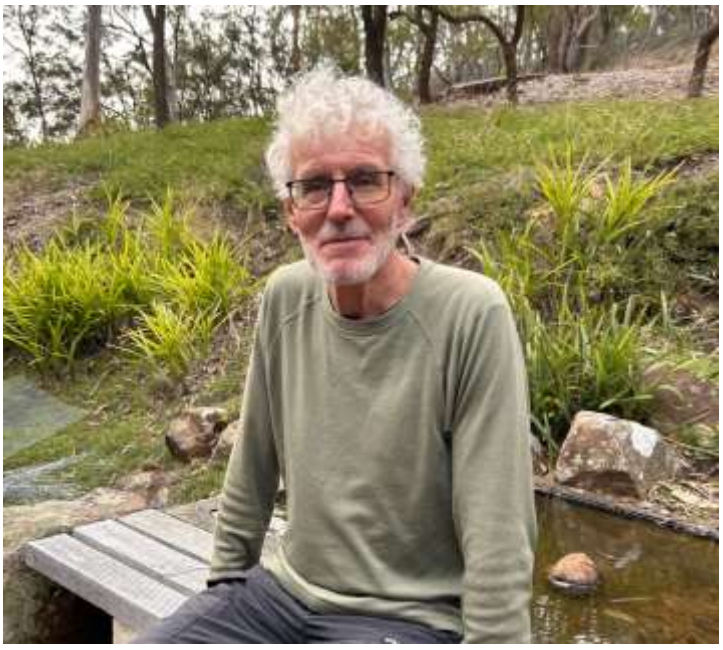
# AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

# NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

# TASMANIAN BRANCH



Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton June 2025

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| Interviewee: | **MARK FOUNTAIN** |
| Interviewer: | JEAN ELDER |
| Date of interview: | 16 JUNE 2025 |
| Place of Interview: | MT RUMNEY, TASMANIA |
| Length of interview: | 71 MINUTES |
| Restrictions on use: | NIL |
| All quotations: | SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD IN THE INTERVIEW AUDIO |
| Acknowledgement: | ALL USES OF THIS INTERVIEW SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THE INTERVIEWEE AND THE SOCIETY: MARK FOUNTAIN, AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY, NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, INTERVIEWED 16 JUNE 2025 BY JEAN ELDER. |

**[JE] This is an interview with Mark Fountain recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking with Mark about his life and career at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens and the establishment of his own garden, 12 kilometres from Hobart.**

**This interview is taking place on Monday 16 June 2025 at Mt Rumney, 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 and present.**

**[*This transcript has minor editorial changes to enhance clarity and accuracy*]**

**Mark, we'll start at the beginning. I want to ask you about your early years, what year and where you were born and where you grew up.**

I was born in Launceston in 1952 and I grew up there from about, obviously 1952 [laughs], and I left when I was about 17 and a half, 18, and came down to Hobart. My home life was in outer suburban Launceston.

I was lucky enough to have parents who were both interested in gardens, and my dad was an agronomist, an agricultural scientist. They were both Ten Pound Poms, they came out on the boat, and they were quite young. Mum was in her early twenties and Dad would have been mid-twenties, and I arrived very soon after.

Dad had a job in the Ag Department up in Launceston, out of Mt Pleasant Laboratories. He travelled up and down the coast. He had a lot to do with developing the potato industry in Tasmania, and Dad eventually ended up being the Director of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, before he retired.

**Did they have quite a big property/house?**

No, it was a classic suburban house in Chifley Street. At the time we grew up, the street stopped about three houses past ours and it was bushland, down into the valley behind us, and that's where I spent a lot of my time as a child, in the bush.

We had a classic suburban garden; fuchsias, hydrangeas, all of those sort of wonderful plants, but a very active garden, a very thought about garden. It had frog ponds. They were very garden-conscious. The front garden looked fantastic, the back garden was a bit more functional – [and included] a vegie patch – and Dad borrowed a bit of land from our back neighbours to grow competition chrysanthemums. I would go in and out – at flowering time they would have a horticultural show in the City Hall in Launceston, and I would end up down there. I developed a good eye I think for what a good chrysanthemum should look like, from Dad, so that was a good education really for me.

But my education – I've thought about this a bit lately – and a lot of my education was out of periodicals that they used to put out in those days. Mum and Dad thoughtfully bought these periodicals for myself and my brothers – I've got three brothers, I'm the eldest – and they were things like *Understanding Science*, which sort of gave you [the fundamentals] – it'd come out monthly – [it was something to look forward to] and we'd all happily read them. I 'owned' them first and the brothers all inherited them.

So I learnt a little bit about science – I wasn't terribly good at science, I have to say. I learnt a little bit about science from them. There was another set of magazines called *Knowledge*, which was broad knowledge; history, general knowledge. There was so much to learn you know. As a child you just pack it in anyway, don't you, and then we had encyclopedias, children's encyclopedias, and I got very used to referencing. I was taught to reference things. If I wanted to know something, go to the encyclopedia, so you would. It's a good way to learn.

