

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

No photograph

Interviewee:	EDITH YOUNG
Interviewer:	Patsy Vizents
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0.00

My name is Patsy Vizents and I'm representing the Australian Garden History Society and we are interviewing Edith Young on the 22nd October, 2025 in a home in Mount Hawthorn [Perth] so thank you Edith, because you are actually an Albany girl. So, we just coincided.

We did, didn't we.

I'm really pleased. So, let's start. Can you just say your name and where you were born and where you grew up to start with?

OK, my name is Edith Young, I was born in Fremantle and I grew up in Kirup and the family transferred to Perth when I was 12.

So, you were raised in Kirup in the South West?

Yes, south of Donnybrook.

Wonderful town.

Well, [giggles], sort of, it's struggling a bit now, it's not as it was. It was quite a high, thriving little town when we were there. We had the general store.

Is that why you were there?

Yes.

Had your parents been there before you were born?

No, I was born in Fremantle. The store was my father's Uncle[s] and he took it over, my parents took it over. We were there for 12 years.

Does that building still exist?

Yes, it's still there with the little house attached, yeah. The last I saw it. I only drove through, but at one stage it was a café then a vegetable shop, then something else. Now it's vacant apparently.

And how long were you in Kirup?

Eleven years.

So, Primary School?

Primary School, yes. And when we came to Perth, we came to Subiaco actually, and I did two terms at Subi Primary and then I was at high school at Perth Modern. That was the first year it became co-ed. Before that, it had been a scholarship school.

My understanding is that it has a musical focus.

Apparently yes, it wasn't then. It is now apparently.

A very interesting school.

Mmm.

Did you know when you were going through school what you wanted to do when you were in high school?

No. I always wanted to be a teacher; school teacher but then when I hit high school, it wasn't going to work. So then I didn't know what I wanted to do and just left school after Junior.

So you were 15.

Mmm, 15, 16 – 15, yeah.

When you were back in Kirrup, did you have connection with gardening?

My mother gardened. She did a lot of annuals and bulbs, tank water so I always appreciated gardening. I didn't really appreciate gardening but I did appreciate the flowers.

And you did have contact with the bush.

Yes, and that's right. We had a nature trail at school; I can still remember that, I was really taken by that. It was string and she laid it out, the teacher laid it out and you could walk through the bush and follow the string. It stopped [with it] wound about a plant or a stake or something.

That's a good method.

Yes, I loved that one but also too, we had orchards around Kirup and we had a mill. There was forestry and orchards. We would go out and visit farms, I would especially. So, growing things was all around but I can only look back and say that. It didn't affect me, it didn't register with me.

So, you didn't have your own garden?

Just the one that Mum did. It wasn't worth while us growing vegetables because everybody brought vegetables in, we could get them around the place really.

So, not possibly a gardening background in Kirup. So, after you left Mod High School, Modern School, what did you do?

5:45

I went back to Tech, to get my Leaving; Leederville Tech, down here. Then I got employed at Elder Smith in town. Elder Smith, Elders in town. The Embassy

Ballroom was on top of it¹, the offices were underneath the Embassy Ballroom down on the corner there. Then I was there for, I don't know how long, 18 months, two years . . . and then a girlfriend and I drove across Australia on a working holiday in a vee dub [Volkswagen] so I guess we were away for about 18 months as well. And when I came back I got a job at Tip Top Bakery at Subiaco and then I left to go overseas, I was away for three years and lived in London and Canada and came back and got a job in a photographic studio and decided I wanted to be a photographer.

Where's the gardening [laughs]

Right, I'm just getting to the garden thing. So, one day in the photographic studio, spring had just sprung and there were butterflies outside the window where I was sitting [indistinct], I'm going to go and do gardening, just from those butterflies. [Laughs] So, I went to UWA [University of Western Australia] and Jean Verschuer was the Curator as they called them then, there². No, she wouldn't employ any woman ever again.

In the garden?

Yes, she was responsible for the gardens down there and she wouldn't employ any woman. She had a bad experience with one woman and she wasn't going to employ any woman again. So that was that. So, then I went out to Curtin.

Was it WAIT or Curtin?³

I was just wondering. It might have just been WAIT, only for a little while and then it was Curtin.

What did you do there?

Grounds, I was in the grounds. The only woman there.

Did that mean you had a Supervisor?

