THE AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH

Photographer and date unknown

INTERVIEWEE:	**DR SIMON GRANT**
INTERVIWER:	PROFESSOR TIM ENTWISTLE
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	15 JANUARY 2026
PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	MITTAGONG, NEW SOUTH WALES
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INTERVIEW CO-ORDINATOR:	LYN BARRETT
QUOTATIONS:	EXTRACTS FROM THE INTERVIEW SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:	ALL USES OF THIS INTERVIEW SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THE INTERVIEWEE AND THE SOCIETY: SIMON GRANT, AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY, INTERVIEWED 15 JANUARY, 2026 BY PROFESSOR TIM ENTWISTLE.

0.00

This is a recording with Dr Simon Grant OAM conducted by Professor Tim Entwisle. The interview is being recorded at the residence of Simon Coombe Wood in Mittagong on the 15th of January, 2026 the time commencing this interview is 10.17am, and this is the voice of Lyn Barrett conducting the interview.

This is the voice of Professor Tim Entwisle, who's the interviewer.

This is the voice of Simon Grant, who's the interviewee.

Lyn Barrett
Gentlemen, are you happy to have signed the consents, and do you have any other instructions with this consent?

I'm happy to sign the consent. Thank you

Tim Entwisle
Equally happy. Thank you.

Lyn Barrett
All right, I will now hand over to Professor Tim Entwisle.

Tim Entwisle
Thanks very much for that. Simon, let's start right back at the beginning. ... if you could give us your full name - I know we've just repeating that. Give us your full name and where and when you were born.

My name's Simon John Boyne Grant. I was actually born in England because my father, who was a medical practitioner, was studying overseas at the time. In some ways, I have a unique heritage, because I also have Aboriginal ancestry through my mother, one of the few Aboriginal heritage people born overseas. From there, we came back to Australia, when I was one. We spent a short time in Abbotsford in Sydney, and then moved to St Ives, which is in the northern part of Sydney. At that time, the suburb was very sparse. My grandfather on my mother's side, Johann Degotardi, owned quite a lot of land there, and we had some land that we got from him. The houses were very few in number. In fact, what is now the St Ives High School was an orchard. My grandfather had many acres of land, which subsequently has been subdivided. We actually were lucky that we lived at the end of a street that had a no through area and backed on to the bush that went through to Middle Harbour. So I spent a lot of my youth, from ages three onwards, exploring the bush around Middle Harbour.

Simon, just before we get to that, if I could just take you back a little bit, to what you were saying before, about your parents and your family. Some history from the UK, obviously, and the local and Aboriginal heritage as well. ... Just out of curiosity, for the geography, do you know what part of Australia [your mother's family] were from?

Yes, they came from their Kamilaroi ancestry. My great, great grandmother was in Keepit Station. At the time with the Kamilaroi, as you'll recall, there was a lot of uprisings, the Myall Creek Massacre and things like that. They then rounded up the Australian Aborigines. And so she was born in Keepit Station which is where they were all placed. It's hard to work out how they moved from there, but I think it's relevant, it was in the early 1850s which was the Gold Rush era, and from what I gather, all the Caucasian workers on the stations went gold prospecting, and the cattle stations, etc, needed workforce, and so that's how my great great grandmother then went up to a town called Bingara. She obviously had a relationship with the owner of that station, and subsequently, my relative Charles Degotardi went to the area which was well-known for gems, and he was in jewellery. He went to Bingara and married one of the daughters and my grandfather was one of the offspring from that marriage. They left that area in the great drought that finished round about 1900 because the cattle etc, were struggling. And so they moved back to Sydney. Thankfully, and I suspect because of their European heritage, they were very keen on educating everybody. And so my grandfather went to university in 1918 and did engineering, and he was insistent that all his children, including my mother, were educated at university. So seven out of the seven went to university, and a lot of them did medicine, etc, which is where my mother met my father, who also did medicine.

Do you know whether your father and your mother had gardens in their background?