So I really had a good background. When I think about it now retrospectively, my parents taught me a lot.

**5:15 It sounds like a very rich environment for a child to learn?**

Yes, it was.

**This was happening outside the schooling. Where were the actual schools you went to?**

I went to Glen Dhu Primary School. I wasn't a very good pupil at all I don't think, and I had an incident with a teacher – which I won't go into – in about Grade 4 which really put me off school. I almost shut off I think, and taught myself after that, even in high school.

But I was reading, we were regular library goers. I was reading four or five books [a fortnight] and by the time I got to high school, I was reading quite serious novels. So I think I taught myself, to be honest.

**You also read a lot of poetry and literature, apart from the novels you describe? At that recent lecture you gave at Government House,[1] you described having a rather unusual childhood in that regard, and you talked about the book *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. Tell us a bit more about that.**

I think the interest in that [Chinese poetry] comes from another set of those periodicals called – I'm just imagining this is where it comes from – *Discovering Art*. I think they were called *Discovering Art*. I loved those and I got really interested in art, specifically in art from the Tang and Song Dynasty periods in China, and I think the interest in poetry comes after that.

I learnt to look at those beautiful scrolls of Song Dynasty paintings. They're the sort of landscapes you could imagine yourself walking into and as a child, I learnt to do that.

**When you went to Hobart at age 17 and a half, what was that to do?**

[1] 2025 Winter Series of Horticultural Lectures, Government House, Tasmania
Mark Fountain 6 June 2025 *Among Tall Trees – Gardening with Nature*

I came down to study art, because most of my early childhood that was what I wanted to be: an artist. I came down to study art, but a year in art school – after a year and a bit – I just decided that it probably wasn't for me. But I was also interested in writing, and interested in poetry, and I had a group of really good friends who – were until one of my friends died earlier this year – were my closest friends really. We've been in contact since then and they were all either writers or artists.

My friend who died, he lived in Japan for the last 30 or 40 years. We all got interested in writers like the Japanese poet Basho, and – me more than they probably – [developed an interest] in the Chinese poets. I learnt to read Chinese poetry – I think because I'm a bit of a dreamer. Well I was a bit, my um always called me a dreamer. I learnt to read Chinese poetry. I can't read Chinese obviously, but there's an art to reading it and you have to kind of reverse engineer the English [translations]. You have to read English as images, and I think my background in art and my interest in literature probably enabled me to do that. So I could actually read a Chinese poem, and Wang Wei's poems are utterly simple, they're beautifully simple and they're very descriptive, so if you learn to read them [as images] you can actually learn to appreciate them. If you learn to read them the right way, you can appreciate them. I'm sure other people read them and think, 'That was about nothing much', but if you see the nuance in there you can actually pick it up.

**10:15 So that started after you left art school? How did that then go into TAFE?**

[During] that period, I was more interested in writing. I was on the dole – as you could be then – for nearly a year I was on the dole, I think. I read copiously and was trying to write and – we lived pretty simply – we all lived in an art studio basically, which cost us nothing.

So that's what I was interested in. Then I worked in the library on an employment scheme for about a year and a half, which was a wonderful place for me, obviously. I learnt a bit there. Coming out of there I just decided I didn't want to sit down anymore, I wanted to be on my feet, I wanted to be physical, I wanted to be doing those kinds of things. I'd always been interested in plants anyway, so I just decided I'm going to become a … I want to learn more about plants, what's the best way to do that. And I thought well maybe I can find a job in a nursery.

I took the bus out as far as I thought I would be willing to go. I went out to Austins Ferry and I started calling in to all the nurseries on the way back, just saying, 'Do you want somebody to work? I'm just looking for work'. So I called in to all these different places. I'd already determined I was going to TAFE and study, and luckily, one of them – Westland Nurseries, one of the big commercial wholesale nurseries – said, 'Yes, come back next week'.

I was just lucky, someone had left. Sight-unseen almost, and so they took me on and I worked with them for quite a few years. It was physically hard work, but the best place to learn – unbelievable. You could pack in so many plant names and so much knowledge, so much learning about horticulture – it was wonderful.

**Yes, and linking that then at the same time, doing the horticulture course at TAFE?**

Yeah, I was lucky. Lucky there, I went to horticulture [school] and my two closest friends who did the course with me were Michael Garrett – who's written the book *Ferns of Tasmania* – and Colin Allan – who became a landscape architect – and we spent our weekends and any spare time learning about plants. We started in the foothills of Mt Wellington and gradually spread out across Tasmania, trying to learn plant names. That's when I had Winifred Curtis's *Flora of Tasmania* with me, and I learnt a lot.

