you went. What was that like?

That fact is true but it's stupid, because why wouldn't you venture? It's a beautiful – this is an ancient, worn down continent with the most amazing vegetation forming its character and we are just dying to know more about it.

What was the best part about going on these surveys?

I think it was all the exciting plants you found. And if found and you couldn't identify it, it took ages and ages to realise that they hadn't been collected before and that they had to be named. I used to get the Botanist at the Herbarium to do that very chore but I like going out and collecting.

What was the most challenging part about collecting? Lack of time?

The whole difficulty to get into places and the moving around, I mean, I can remember one job [giggling] I was asked to do and I had two calamities. The first thing was that the young Botanist who I engaged to come as my assistant, broke a bone in his foot the week before I was meant to go. So, he was out and I couldn't get anyone else quickly so I said to Alicia [Marion's daughter] who was probably only about six, I don't know, would she come? "Oh no mummy, I can't." She was

very shy and she was a very clingy little girl back then, just gorgeous, but they grow up really quickly with self-confidence. Anyway, in the end, she said “yes, I’ll come”, and it was amazing. We had gone up there to be to the destination where the truck had been left for me, or ute. It was left for me at the boundary gate at this place to do the survey of an absolutely amazing property, with wonderful rock outcrops, all sorts of things and . . .

Do you remember where it was? Do you remember the place?

I remember the place so vividly in my mind. I should know where it is but I can’t tell you quickly, I’d have to think. The nearest location was Sandstone. No, no, but up in that area which isn’t very habitated. At the boundary gate, Yeelirre, it was called Yeelirre, it was beautiful. Yes, it was an absolutely beautiful place with rocky outcrops that were stunning with great huge rocks that looked like big birds sitting on their nests and all sorts of weird things in a way. When we got there, there were two utes at the gate of this station and a note saying that one wouldn’t start and the other one had no brakes. And here I was with a little girl at foot, thinking dare I do this, is it a dangerous thing for her for me to be setting out doing this? She would say, “come on [indistinct] (26.19) and so we went. I said to her “you’ve got to write the notes”. Anyway, what happened was that she took the note book and the pencil and she wrote the notes and I dictated as we went about where we were and what we found and all of the plants and you can imagine the extraordinary spelling! [laughs]

Wow, that’s amazing!

So, it had some repercussions later on which I perhaps, can tell you about now.

Do, please tell us because there are not too many six year olds employed to record botanical information, I don’t think.

27.05

Well, the funny result of that is that some years later I had a quite bombastic, big bulky fellow come stomping into my office in West Perth, demanding to see me. Oh, I had a deadline of a thing that had to be in that day and didn’t want to see anybody but when he came in to see, it was a particular plant that he stormed in and said “it only grows in South Australia, it doesn’t grow in West Australia! I found it”. He was very, very aggressive. I said to him, “well, I will give you my field note books and you can look it up, because this is where we found it, I remember what it looked like”. Anyway, he got this thing and started to read it and he stormed into my room again - “What is this joke?” and I was slightly offended. Alicia had written it in sound language, you know what I mean?

Phoenetic?

Yes, phoenetic. So, I then had to explain to him what had happened, but I take my hat off to him, he wrote down the information about where it was and hired a car

and off he set and found it. So, my information must have been pretty accurate because he didn't know anything about West Australia at all. So that was that.

That's fantastic. Onto another aspect of your career, can you explain how you came to be involved in saving the Cloisters fig tree? Right in the middle of the CBD in Perth, I think it's to do with when Mt Newman House was being built[1].

Well, it's going to be hard for me to explain how because I don't know why or how and it was quite soon after we moved to Western Australia. There was this man[2], banging on the front door at about six o'clock in the morning, saying he needed me, to come and help. I was quite taken a-back when he said what was the trouble. He said, they cut around about three quarters of the, or nine tenths he might have said, but there was only about a foot left, circumference of the [slight confusion between trees] that means I've got the wrong one.

That means you were saving more than one tree, Marion?