05:16

Yes, on my mother's side, my grandfather had land. Through the Depression years, he used to plow lots of acreage, because he had a lot of people that he let live on the land. He used to plant lots of things for them. He had macadamias and things like that. My father grew up in Chatswood and he always was growing things. He had an orchid collection from many years. Just before he died, he gave a lot of those to the Sydney Botanic Garden. A number of them got put into the new glass house, the pyramid that they had. When we grew up in St Ives, we had a bigger than average block, and he had orchids, plus a lot of camellias. Plus we backed onto the native bush, and so we had mixture of both.

... I'm interested in the native bush, because I think as we go through this, your life story, there is clearly a strong interest in the Australian bush, as much as there is in interesting plants, which we'll get to of course. What do you remember about those first memories of the bushland around St Ives?

Well, three plants on our block which I think are of interest and I have always loved ever since. We had a wonderful what we used to call Sydney red gum, *Angophora costata*, with the lovely red bark that they have. It was a very large tree and was just behind the house. We had a beautiful view of it. Closer to the house was an equally wonderful *Banksia serrata*. And I can recall, unfortunately for visitors from overseas, almost every visitor used to have to hear my father tell the story about the big bad banksia men and the descriptions that were given associated. But they were just such beautiful trees, and in some ways they change your view on, what's a normal plant, etc. You know, often I used to hear my mother say that she when she was in England, she found the forests boring because they the trees were all the same, whereas the Australian bush is just so different. And it

was. We lived on large areas of sandstone, so those trees did extremely well in that environment, plus numerous other trees. There was also small areas similar to the elevated swamp land on sandstone, where you'd get *Bladfordias* flowering, Christmas bells. And so it was a wonderful area to grow up in, and it was very safe because there was just no one around. We were on our own.

I think that's an interesting view, too, from your parents - or your mother - because I've heard the opposite said of a lot of people coming out from the UK. They come to Australia, they see eucalypts, and I've heard the comment "they all look the same to me". To me that perhaps says something about the plant knowledge or the plant interest of your parents, whether it's articulated in different species or it's more [that] they are very aware of the variety.

I think it's possibly a little bit different. All eucalypts may look the same, but they are not symmetrical. They're very abnormal in shape and things but I can imagine somebody who's grown up expecting trees to be symmetrical and even, struggling with the change and the harshness of the Australian bush. I have to admit that I'm a late comer to really finding the beauty of that. It is starkly different to bush elsewhere, you know, trees elsewhere.

You say you were late coming to the beauty of it, but I do understand, when you were younger you did take up a little bit of gardening. Perhaps to earn money?

Oh, yes, I loved gardening. You know, I was quite happy just digging up weeds and looking at the trees. We had collections of camellias. So there was always something flowering. We had a New South Wales Christmas Bush, which regularly flowered. And so I used to work at home for pocket money. And when I was at university, I went and gardened around the area to get pocket money. I much preferred that than working in other jobs.

10:04

We'll get to your other job [laughs] that you eventually moved into in a moment. I think you were also involved in your [family] home garden, terracing and some landscaping. That also, as much as the plants, along with the building of a garden, must have been embedded early.

Yeah, and we used to all work, my brother and myself and my father. We had a ready supply of sandstone. My grandfather in his land had this sandstone quarry, a remnant which is still there, just down, down below us. What still amazes me is there were sheer cliffs that my parents didn't seem to worry about us climbing and the risk of falling over, but that's another story. There was a ready supply of sandstone, so a lot of the terracing and the garden beds were made from sandstone. Sandstone is a very easy material to work with, because it just splits in layers, very easily. And so you can build up garden beds, very stable garden beds. And so the majority of our backyard was a garden with sandstone terraces with camellias growing inside that. And the walking surface was pavers also of sandstone. I'm not sure exactly where they came from, but I'm sure they must have come from the leftovers from the quarry, which at that time was starting to close down.

So with that interest in gardening, and earning a bit of money from it, obviously taking an interest in the plants and noticing what was around you, you did turn to medicine as your career. Tell me a little bit about how you got into medicine and why that eventuated?