**You did that at that time?**

At the same time that we were studying TAFE. Again, my way of learning is, I probably learn more by myself than I learn in a classroom and, I think collectively, we did. TAFE then, there were a couple of good lecturers, but generally the standard – if I think about it retrospectively – it was not anywhere near as good as it was later under Laurie Miller and teachers like Lindsay Campbell. They had an excellent group of teachers there then, in those days.

**14:31 Coming back to the field trips, were there particular things you were collecting? You had Winifred Curtis …**

I was interested in everything, as I nearly always am, and Michael became more and more focussed on ferns. But that was good for me, it was an opportunity to go to all sorts of different places because – people don't realise it but ferns grow everywhere if you know what you're looking for – so there's dry area ferns (we've got dry area ferns on top of Mt Rumney up there). So one week we might be in the deepest, darkest gully you could possibly imagine, and the next week we might be on top of a mountain.

We travelled all over the place looking for ferns, right around Tasmania, right up in the north-west corner. I've got memories of walking up a – I was almost going to put it into the talk I gave – I've got this really strong memory of walking up a creek in north-west Tasmania – called Copper Creek, I think at the time – and we were walking up this creek, which it's in, kind of rural landscape really, and we couldn't access where we wanted to go by crossing people's property obviously, so we walked up the creek and we walked round this corner. Michael was after a specific fern, and we walked round this corner and there was this fern, a very rare fern in Tasmania, called a Lime Fern [*Pneumatopteris pennigera*]. We came round the corner and this beautiful scene of *Pomaderris apetala*, with this carpet of Lime Fern underneath, very simple, and it has influenced the way I garden I think, just the simplicity of that kind of vision.

**Amazing travels. Did you find the King's Holly? Was that one of the ones that you …**

No [it was originally found by Deny King] but I've been to where King's Holly grows – it's a good story to tell. One day Michael [Garrett] left a branch of this plant on the kitchen table with a little note saying, 'Do you know what this is?' I picked it up; I knew kind of what it was straight away. I looked at it and I thought, it's one I don't know, and there's only one [of this genera] I didn't know and that had been considered rare, it was on the borderline of being considered extinct I think. It hadn't been found for about fifty years, and it turned out to be *Phebalium daviesii*. I looked at it and I said, 'I know what this is', and I called Michael and said, 'Do you know what you've just

found?' and he said, 'No'. I said, 'It's *Phebalium daviesii*, that hasn't been found for fifty something years'. I said, 'I tell you what I'm going to do. I'll take it up to Dennis Morris, the botanist, and see what Dennis has to say'. Dennis was one of Dad's employees, so he was almost like a family friend, and so I took it up to Dennis and Dennis already had his microscope out on the table, because when I told him I thought I had *Phebalium daviesii* and he took one look at it as well and just said, 'It is'.

I think it got in the paper, in the *Mercury*, and it got people very excited. It was Michael's discovery, I never claimed that. I actually only identified it really. Michael, any creek in Tasmania, he's probably been in. It was really exciting.

And I've been lucky with my time at the Gardens [Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens] – especially when I was at the Gardens – to go into some extraordinary places.

**Perhaps we shall start talking then about your time which began in 1994, working for the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens, which is the second oldest public botanical gardens in Australia, established in 1818, is that correct?**

Yes.

19:34 **So you had nearly a quarter of a century working there, with a whole range of roles. Shall we start at the beginning? You began in 1994. How did that happen, how did you get that job?**

Well I was head-hunted by the new Head. He'd been there for a year and a bit and he'd had a whole lot of sessions talking to the horticulture communities and really trying to get an understanding of where people thought the Botanical Gardens should go, so he was being very consultative.

I'd been invited in the year before, as a horticulturalist, and I don't know what had happened to get me invited there particularly. I went in and sat down and they asked me questions about where I thought the Botanical Gardens should be going and I, quite frankly, told them where I thought the Botanical Garden should be going and should be doing. I think David [Dr David Bedford] obviously liked what I'd said and not too long after that, I was asked to apply for the job of Head of the Nursery at the Botanic Gardens, with my nurseryman's background. I obviously got the job and went and started work [in the RTBG Nursery] but very quickly got out into other areas of the Gardens. Almost within two or three years I was doing other things, like project managing.

**Then five years later you were the Manager of the Garden Operations, and then – in the early 2000s – Acting Director for a bit. You've played almost every senior role throughout the organisation.**

Yes a lot of senior roles at the Gardens, luckily for me. I've had some really good projects as well. I think that if I analyse what I've done at the Gardens, the major things might be I project-managed the Macquarie Island Plant House project. That was very early on, when I was still probably Head of the Nursery at that point, but doing that project management off the side. That was a really important project.

I also played a role in getting the Seed Bank – the Tasmanian Seed Conservation Centre – established and set up. I was part of a team.

**Tell us a little bit more about that, the importance of that.**

Well I personally think it's the most important thing the Botanic Gardens does, apart from educate people about the importance of plants, which I also think is an essential role of a botanic garden.