We had the Curator, Vern Andrews and to his credit he said, "no, I'll employ women" [indistinct]. He wasn't a gardener at all, at the time it was jobs for mates. But anyway, he took me on. I said I would study at night school, horticulture. And that had just started, I was in the second year when horticulture started here in Leederville Tech, no not Leederville, Mount Lawley.

9:25

That was a two-year course?

¹ The Embassy Ballroom and Elder Smith used to be on William Street near the intersection of The Esplanade in the city of Perth.

² Jean Verschuer (Lady Jean Brodie-Hall), Curator 1970-74 UWA becoming the inaugural University Landscape Architect 1974-1981.

³ W.A.I.T. – Western Australian Institute of Technology 1966-1987 became Curtin University of Technology 1987-2010 which then became Curtin University or simply Curtin 2010.

Three. I did that, as I say, at night school while I worked during the day in the garden section out at Curtin.

What was good about that course? Why did you choose that course and not . . .?

That's all there was.

What about Bentley?

No, Bentley came later, that's all there was. As I said, that was the first horticulture thing . . . I forget what his name was . . . Oliver, I forget his first name. He and . . . there were two of them, set it up and that's all there was for horticulture. As I say, it started the year before I went, I was the second year, classes.

What was their specialty?

There wasn't. We did all streams in the three years. Like, we did the nursery work, we did amenity, we did sporting fields, we did it all in that three years. There was no streaming then. So, you didn't have to decide if you wanted to do any one of those particularly but there were the jobs there then, for those particular courses; sporting field maintenance, nursery work, there probably was but it wasn't specific.

And your fellow students, were they employed as grounds folk with Council?

Yeah, mainly.

So, you would learn how to use a lawnmower?

Well, I learned that on the job actually, that was more on the job.

I was going to say, this was part of an apprenticeship?

It wasn't formalised as an apprenticeship, it was a Certificate IV in Horticulture I think it was.

Was there anything that you were inspired by through the teaching?

Mmm, no probably not, it was just what I was doing. There wasn't any sort of [indistinct]. This is the job, this is what I was doing, I was studying for it. I didn't even think, I can't even remember thinking that, when I get the Certificate, I will go and do something else. It was just what I did.

I'm trying to get a picture of what was happening in Perth at that time, so somebody employed as a landscape designer, who would be employed to do that particular public garden or something, was that ever a "thing"?

We didn't have them on staff except Curtin/WAIT had landscape section; the department, in the architecture department and they did some of the landscape plans. But Marion Blackwell was brought in to do some.

She was brought into Curtin?

13:16

Yes. She was contracted in to do designs around some of the buildings at Curtin.

She did Murdoch too.

I didn't do very well at landscaping, I admit that now, I'm not a landscape designer at all. But we had to do it, it was part of the course [indistinct]. Looking back now, I was more into organic and permaculture and stuff like that. From my reading; Bill Mollison and Tasmania which wasn't what they wanted in landscape planning in those days.

So, the direction was really, somebody would get in some plants and borders. Have you ever been back to see them? They might have changed.

I didn't leave there on a good note and I didn't go back there for years and years and years. I went back a couple of years ago, about five years ago or something and yeah, they've done well [nodding].

Some of the trees would be really quite big now.

Oh yes, I was walking through and saying, "I planted those, I planted those". Yes, as I said, I left there under a cloud and then I went to the Shire of Swan in their parks section and I was there for seven years. My boss there was Stephen Atwell, Steve Atwell. He used to be at Canning. When he retired he was at Canning. So, he was there and then I went to the Town of Victoria Park in the technical services section, so I was Admin Officer there so I wasn't involved in grounds particularly. I was only there as Admin Officer was my title but that was just in parks.

So, your background has been in developing gardens but not of your design, and they are public, did you develop your own style, your own feeling for your own gardens where you were living, at that stage? It would be like bringing work how, I suppose.

[Laughter] Could have been. No, as I say, I'm not a landscape designer by any means and I was living in Shelley mainly at the time but I did my garden there, all with natives. It was left to go wild sort of thing; wild gardening sort of thing. But that was what I wanted. It wasn't called that back then, I had an original *Melaleuca preissiana*, I think it was. There was some controversy as to whether it was *preissiana* or something else. And so, I just planted out sedges underneath it because I thought that's what it would have had originally where it was. It was all filled-in swamp, yeah swampy area adjacent to the river; the Canning River. So, I did that for the tree not thinking that it was a landscape feature, I did that for the

tree because it had a hard time during the building process. Then at the back, I just planted natives

Well, that would have been an unusual garden [laughs].