Well, at school, mathematics and science were always by far, my best subjects and English was well down which I won't go into, reasons which I've recently worked out. What I actually wanted to do was to get into one of the sciences. My father, of course was shrewd in his advice. He said, "Oh yes, you can, well and truly do that. You know that'd be a good thing. But of course, if you do medicine, you can do that as well, and it's much more assured that you'll have work and things like that." I was going to put in my application for one of the sciences. I actually went over to Macquarie University, and spoke to one of the science people there about what the opportunities were, he was a colleague of my father's. But as I was going in with my application, possibly because of my lack of being really bold in choice, I decided maybe I should do medicine. So I did medicine and I must admit, medicine has been good. I was very interested in the physiology and the sciences behind medicine, almost as much as medicine itself. I was always interested in why things worked and how it happened and what the relationship was, etc, which I think was an extension of my interest in botany and plants and things like that, as to why animals are there, why plants there, and so on. So, even though I did medicine, my specialty endocrinology, was associated with hormones and mechanisms of why hormones work and, and a lot of that, as opposed to the more practical sides of medicine such as surgery and even general practice, which are more looking after general health problems. Endocrinology involved a lot of trying to work out why something was happening or how it was. It was at that time, DNA work was only just becoming available, and so, as it's happened in all areas of science, there was a huge explosion in knowledge of the mechanisms of all diseases.

I've also found that doctors seem to have an interest, a latent interest, or perhaps one that develops through, through study, of botany. And there's always been a close association, historically, of course, with medicine and plants. And it's often the question, you know you walking in to see a doctor "oh, you study botany, don't you?" Did you find that amongst your peers there was this interest as well?

Surprisingly, not. However, having said that, I think most professionals are obsessive collectors of something, and whether it's into botanical areas of interest, whatever you get into, you tend to not do it half-hearted. Botany is one of those fields. As I said, I can't recall that any of my colleagues were directly botanically interested. They, by necessity, talking to me, are now, but I've more persuaded them, rather than the other way around.

15:20

That's interesting. That's good, that's good. Well done. And let's turn to you [again]. You got married as well, and I'd be very interested to hear a bit about Mariese and her background as well, given you are very much a partnership in the garden that we're sitting in today, and you both have strong interest in plants.

Well of Mariese's parents, her mother did botany, and in fact, I think she travelled to UK, and worked at Kew Gardens at some stage. So she was interested in botany. Her father actually worked with CSIRO, and he was one

of the involved originally, his work was mainly with pastures, so he was lucerne [and clover]. Once you reach a certain age, you then had to move into other areas. So he got involved in various diseases or pests associated with things but, but he was very much interested in in horticulture, but more on a commercial site. At that time, I think CSIRO, a lot of their work was more directed at farming and working on wheat, working on ... but his area of expertise was, was pastures, so lucerne, [hay] etc. I think more recently, CSIRO then had a golden era where they really pushed botanical knowledge, etc. Unfortunately, that seems to have fallen by the wayside as well.

Correct.

And when did you get married?

We got married in 1978 after we completed our university course. We then went to Royal North Shore Hospital and to start with, we actually lived in a unit at Neutral Bay.

Did you have a garden?

17:13

We carried several tons worth of soil up onto the roof of the unit. Unfortunately, the unit then started leaking, and when the strata managers went up there and saw that there was this garden up on the roof, the next week, we were told that we had to remove the several tons of earth from the roof. And so we decided maybe it's time we need to find a garden ourselves and we then moved to Ryde. We spent a couple of years in Ryde. During that time, it was associated with our training and we were involved with physician training, The course was fairly difficult, in fact, the pass rate was 16% I think, when we got through. Mariese went into neurology, again, I think neurology as opposed to a lot of the other medical spheres, is a very intellectual sphere. It's looking at more diagnosis. Unfortunately, with a lot of neurological disorders, there's very limited treatment available, so it really is defining what the problem is, so that people can get better understanding of their health problems, not necessarily with their view that there's any specific treatment. As we completed our courses, I started a PhD, which was in looking at research in thyroid. It sort of was too successful, too quickly, and within about 12 months, I had actually achieved all that I wanted to. I had the choice of continuing to do that sort of research, or to do something different? And I decided, actually I quite like physician work and that I wanted to get out of and not in a laboratory. And so a job in Bowral arose and we moved here.