The Tasmanian Seed Conservation Centre was established under the auspices of Kew – and initially with quite considerable funding from Kew – to collect and store Tasmania's seed gene pool really. We hired James Wood, who's a – we were lucky – an extraordinary … He came from the Kew Seed Bank which is in their Annexe garden, the name of which has gone straight out of my head. [Wakehurst]

James is one of those people who just lives plants, and he has learnt so rapidly. I used to be a good field botanist, I wouldn't claim that anymore, and certainly not walking behind James.

**What was involved in setting it up. What was the work that he did?**

Setting up the Seed Bank itself, we had to physically build a seed bank. We had to learn what a seed bank was all about, and we had to do it on a scale. We couldn't do it at a Kew-sized scale. Everything that we do is duplicated and goes to Kew essentially, so they're holding the world's seed bank there. We're holding Tasmania's.

So we had to build a lab, seed cleaning and storing facilities, a specialised cool room for packaging and storing seed. Then the critical thing was to find the right person; someone who can systematically go through the plant material and work out how to collect it, how to store it, how to clean it, how to test it.

There's a whole range of processes that have to be undergone. You have to test viability before you can actually store, there's all sorts of processes and James – to his credit – has set it up and has got it going and been gradually filling it up. He's [also] an amazing field botanist.

**25:47 It was a crucially important thing to get established though.**

Oh, indeed. He'll be a challenge to replace I'd say. He's still there, working away (well, I hope he is).

**Another project you talked about was when you worked with MONA on the development of the 24 Carrot School Garden Project.**

My role there really was support and I can't claim any credit for that at all. I was contacted by Kirsha [Kaechele] when I was Acting Director and asked whether or not we would be interested in helping support the project and being on the committee. So I was on the committee that founded it, but I have to say my role was [support] … it [24 Carrot] was very much driven by Kirsha.

I think it's a wonderful project. It's a brilliant project to be out there doing these sorts of things for kids in any kind of school. It wouldn't matter – they're working first on

the lower socio-economic schools – but I think any school, anywhere, would value having people in contact with plants and horticulture. Especially with understanding food plants and all those aspects of life, just the whole bundle of life that goes around understanding plants. It's a brilliant project.

**Were there other projects that stand out for you in that time?**

Well I did the Strategic Master Plan for the Botanic Gardens. It was a large-scale strategic master plan that included understanding … I have a strong belief that to be able to plan, you need to understand your history, in depth. You need to know what's happened before. It's the sort of groundwork for any kind of planning process in my mind. So we did a history of the Gardens at that point in time, and we analysed all the different areas of the Gardens for their historical value and then we looked at the Gardens from a landscape point of view. It's quite a comprehensive sort of planning process and it took a couple of years to get it all put together. We worked with Inspiring Place – Jerry de Gryse's team – to do that.

**What years was that, roughly? Was that early 2000s?**

Probably early 2000s, probably somewhere in there, yes.

**I just noted that when you were Acting Director – in the Annual Report of 2014 – you wrote of the importance, you talked about resilience in relation to the long-term sustainability and that's probably part of that Strategic Plan too?**

It was built into that thinking process, yeah. I think, in any organisation – especially one …

The Botanical Gardens – and I'm allowed to say it now because I'm not a public servant – but the Botanical Gardens has always been under-funded and it's at the bottom. It's quite understandably at the bottom end of a government's scale of funding but I think, governments and organisations like government, tend to overlook the value of the Botanic Gardens, socially and communally. I think they're incredibly valuable places. They have to sell themselves, and they have to, kind of link to community, which we tried to do as much as possible. Certainly when I was Acting Director I always felt that we needed to be out there doing those sort of things. Even creative events and arts events in the Gardens bring people in. Even if they're not coming for the plants, they're there, so they're still connecting. So there's value in that.

**30:45 You helped also to develop quite a strong volunteer program?**

Well I didn't play that much of a role. A botanical gardens is a team, so there were always other people playing specific roles and I always valued the volunteers. They're really important. The Seed Bank's got a wonderful group of volunteers who work there, and there's volunteers right across the Botanic Gardens who work in the Nursery and front-of-house. It couldn't run without them quite frankly, so very important. And again, another community link. They go out into the community and they understand the value of the Gardens so they're ambassadors, if you like.

**Which helps, in turn, influencing politicians and getting more funding, yes.**

Yes.

*Recording paused.*

**Now Mark. Coming back to the time of being at the Botanic Gardens, early on – I think in 1994 – you did a fabulous field trip down in the South-West. Can you tell us about that?**

I went down into the South-West with a couple of botanists; Martin Neyland and Jocelyne Cambecedes, who was from France. We were looking very specifically to find King's Holly, which we did. Very carefully, because in those days we were really worried about the disease *Phytophthora* getting into the population and it's a proteaceous plant so it's highly at risk from *Phytophthora*. So we washed down our boots and walked up the creek deliberately, and found one population on the first day, collected material. I was collecting material very specifically for a program at the Gardens. We were going to try two things; we were going try tissue culture and different grafting techniques, to make sure we could grow the plant *in situ* and keep it growing.