Yes.

There was a lot of blockage towards natives, especially in public spaces, that's why Marion's gardens in Murdoch University are so . . .

Very well regarded. I haven't been to Murdoch.

The Banksias . . . fantastic. Well, all shame to UWA for not employing you because [laughs]

I was the only woman on staff at Curtin for a long time and I got through to being foreperson.

Did you have any favourite areas?

I was just talking about the Japanese garden they had there, to the young man who owns this house, he has gone to Japan and it came up about Japanese gardens. I was saying, there is one out at Curtin. They brought over a landscape fellow from Japan to design it and I looked after it. I suppose that could be a favourite, mmmm. Because it was different and it required, in some cases I had to look up how to prune particular plants [laughing]. Or how to treat a particular plant so that was interesting. But generally it was mainly [indistinct].

So, Curtin is alongside the old Bentley Tech and I know that John [Viska] either established or was involved with their . . .

20:00

He was involved.

How did you get involved with the Australian Garden History Society?

I've been trying to remember that and I can't remember that specifically.

So, it wasn't through John?

No, it wasn't through John, no, I can only think that I went to an open garden or something that they might have been doing. Or, I went to an open garden and there was information there. I was a member of the Bird Society before that, and I think one just went, not word of mouth but the information was there for you to pick up and I think I might have picked up. I heard about it, just phoned somebody up about it and joined, went to the first meeting.

The branch started in 1988. The original; the national was established in 1980.

In 1988, I had left Curtin in 1989.

Good. Well there must have been something that sparked you to become involved.

Yes,

When you became involved as a member, did you attend meetings or was it just the, can you remember whether it was just the outings or . . .

I think initially it was just the outings and I used to take a friend with me to some of those but sometimes there was a meeting before the outing [indistinct] or something and I must have stayed. I remember, I went to a meeting and I nominated Linda to be secretary. She was sitting beside me.

Linda Green?

Yes. So, said she would do it but she was reluctant to be nominated. So then after her stint . . .

She nominated you? [chuckle]

No she didn't, I volunteered because I had nominated Linda, I felt if you are going to nominate somebody else, you should really step up yourself and I always felt a bit guilty about nominating her because as I said, she was very reluctant.

She was a landscape . . .

A landscape designer. So that's how I got on the committee, really.

And once you are on the committee, you are exposed to all aspects of what it is.

That's right

So, you joined in as secretary? So, the correspondence . . .

Yes, I had to liaise with Jackie. Yes, so I had to liaise with her, not very often.

So, that would have been in the mid-eighties, sorry mid-nineties. And were you involved with the WA conference of '95?

Yes. On St Georges Terrace [indistinct] because that's where I stayed, for the conference. In, off Adelaide Terrace in there because I stayed in the Hotel on Adelaide Terrace.

That was the very first conference that WA organised and it was within minutes of them forming. So well done. That was "Scarp to Sea".

That was it. That's right, mmm.

Who was the chair for that? Was that John Viska?

Mmmm [nodding].

What was your roll?

Whatever came up. Could you do this or you'd be volunteering for something.

And did you stay for the second one, in 2005?

Yes, that was the one we went to York, wasn't it? We went there on one of the trips. If that was the second one, yes, I was [indistinct]. When was that?

2005.

Yeah, I was still working.

Were you involved in a particular . . . by that time, you were pretty well, you'd been there for a while. So did you put your hand up for a specific responsibility?

No.

So, general. Did you ever take on the role of NMC rep? Did you ever get to go over east?

No, no.

25:27

Once you get into a thing like the Garden History, did you find that there were frustrations or we could be doing this or that? Did you have a thought of when you started?

Mmm, I don't know what I was hoping or whether I thought the garden history society would have some clout in saving gardens.

So, advocacy and standing up to save

Yes, to save the good historical gardens that would have been bulldozed or that we would have had some way of stopping that or preserving the garden, that the building could go ahead, but to make arrangements to retain the garden. I did think that was what the society did but no, it didn't.

So, there is a movement, especially as we've moved into the 21st century and heritage and conservation has become . . .

Yes, you've got a bit more leverage now.

There are always historic gardens, when you are organising trips, there are always somewhere really interesting to go. It exposes many, many people to that and I think that's pretty good.