[Laughs] A lot! The Cloisters tree, what had happened, is that this fig tree had been saved, and I found out quite a lot of the history of the tree later on, so I will tell you a bit about that. It had been given to a migrating family from England by people visiting and it was in a pot. When it grew, they were living first of all, in St Georges Terrace down on the eastern end but they moved up the street, but I can't remember, but to the centre of the city so to speak. There was a big block there with . . . a church . . . building, what's it called?

Anyway . . . I'm talking about the Cloisters, that's what I should be talking about [laughter].

PV: Did they move to that Cloisters site?

Yes. They moved from where they were renting to, with the Cloisters tree, to the site, with the tree in a pot and it was outgrowing the pot. So, the father dug a hole and planted it next to the well, in the garden of that Cloister building. And the roots now go underneath the next street. They dug them up, it's fantastic. But it had so much damage done to it. People cutting it back, and they've built a building right through it.

They've built a bar over it.

Oh it's terrible, it was a beautiful tree.

So, you went there and I remember you saying that you had to spray it. You had to climb the tree to spray it.

[1] May, 1970 https://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b4635191_2
[2] Don Bailey according to conversation between Caroline Grant and Marion Blackwell prior to interview in May, 2024.

Yes, I had a very good tree surgeon[3]. I rang him immediately and said “Murray Turner, can you come? This is urgent and we need to spray this tree.” And he was excellent and he had had actual training. I think he was the only trained tree surgeon in Perth at that stage and he would take on jobs, he was excellent. So, he had to get up this tree and spray it on the underside as well as the upper side of the leaves, to try and stop it transpiring. Because, they had cut off three quarters of the root system and there was just this little bit left. The roots, as I say, went under the next street. It was quite an established big, old fig tree. I mean how they could do what they did I cannot believe, but we saved it.

And it is still alive despite everything that’s been done to it.

They have built all through it and done awful terrible things to it. You should look and see pictures of it as it was because it was a lovely tree in the middle of Perth.

PV. Was it a domestic house on the site because that was Hale School wasn’t it?

34.14

This was before that. I don’t think it was Hale School at that stage, but it is the building that is still there that they lived in. They lived in the down storey [ground floor] and there were other people. They used to go up the stairs at night with candles and the wind would blow them out because there were cracks in the bricks.

It’s a Port Jackson Fig?

Yes. It was a beautiful, beautiful tree. Ofcourse we had to prune it to a degree, I tried not to prune it too much because if you take away the structure, you no longer have a Port Jackson fig, if you know what I mean? But anyway, Murray was fantastic. He got his back-pack spray and he sprayed all the understorey. The chap who came and got me was very good; he got hold of Perth City Council, quordoned off outside the tree so we could get trucks in and out. We really did do a major job on that and we saved it. It actually didn’t die, I can’t imagine why it didn’t die except that it is a fig. Figs have amazing root systems.

Marion, you were operating in a world that wasn’t terribly interested in its own plants; Western Australia, so how did you keep up to date with what was happening? Did you go to any conferences or receive journals or . . .

What was I going to keep up with?

Well, one of the things that made me ask the question was when you talked about spraying the trees, it was a product that wasn’t generally available, that’s what I recall. So how did you know about the product?

[3] Murray Turner had trained at Merrist Wood College in Surrey; it is highly regarded, according to Marion in conversation with Caroline Grant.

I just enquired and found out. Most of my life I have had to do that.

Not so easy in the days before the internet though!

Oh yes, now you've got quite a different means but in those days, there was no means of finding out anything.

Now, was it after that you got involved with designing the grounds for Murdoch University?

Yes, it was definitely after that. I'm not good on chronology.

That's alright. You don't know how they came to ask you to do it?

Well the first thing . . .

Or who asked you? [laughing]

Well, before that, I did the Harold Boas Gardens.

OK, then tell us about Harold Boas then?

Well, Harold Boas Gardens; I don't know how I got asked to do it, but I did. And it was a paddock; a sloping paddock with a path across the middle. And right in the centre of the path in the middle of the path, there was a ring of garden abouot 20 feet across and a planted row of hebes. Do you know hebes? They are exotic shrubs, only about this big [Marion indicates with her arm outstretched horizontally], they were about a metre tall. They must be hardy because how they were alive, they wouldn't have had their water, and that was the whole of the park. It was just grassy slope and I remember they had a disabled children home on the other side of it. Those children later on, they used to come, when we were developing the park and they would set up amongst the workers to be positive that nothing would happen because the children, a lot of them, not only couldn't hear but were otherwise disabled and it was quite a curiosity for them as you can imagine. The fact that when we started digging big holes and bringing down rocks from the Hills, which I'm very lucky I got.