I think from memory – I was in the Gardens a year or two ago – and I think they've actually just planted one out in the Gardens for the first time. So that probably is from right back then.

**Fantastic achievement.**

A lot of work and a lot of horticulture's gone into that, a lot of teamwork.

**Did you get any of the South-West weather?**

Not so much on that day, no. We had two reasonable days, it wasn't terrible. The second day we actually got back in and found what we think was an expansion of the existing population. We found a few more that hadn't been spotted before. That was an interesting sighting.

**34:12 I also want to talk about your involvement – you were a member of the Council of the Heads of Australian Botanical Gardens. What did you call them?**

CHARBAG [laughs] – it was a bit of a joke between us all, we [sometimes] called it CHARBAG. It was a really important opportunity to catch up with colleagues in other botanical gardens who were either directors or, occasionally, an acting director [or a staff member in a senior management role]. But I went in as a proxy, initially, and in my Acting Director's role when I was the Acting Director, and as a proxy for a couple of different directors I worked under.

I always found it really valuable to be able to catch up with colleagues and learn more about their botanic gardens and how they functioned. There's so much to be gained from talking to people, especially people at that level, and I always learnt from it. I always thought it was a valuable thing.

One of the things that came out of that was, we thought – we're a small world, Australia. There's only seven botanic gardens (although there's lots of other satellite

botanic gardens that didn't get included in that process, even in Australia), smaller gardens that deserved a place, deserved some sort of forum. Then we thought, well we'll include New Zealand. This was probably an idea that Phil Moors – the Director of Melbourne Botanic Gardens at the time – I think he birthed the idea if you like. It may have come from somewhere else, I could be entirely wrong, but at the time, I think that's where it came from.

We sat down, we'd had some colleagues come over from New Zealand to one of our Council Heads meetings and we talked about the idea of Botanical Gardens Australia New Zealand and making it a much more inclusive body, that picked up a lot of these smaller gardens that didn't always have the botanic gardens title, but were still functioning like a public place for education about plants.

Again I think that was a really valuable time and I was on the original committee that formed that, so I had a bit of a role there. I can't claim to be a major player, I was just part of the team that forged that process, and I value that time.

**That would be things like, in Victoria, the small Castlemaine Botanic Gardens and places like those.**

Yes all of those smaller gardens got included.

**Which would give them support.**

Yes, and places like, in Tasmania, places like Inala would be picked up. I think they've been grouped into … and even the Arboretum up north, I think they're part of that forum. I hope they are. We certainly asked them to be. They were the sort of places we were hoping to pick up.

**A very important role to play.**

Yes. I think that was really valuable, and the organisation's valuable. I was also on the editorial committee of their magazine [*The Botanic Garden*] which we helped grow and that was the communication. I was on that from the founding of the magazine until I retired really.

**Another important role during this time at the gardens, you started to travel, of course. There would have been some work trips or giving conference papers. You went to Japan a lot?**

I went to Japan once for work, and I was very lucky there. I got an email out of the blue asking me if I would like to talk at a world orchid conference. And I have to say, I knew a little bit about Tasmanian orchids, but not a lot. I thought I could probably talk about them, from the point of view of the Botanic Gardens, and so I went and asked my director if he thought it would be okay if I replied that I could do it, and he said, 'Go ahead'. So I actually went and spoke to the then expert on orchids in Tasmania and he was wonderfully helpful and helped me put together a presentation and a paper and actually, a display, which we put together for this orchid conference which was in a little town called Onomichi in Japan. There were people from New Zealand and Russia, and West Australia – one of my colleagues in the botanical garden world

from West Australia – Kingsley Dixon. I can't think who else was there. There were people from all over the place, from Japan, obviously. I think a Chinese speaker.

It was a really interesting conference and just a wonderful opportunity. I'd wanted to go to Japan since I was a child really, so I couldn't not go. I used the opportunity after that – I had time off and went and visited gardens and Botanic Gardens and so I spent nearly a month there, I think.

**40.42 You also had visits in the UK and …**

Yes I spoke at a conference in Dublin for work, on the master planning process. Part of the master planning process that looked at how you analyse plant collections for value, to determine where they fit within your type of botanic garden. It was actually one of those talks that I gave – and of all the talks I've given – it had the most feedback. I had lots of emails from different botanical gardens asking me about the process afterwards. That was a valuable thing to do.