So did you complete the PhD study?

No, I decided not to, because it wasn't going to achieve anything. And with this job in Bowral, the advantage of living here was Mariese at that time was working in Westmead Hospital and it was feasible to travel to Westmead to continue her work. She got involved with investigating Parkinson's disease, and so she could live here and do that. Down there I was the sole physician at Bowral Hospital for five years, which meant it was a one in one on call, and then it was one in two on call for the next 10 years. So a lot of our time was taken up by work, and we had young family developing. The reason we have the garden is that, right away, I decided if I'm

living here, I would like to have an area larger than normal. Mariese at the time, thought that maybe one or two acres we could cope with, but I felt that I would have finished that within a few years. I needed something a bit bigger than that. Actually it was difficult to find a five acre or more area of land that had reasonable potential that was close to work, because I was on call, I had to be within five to 10 minutes of the hospital. This block came up but it wasn't on town water. That was one of the first concerns I had, is how we would manage a block garden without town water, and a young family without town water. But in the end, we took the plunge and set up our systems. And although it has been hard in dry years, you learn to get around that as much as possible.

20:56

Describe for me where we are and little bit about what it looked like when you first moved here.

The block is just over eight acres. It is about five to six kilometers from both Bowral and Mittagong. It's up the hill, about 700 meters above sea level. It's on the northern side of Mount Gibraltar. The soil here is very deep, although, subsequently, I have found that it is deficient in certain minerals. But the actual soil structure which is probably four to five feet deep over most of the land is reasonably good. So it's ideal for growing things. When we moved here, it had four head of cattle and had been grazed for many years. There were about two dozen remnant eucalyptus trees and two or three planted trees that the previous owner had planted, only one of which I think is in existence now. The eastern half of the block had two eucalypts on it, and the western half had the remaining nearly two dozen or so trees. Over the years, of course, those remnant eucalypts have dwindled, they either died in the droughts, died from too much water in the wet areas in wet seasons, have been struck by lightning then blown over. Of interest, one of the ones that died in the drought in 2019, we cut it off as a habitat tree at about 15 meters tall. The number of tree rings that we counted at 15 meters was over 200 so I think most of the eucalypts are probably 200 to 400 years of age.

So it would be fair to say there was no garden here when you arrived?

There was no garden at all [both laugh]

Okay which is interesting. And this is 1985?

1985 we moved here. We had a house built and moved on the block in 1987 I would guess that almost everything I planted between 1985 and 1987 was either where the house or drive ended up so has subsequently been moved or didn't survive, or whatever. From 1987 on, is when we started creating the current gardens. In some ways, when we started we had two different schools of thought on gardens. Mariese's was more aesthetic. Mine was more obtuse. I like rare and unusual things, and I like trees and shrubs. And so while I was busy purchasing various trees and shrubs (at that time, there was quite a lot of rare plant nurseries, which subsequently disappeared as gardens have changed), Mariese's was busy getting bulbs, roses with heritage roses in particular, and other trees, plants that were very beautiful to look at immediately. The advantage of Mariese's approach was that within a few years, the garden was actually looking quite attractive, because most of the plantings that Mariese had planted were already achieving a degree of beauty, whereas most of the ones

that I had planted still look like small sticks in the ground and were to take quite a while to grow. Our likes have come together. As my trees have matured, they've started to show their beauty. I was wandering around the garden today, there's a *Schima superba*, which I didn't even know what it was when I purchased it. I think I had read that it was a camellia relative. It would have taken 15 years before it started to flower and now it is always a spectacular tree. Every summer it flowers when very little else is happening in the garden. And I think the, the beauty of the two approaches has meant that from a very early stage the garden has had something to look at.

25:21

I was going to say, that tension that you're talking about, which I think a lot of people would understand and be familiar with, it's sometimes internally as well as between people: the interesting plant versus the beautiful landscape. So, how has it evolved... As you say, your plantings have probably come into their own later. Is the way you approach the garden though and little individual parts became your responsibility and others Mariese's, or did you try and combine the two [in an overall...]?