I do.

It was pretty exhausting, I imagine, that 2005 conference. The next one was 2014 but you had gone by then; you had left.

I had left, and even though it was in Albany, I think I was away overseas when it was on.

Can I ask why you left; why you retired from AGHS?

I just . . . I was moving down to Albany and there was a bit of that reasoning in there. It was good and it was lovely to see the gardens, to appreciate them, the enthusiasm and all that, and I . . . I wouldn't have been able to get to meetings or be able to come up for trips or visits or those things,

Very frustrating

So, I didn't keep up my membership, no.

Are you involved with anything similar in Albany? Are there garden groups down there, do you know?

No, I don't know. There's garden clubs but that's not me. We have an Open Gardens [Society?] where they open and all the proceeds go to the Hospice. So, I go to some of, I go to that. But there's nothing sort of . . . I also became a volunteer at the Herbarium down there and to be a volunteer, you had to be a member of not the Australian Plant Society, the Wildflower Society. I again thought that they might be able to have sway in controversial bush clearing habitat and all that. I did put it to somebody and they said "oh yes we do but we have to do it with scientific information/knowledge". But they didn't do much really, they couldn't do much, I don't think. They are only a small group as well. And then there was a bit of a kerfuffle there and I thought, oh no, I don't need that so I didn't go back to there either. I think I was in it for a couple of years.

Steve Hopper, he's down there.

He's down there [affirming]

I would have thought he would have been active in that, sort of conservation.

Conservation yes, and he has a lot to do with the Aboriginal . . .

Corporation

Yes, he's not involved with the West Australian Wildflower Society, as far as I know.

I'm not sure I know what they do, the Wildflower Society.

Well they run the Herbarium down there so, they are in the . . .

31:00

they are in wildlife and attractions or whatever it is called.

Oh, DBCA.⁴

Yes. They have got a building there, that's how they got the Herbarium. They do – they are quite good, they do good work. They do projects and scientific study and they have got where all the specimens came from; one lady was doing it all on a map in Albany, in the Herbarium, [listing] where all the specimens came from, mapping. They go out once a month on a walk, they call it.

Have you had enough warm weather down there, there's been a lot of rain this winter?

Yes, there was a good display, it was late and I think they just made it with their exhibition, just got in in time. The week before they probably wouldn't have got the specimens, some of the specimens they had so, I think they were lucky there. But they do a good job.

We haven't got a conservation-minded Council or any groups really, that I know of for conservation or greening or anything like that. That disappoints me.

I'm surprised, I really am.

Denmark has got it, and we have just had Council elections and I saw who has been elected – same, same. There is a wonderful group there and they are trying to save a place called Yakamia Forest⁵ and they are all just grass-roots people and they have been on this for about eighteen months or more, and they are still fighting. They put up some people for election and they didn't get in. That was very, I was really disappointed. I would love it if Albany became a conservation masterpiece. Mmm.

In ways that Garden History can assist, because we are working on a lot of advocacy. If we know of particular areas of concern, we can actually start to do research and galvanise and approach on a national level.

That's true.

Communication lines need to be open I think, to be able to know those things.

Yes, I hadn't given that a thought actually.

⁴ Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions

⁵ a forest location within the City of Albany and Yakamia is a residential suburb

So, just bear that in mind.

I will. So, weather-wise, I'm really pleased that I moved to Albany and I should have done it before, when my parents were alive. I wish I had done it sooner, definitely.

I'm glad there is a Garden History Society, I'm very glad that there is and I've been to the Garden History Museum in London and all that and have visited some gardens over there and it was a busy scene that everybody goes to, but I'm really glad that there is one here. I really don't want to be a member of anything now [laughter]. So now I'm with Free the Bears, a volunteer group down there. It raises money for the Bear Sanctuaries that we have got in Lao, Vietnam and Cambodia. We rescue some bears from the bile farms. It was started by a woman here in Perth. She went to one of those countries; she was appalled at the bile farms, and she came back and set about trying to do something about it. Our patron is Rove McManus, he's into it. Our little group down there, we raised, well we look as if we raised \$20-\$25,000 this year. We had a massive garage sale and a market day and next year we are having a High Tea.

Well, it takes individuals doesn't it?

Thank you very much for your time.

Recording ends: 34 minutes, 48 seconds

Interview ends.