**And rewarding by the sound of it.**

Yes really rewarding, and I got the chance then to go to Dublin, and I used that opportunity to go to Kew. I spent three or four days at Kew with Kew staff, being shown around in the mornings and then they gave me free rein to wander all over the place in the afternoon. Then I went down to their Annexe, and I went to Eden Project. One of the speakers I'd brought over for a previous conference was one of the founders of Eden and so I got a guided tour of Eden from the inside, and I spent a day with the staff at Eden Project, talking about process and what they were doing and how they were doing it. I learnt a lot there. Lots of opportunities really. You're always learning.

**Before we move on to talking about this wonderful garden here at Mt Rumney, I want you to tell the story that you told at the recent lecture at Government House about Winifred Curtis and she came to the Botanic Gardens, quite early on I think?**

Alright, yes well, Winifred is an iconic figure in Tasmanian botany. She was a legend to me already and then one day I just got a call out of the blue saying, 'Could you give Winifred Curtis and some of her friends from her retirement home' – none of whom seemed very retired to me, they were all mentally active and very busy – 'whether I would give them a walk and talk round the Nursery at the Gardens'. So I took them around the [Nursery], showed Winifred what we were doing, and at that point we were doing lots of propagation of Tasmanian plant material – that was when I was still in the Nursery and we were collecting in the wild – so I could actually go through and take her through and show her all sorts of things.

I also took her out and she showed me the site of where she thought the original Herbarium was, which used to be in the Gardens. The first Herbarium was in the Gardens; it was basically a wooden hut – we've got an old photograph of it – and she went out and had a look at that. But then at the very end of all of that we sat down with the ladies – and they'd all brought lunch, I hadn't thought to bring lunch, and Winifred shared one of her kiwi fruit and cucumber sandwiches with me – and I was lucky enough to be able to tell her how much I valued her books and how much I'd

learnt from her books. I'd learnt so much that I'd read the books and I could walk into the field – anywhere really in Tasmania – even if I didn't know a plant, if I remembered the description I would know it. I could actually go – based on what I'd read in Winifred's book – that's such and such. I learnt so much and I read those books cover to cover, many times over.

**She was a remarkable person; that's a lovely story.**

She was special, yes.

**45:17 Now I think we'd like to hear more about the establishment of this gorgeous garden here at Mt Rumney, which you describe as 'a demanding garden', and in relation to this aspect you're likely to describe yourself as a hermit gardener?**

[Laughs]. Well I am these days; I spend so much time here that I feel like a hermit some days. I don't really mind being a hermit, to be honest.

This place – it was a garden before we came here – it was a really classic Australian plants garden with a lot of grevilleas and broad Australian plants, mostly from the eastern seaboard. It was getting a bit overgrown I suppose when we moved in, but it had been in a book: it was in Diana Snape's book *Australian Native Gardens* (I'm trying to think of the title of the book), it was a 1992 book.

It was in that book, but it already had a history as a garden. We moved in in 1996 and we looked at the garden, the shape of the garden, and some of the beds we haven't changed at all, some of the beds remain almost as they were in the original garden, especially out in the centre of the garden. Other places, parts of the garden we've changed quite a lot. It's driven by a couple of things; it's driven by climate change. I don't think any horticulturist is going to disagree with the idea of climate change. I've been growing plants since I was in my twenties and it's an absolute fact that the climate is getting drier and summers are getting hotter. We've felt that here, in the nearly 30 years we've been here. So, we've changed the garden to work better under those circumstances, and we've simplified the garden to make it visually stronger. Those sorts of processes.

**The influence for some of that, was that where Thomas Church in the US influenced you?**

I was certainly influenced by Thomas Church because I got interested in mid-century modern house design, because the first house I ever bought in Hobart was in South Hobart and it was a kind of poor Australian copy of a mid-century modern design.

Then we moved into this house which is a much better example of mid-century modern, with the post and beam style angled roof. You couldn't actually build a garden that didn't pick up some of that feel here. We thought – I worked with my wife to develop the garden, we work in collaboration – there was no way we were going to not include those elements, and Thomas Church came from that kind of thinking.

Thomas Church was working in the thirties, forties, pretty much, and his style picked up elements of modernism, elements of abstract art, and some hints at Japanese garden design as well. The modernism is particularly evident in his work. There's a sort of abstract quality to it, and we used that as a guide. So he was particularly important.

**49:51 And your visits to Japan – you see the evidence in the paths and some of the plantings and some of the pruning.**

Yes some of the design elements, definitely Japanese gardens. Some of the Japanese gardens you can walk into, some of the famous ones like Ryoanji – the stone garden – you can walk into that garden, and it's contemporary now, it hasn't aged one iota. It's extraordinarily contemporary. There's other gardens in Japan. There's a famous garden Daichi Ji, which is out near Lake Biwa, and that's a sculpted series of azalea hedges which could be now, it looks very contemporary but [the famous allegorical garden was purportedly founded in the early 17th century].

What I liked about Japanese gardens was the simplicity, and that quality of being contemporary and ageless, I think fits with mid-century modernism. So we were thinking along those lines when we used those influences.