When you've got eight acres of just paddock, it's very difficult to create all of it at the one time. And so you start areas. Mariese would put a hose down as the edge of the garden, and then I would then go around with a spade and we'd dig up the area and remove the grass. Then we'd plant things there. But for the overall attractiveness, she's certainly been the driver, making sure that it was attractive. I don't think I'm quite as guilty as the true [arborist] I've forgotten the word, but somebody who collects trees and just has them in a geometric pattern, I think I've always had a view of some degree of attractiveness. What I have learnt though if you're going to create a garden is that many of the trees need protection and you can't plant in a geometric pattern, because that gives no protection to the individual trees anyway. They do need to be planted in a community because they help protect themselves. So the end result is that it has to not only be botanically interest from my point of view, it has to be aesthetically interest from Mariese's point of view. I think our views have both grown together over time, and certainly in recent years, it is my desire to have it attractive as well and appreciated now and Mariese on the other hand, has become more interested in unusual plants. So she is now saying, why don't we plant X, Y or Z that may be less well known because I think she can also see the attraction of having plants that are different. What disappoints me that in gardens of today everybody's is planting the same thing. If there is a camellia cultivar that is spectacular, within a few short years, everybody has got it. I My belief is, I really like having a diverse range of species. I think it's good for preservation of those species and I think it's good for everybody but variety is important.

Let's stick with the variety, because that's something that clearly interests you in the garden. But also, I think, and we'll get to your interest in bush and walking in a moment, that variety of plants and the reason for growing the variety, which you've talked about a little bit. You also distribute or get seed from collectors and other people interested in plants, and I believe, also distribute material to others to try and maintain species for big broader conservation points of view. Can you talk a little bit about that aspect?

Two things. I'm very much interested in that, and one of them is and it was highlighted by the adverse conditions that we had leading up to 2019 bushfires. At that time it was extremely difficult to keep a garden

going. I mentioned earlier that we're not on town water. We had to survive on a bore that is relatively poor. It doesn't give huge amounts of water, and the water is very high in iron content. So you can't use it to pump directly onto the garden. I also learned particularly in that season and the seasons leading up, that all the water in the world won't make things survive if the weather is so hot with the harsh sun and the humidity low. The humidity was 0% for probably three or four months in a row in late 2019. It just means that certain plants are going to struggle. So during that time I lost some species of maples, which are one of my collections. I have very little chance that I can get them back again. But that is the reality. Trees are being lost because of the change in environment, and so I think it's now becoming imperative that we grow as much as we can to try and preserve a lot of these things. It also made me realize that I've got to distribute plants to as many people as I can but unfortunately, gardens are becoming less and less varied. They're becoming smaller. And so people have a choice of, do I want something I know that it's going to be a success, or do I want something that's unusual, that might be a success? They obviously are going to choose something that they're guaranteed. The risk we have at the moment is that lots of interesting plants and diversity are going to be lost if plants aren't distributed. But one of the risks of private gardens is there is no guarantee that the ownership will be maintained. Somebody even relatives, may destroy those collections. I've become increasingly aware, as I said, associated with the drought and plant loss, but also through some of the organizations that I've been with. The IDS and the people I've been involved with there, John Hawker in particular, emphasise that private gardens can also be risky because they can be lost. We therefore need to spread these plants around.

31:38

The International Dendrological [Dendrology] Society, that abbreviation [IDS], in case those listening don't know it. I do want to return to that too, because I think that's interesting and your role there, particularly in recent years. With plants growing in your garden, you've got some plants here that I know are extinct, or most likely extinct in the wild. So I can see that conservation angle. Do you have any concerns with hybridization, because I know some of the groups you work on hybridize freely, and that is always a risk.