At that stage I was Head of the National Parks and Conservation Authority and there was a park up in Kalamunda where the Electricity Commission had made a horrible mess putting through their lines and there were rocks, huge rocks pushed aside, just looking like a dump. Because we were responsible for the National Park, I had access to the people who were doing the clean up because of that mess, by taking the rocks and using them in the development. And that's what I did. We didn't have to pay for the rocks but I had to get all of my Wildflower people up there, cleaning up afterwards, which wasn't an easy thing to make it look good, to do my side of the bargain. But we got these huge rocks brought down, before this, they had never used rocks bigger that what you could carry in a wheel barrow. So, this

caused . . . it was a bit way out for them. Well if you look at it, there's a pool at the top, then it goes down through a water fall and ends up at the big lake at the bottom. It's just the slope with nothing on it and then I panted all sorts of Australian trees. Some were West Australian, some from the east but that . . .

Where did you get the Kurrajongs, the Brachychitons from?

41.05

Where did I get the Brachyichitons from – Queensland! Queensland has got the most wonderful – I mean now, due chiefly to the Wildflower Society there, they developed a source of Brachychiton that is so diverse and so amazing that I could have had a much larger palette than I actually used.

But they have been very successful. You must have had some understanding of the fact that they could grow on that site. They hadn't come from anywhere nearby.

I loved Brachychitons, I think I knew a lot about them because I had been interested in them since I was a child. I got information through the Wildflower Society in Brisbane, which I had a lot to do with them coming over, members coming over quite frequently. They were a lovely active group of people growing native species and Queensland has some wonderful . . .

Those Brachychitons, if I recall, did you have them grown by a nursery?

I had a lot of the stock grown by The Wildflower Nursery and kept them until we were ready to plant them.

And they are still there, they have been a great success for that Park. I mean there are a lot of other really interesting plants there; Popanover [??] and palms . . .

Yes, all sorts of palms but a lot of it was . . . I tried to set it up to display the diversity of wonderful species that we have had [indistinct] (43.14). They are from all over the place.

Well, a very well used park.

PV: and how did the Council respond when you finished the project?

Well, their maintenance had to be very minimal. It didn't need much maintenance but it needed to be focussed on the things that were essential and I don't think they have ever understood this. You go and tell them to begin with but once you have designed something, you really have nothing to do with it. You just have to put up with . . . they have let a whole lot of gum tree seed and come up in a forest around that top lake. It shouldn't have ever been let grow there. They have sort of messed up the design and took out a lot of interesting plants like Hostas (?) that had grown.

It's a difficult chain. The designer should have control over what is done or at least, I can't say control, but at least give strong advice.

PV: Like a Maintenance Plan ongoing?

Yes, ongoing maintenance over the site. Yes, it's very important.

PV: 1974? I think I remember you talking to us in 2020, I think you said 1974 that was done?

Was what?

PV: The Harold Boas Gardens.

Oh, I won't ever give you any numbers.

This is a more esoteric question. Could you explain your definition of a garden?

Why?

I saw you saying something about having a boundary and having something of the heart. I really like that but I would like to hear it in your words.

I don't know about that. A garden is a planted area, it doesn't have to have a fence which displays place and in particular, foliage and flowers.

Can you explain the significance of West Australian plants and how they have survived?

The significance of West Australian plants, there's no reason why you cut them off from Australian plants. You should not have plants isolated in your mind by state. They go by soils and climate. So, West Australia, from the top to the bottom covers most of the climatic zones of the continent, it's quite different from Queensland but it has a big area of desert that booms up into the middle but in that, there are Aboriginal tribes that have lived there and are quite different from elsewhere. There are arid area plants that have grown to survive conditions and are still there and if you really go into it in detail, they are very ancient.

They are fascinating, absolutely fascinating. In fact, the whole flora is ancient, so old compared with other areas and if you've seen what survives in conditions that are becoming more and more arid.