We used the influences of one of the more contemporary – well he was working in the 1930s to the '50s and '60s – Mirei Shigemori, who was a Japanese garden designer. He wrote a huge number of volumes on the history of Japanese gardens as well. He was deeply steeped in traditional Japanese garden design, but he kind of broke the boundaries and became very contemporary. I don't like some of his really contemporary work – you know, I question it. He pushed the boundary a bit too far in my mind, but some of his early work like Tofokuji – the one in the talk with the moss squares, I've always loved that garden.

Another garden I visited on the island of Kyushu– forgive my pronunciation, I'm not very good with my Japanese pronunciation – but that particular garden [Komyozenji, attributed to Mirei Shigemori] was very influential.

**So when I look out the window and I can see pavings, and stonings, and gravel paths, and bonsai, stonework, and plants – you've pulled all these elements together and the final result is just amazing, because you've still got the Australian bush.**

Yes we wanted to do two things. We wanted to meld this garden with the bush. I've always loved the bush anyway, from my childhood right the way through to my horticulture years, wandering around with my colleagues. I've got a deep appreciation for the bush and the way it looks and feels. I always wanted to live in the bush and work with the bush as a kind of a backdrop. The garden is designed to fit and meld with the bush, but it's also been consciously designed to be a little bit more fire-safe; that's the reason I use big sweeps of *Myoporum parvifolium*. Which is – in my mind – not unlike moss in Japan. When you go to Saihoji, the famous mosque temple, that's just multiple colours of green underneath and so I'm kind of playing with that effect to a degree as well.

**54:56 You rely on tank water here?**

We're on a water scheme, but we pay for our water, so we don't water the garden. I water the [pot] plants with the water we pay for, and I water my nursery with it, but the garden doesn't get watered at all, unless it's an emergency. If we're getting to that point in the summer and we got there last summer – since we've lived here we've had quite a few years where we've had to use the tanks. I just get the generator out and

we start putting water on the plants we regard as precious, and that's mostly the big trees. I don't want to lose any of my framework eucalypts or any of those sorts of things. If we lose other things then so be it, to a degree. We live in the bush; we have to accept that kind of collateral damage. We also live in a place that's potentially a fire-risk and we have to accept that kind of risk as well. You have to be a bit of a Buddhist about these things I think. I'm not a Buddhist, but you have to have a kind of mindset where you're ready to accept these things.

**There is a sort of balance between sustainability and the aesthetics. That's partly what you're saying?**

Yes, it's sustainability and – I think I said it in the talk – it's about resilience. It's making a garden that survives but still manages to look okay under difficult circumstances.

There's lots of the garden's unfinished – and I think I also quite frankly said that in the talk – that we've still got a lot of work to do, and we're in our seventies now, so we're coming to the realisation that we've actually got to get it done quite quickly. We're working quite hard at the moment to get some of these projects done.

We want a garden that – in the end – we're just gardening in, but we're still very much in construction mode at the moment. Which is a bit frustrating but … although – I have to admit – I love building stone paths, hard work, but fun.

**Yes. And they're beautiful, the different patterns; and again, you see the Japanese influence in your stone paths.**

Yes. We were lucky to move onto a ridgeline with lots and lots of exposed stone, flat stone. It didn't matter where you dug, stone would come up. So we ended up piling. I ended up hand-selecting out all the flat top ones and they've gradually ended up in the pathways.

**So what does it mean to you, being in this beautiful contemporary environment, with the nature and the landscape?**

It means everything. It's pretty special when you can get up in the morning and you can look out the window and – it doesn't matter in this house, at the moment there's a few places where you don't want to look because they're not tidy and they're not finished – but most places you look here, you can look out and there's things to see. We've got quite a bit of water in the garden so there's usually quite a lot of birdlife. Not so much today, because it's windy, but there's usually birds. If we'd been sitting here normally there'd be birds out in the reflecting pool out there.

Occasionally you'll have a wallaby wander down there and drink out of that reflecting pool.

**59:22 The wildlife, you live with too?**

Yes. We accept a lot of collateral damage, actually. You can see we've got wire out there at the moment protecting plants, but at certain times of the year when there's no food out there for them, they really give the garden a hard time. Again we have to accept that. We try and live with nature. And I think people are going to have to do

that more. Even things like aphids, I think people have got to accept that aphids are actually food; they're food for insects and they're food for small birds. One of my other interests is the birdlife. I'm part of Landcare Australia – I'm the President of the local Landcare group here – and we are currently running bird surveys every month, and we have been for this year. We've become part of a survey of birds in the south-east, so we're starting to get an understanding of what birds are in our area and that'll give us a bit of an idea of numbers. But evidently, right across Australia bird numbers are dropping, dramatically. If we don't do things, if we keep spraying things like aphids or any other insects, if we don't do something to maintain biodiversity then we're at risk of losing things that are precious.

It's hard to get people to understand this, but I think you've got to let go of some – as a human – you've got to let go of some of these things that we regard as important, like your perfect azalea, or your perfect this or that, and accept that there's other things involved in this process. Not just humans.

**60:01 Your Instagram and Flickr sites are probably quite important in terms of educative things about your garden?**

I think so. I don't have that many followers, and I'm not really an ardent [Instagrammer]. I was doing it originally for me as a diary, but I realised that I might as well say what I think. So hopefully the people who do follow me get some information from that.

Flickr not so much. Flickr is like a repository of images, and I don't use [it] that much these days. It changed. It used to have a more social element to it. I had some great friends that I made through Flickr. People in places like California, that I've actually visited. When I went to America I visited a friend who lived in northern California, an artist. I went to his place and drove up his driveway and his house is surrounded by Madrone [Arbutus sp.] and [Manzanita (Arctostaphylos)] – the most beautiful trees with these fantastic trunks. So, you're lucky, you meet people on those sorts of things and I'm still in contact with him fairly regularly.

**Since your retirement, although I can't see you as being retired, you're busier than ever. But you also did some work for the renowned garden Dalness, in northern Tasmania. What were the challenges facing those old gardens in a changing environment that we've been talking about?**

Dalness is an interesting garden, and we did quite a large-scale report for it … that's the report there. It's one of those gardens where it's got a lovely old house. It's got a beautiful parkland, a magical parkland, with a fantastic oak tree out the front of the house and a circular carriageway, and a big avenue of oaks leading up to the entry point.

It had an interesting history. They originally asked us to come in and do a bit of an analysis of the site, to let them know what they had, in both the garden and the parkland. It was quite a complex process that we broke down. In the end I gave them a bit of a precis of the history of Tasmanian gardens in about two or three pages – if you can do that – and then I tried to put Dalness in context within that history, to give

them an idea of where the garden sat, historically, and the value of it, historically, because it was clearly valuable.

They had an old plan that the previous owner had had, of a much more formal garden layout but it didn't appear to have been actually constructed, except maybe a bit of evidence in places. It was a point-in-time analysis of that landscape and that garden was the key fact, but we also tried to place the place, historically. So that was interesting.

I also did some work with Jerry de Gryse on an historical garden – the Governor's garden, at Norfolk Island – with Inspiring Place again. We did a kind of overview of the Government House garden at Norfolk Island, which was a really interesting process.

I've been lucky to work with some interesting people. I worked with the architect Richard Leplastrier at one point, down on Bruny Island. He was building a house down there. We just looked at the landscape from more an ecological/horticultural point of view.

**In terms of designing a garden?**

Yes, designing a garden that was basically facing out towards Cloudy Bay, almost on dune sands, so it had to be thought about completely differently.

**Wonderful experiences.**

Lucky, really. Yes that's what horticulture can do. That's what's valuable about horticulture in my mind, that it can give you a whole life and it can create, sort of, deep value that's ongoing. It's ongoing here now. This garden – it'll probably be never-ending – the reality is they never end, and we're planting plants now that I know I'm not going to see grow to their maturity, in any way. But I can actually go out and sit there in the garden and I can visualise what they're going to look like, and that probably goes right back to dreaming my way into Song Dynasty landscapes.

**I think at that note we're drawing to the end.**

It's a bit circular [laughs], that's good.

**Very circular. Are there any final things you'd like to pick up on Mark?**

I'm just trying to think. The one thing I haven't mentioned – well we talked about it initially – the poetry.

The one thing – I mentioned it in the talk – I think there's something about gardens and the idea of visual poetry that is, probably another driver for this landscape – in my mind anyway. You want gardens to be a kind of sequential pictures if you like. I'd quite like to be able to make this garden into something like that.

We're going to be photographed again evidently – well, we're hoping to be – by Claire Takacs (the Australian garden photographer). She's doing a book on contemporary Australian and New Zealand gardens, and she's hoping to include us in that but we're

going to be very weather-dependent and project-dependent. So we've got a lot of work to do before that happens. I'm looking forward to that really.[2]

**Yes. In some ways you're talking about the garden as a poem?**

Yes I think so. I think gardens are a kind of poem, a visual poem.

**That's wonderful. I think I'll conclude and thank you for sharing your amazing story Mark and, obviously, your deep passion for the world of plants. Your story encompasses such a diverse array of experiences and it's wonderful to see how this knowledge channels into this garden, this visual poem here at Mt Rumney.**

**And of course, your teaching and the work at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens – there's some long-lasting outcomes of that.**

I hope so, yes.

**So, again, many thanks for participating in our Australian Garden History Oral History Collection.**

Thank you.

**TOTAL 71.00**

*RECORDING ENDS*

*INTERVIEW ENDS.*

[2] for an earlier feature see *Visionary: Gardens and Landscapes for our Future,* Claire Takacs 2024 p 194-199