I've heard you say that Australian deserts are clothed where as others are not. Is it because of special families of plants?

Australia's deserts are clothed. That's the condition that absolutely fascinates me. Well, mostly, actually it is the definition of desert, it contains no plants but that's a

funny statement to make because where are you going to stop at plants? I think you can't ever say, any areas that I can think of except ice, is without some sort of vegetation and growth. And we've got fantastic vegetation and growth – trees!

Have you introduced any desert plants into your designs?

Into what?

Into your garden designs.

Oh yes [giggles], in fact there's a little gum tree just out there, it was tied up yesterday that has gorgeous many mini ritchi[4] bark and lovely flowers and that comes from out past Kalgoorlie in the desert; it's gorgeous.

49.40

When I was asking about the West Australian plants, I think I was thinking of Yilgarn Craton or plants that have been in isolation from the rest of Australia for a long time. They have got some special survival skills.

I would say, you can't cut plants off by state.

No, geologically different from the geology of the eastern states.

Yes, to a degree. But the era is equivalent therefore your conditions, I can't say that they are the same because every area we have, different climatic conditions but they belong to the same era and therefore you probably started off with a group that is always diversifying and dying off. So, your end product, any particular position is the thing that survives. And it will differ because they have different type of soil, they have different growing conditions, you will get even different sunshine north and south etc. So, for all sorts of basic factors that qualify the diversity.

The other thing that I found interesting, it follows from what you were saying about the man who said you could only find that tree in South Australia, you have found plants that are considered out of area, quite often. I think you actually went back to look for one.

Well, that statement covers a tremendous number of species. It's only that we haven't seen them that we don't know that they existed there. Some species have been broadly scattered and gradually died out from aridification or what ever the changing conditions are, and you will have one here and one there and nothing in between. The soil might be hotter or there will be a reason where it is more difficult for the plants to survive in that intervening area that it was in the two marginal areas. It's nothing unusual, it's just the natural process.

[4] Minni ritchi is a type of reddish-brown bark that continuously peels in small curly flakes. Wikipedia sourced 17 June, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minni_ritchi

A lot of it is to do with people haven't actually been out there to look.

Oh, I haven't seen them. Malcolm French has just discovered new patches of species that he knows and he didn't have any idea that 20 miles away from where he knew it had existed before or probably more. No definite number. It's wonderful having someone; two men that are really identifying the iconic image of Australia; gum trees. There's nothing more Australian. There is no other continent dominated by a single genus.

There's another story that comes to mind. Acacia might be quite close, I don't know whether you can say dominating but it's pretty significant.

Acacia are larger in number than than Eucalypts. They are nothing like the height, they are very, very diverse but they are not limited to Australia.

Ah no, that must have been the problem. Wasn't there a move to change the name or . . .

That was a fight. Our Acacia expert was overseas at the time. I got this emergency telegram saying, "Do something!" [laughing]. We only just saved the name. That was a tremendous shock really that South Africa wanted to apply it to theirs and not to ours.

Turf War!

Thank goodness we won it because there are so many.

Going back to design a bit, what is the design of which you are most proud? [laughing] Which is your favourite child?

No idea, don't have a favourite.

Which part of your career have you found most interesting or rewarding?

Again, there's been aspects of areas of interest almost all the way through. It's been fascinating and you want to keep developing and following.

What are you most interested in just now?

. . . [laughs]

Well, I tell you that in garden history circles you are well known as the person, the woman who knows desert plants and when somebody asks me and asked after you and didn't know your name, I couldn't think who they meant. Then after a while I realised, you are probably the only woman who knows desert plants, so it had to be you.

The desert plants are certainly not the only ones I'm interested in. There's the rain forest and mountains are fascinating. You get these eco levels and that really applies to snow gums in particular. The conditions of living are too cold for them to exist.

Well, I think we have asked you a lot of questions. Thank you very much for your time. It's been enjoyable.

PV. Is there anything you would like to add, or anything to contribute to this conversation?

As I say to people, "Open your eyes and see what is around you when you are travelling." Amazing what you will find.

Interview ends: 57 minutes 31 seconds