That is always a risk. There's no guarantee that some of the ones that I've obtained from seed aren't hybrids in the first place. Maples, oaks, a lot of those have a risk of that. I guess in some ways, you've got to work with what you've got. I do work on statistics, hoping that if you've got a tree that has multiple seed then the chances are at least one or two of those are going to be reasonably pure. That's not always the case. But yes, I think there is a risk there. Grafting or propagation by vegetative means is obviously a way to get around that. Unfortunately, a lot of the trees that we've got don't graft well, and some of the ones that I know that are maples, for example, that are available in Victoria, just can't be grafted at the moment, because there's no closely related species to graft on. So they probably will be lost. I guess at the moment we're facing a crisis in available gardens. I think there's going to be a rationalization on what is preserved, and I fear that a lot of those plants are going to be lost because they are in private collections, and they are not necessarily viewed or known that they are so special.

Your mentioning of your private collections, and also propagation, brings me to some of the people you've worked with. I think you've interacted with many of the, particularly, Australian collectors who've been

overseas. Are there a couple of people that you might just mention who've been important in your, well, in your education, in your connection and developing knowledge and plans?

33.58

Well, for most of my time I worked in isolation. As I mentioned we were fairly busy with our work, and so I developed the collection largely through books. At that time, the internet wasn't as strong as it is now. More recently, the internet has really taken over from that, so it's very much easier to access information. But when I started the collection here in 1985 to even 1995 the internet was, was very poor, and so most of my information was through books. And I had luck one of the species of maples that I had was *Acer pentaphyllum*, which is very close to extinction in the wild. Overseas, it is an extremely rare and an extremely valued maple that is virtually not in existence. Yet in Australia, it is not uncommon, it seeds profusely and I get many kilograms of seed every year. And so during my contacts with people, I just happened to mention, that I have some pentaphyllum seed, of which everybody was extremely keen to get some. in the end, I sent something like two to three kilos of *Acer pendaphyllum* seed to various places around the world. And that opened the door for me to meet people. I was very lucky. I met Peter Gregory, who was probably one of the main luminaries of the Maple Society, and his colleague Hugh Angus, and with whom I still maintain contact. By 2011 actually, by default, I had a reasonable collection of maples. Unbeknownst to me everyone else seemed to have stopped collecting maples. I was looking through the internet at that time and noticed that there was an International Maple Society meeting in Belgium at Philippe de Spoelberch's Arboretum. It was not something that I'd ever thought that I would go to, but I thought I might go to it and see what it was like. And so we went to this International Maple Society. Of interest, a third of the attendees were amateurs like myself, so I fitted in very easily, a third of them were botanists, and a third of them were arboretum owners and things like that. I met Philippe de Spoelberch who has one of the best collections of maples around the world. He had about 90 species. I saw a publication from his arboretum saying they had about 96 different species, subspecies and forms of maple in an article that was published a year or so ago. Of interest, when I looked at my list, I had 95 I think I was only one behind him. And so my collection wasn't too bad. And they said they had 13 specimens of *Acer pycnanthum*. I went and counted mine, and I had 12 *Acer pycnanthum*. And so I thought, I'm not that far behind. Anyway, I met Philippe who said, "You should join the International Dendrology Society, you'd enjoy that" It was a fantastic meeting. It was as I said, something that we would [not normally] have gone to, but we met all the luminaries in maple circles. I met people such as Piet de Jong, who was the one who wrote the classifications of maples, as well as Peter Gregory, Hugh Angus and Philippe and so on. In addition we went to Kalmthout Arboretum, to Philippe's arboretum and to Arboretum Trompenberg. As I said it was just wonderful. In fact, of all the medical meetings, conferences etc that I've ever been to, it was by far the best. The best part of it was that everybody was the same. They were all these odd people who liked collecting maples and I fitted in very well. From there, I came back, and I thought, I must join this International Dendrology Society. I went to the site and it said, to join you, have to have a member of the IDS to sponsor and support you. I didn't know anyone else who was in IDS, so it fell by the wayside because I literally didn't know anybody who was in IDS. About two or three years later, we'd had our garden open for the Southern Highlands Botanic Garden Society, and one of the members of the IDS had come along. They were having a meeting in the Southern Highlands, and they asked did we minded if they came to our

garden? I said, Oh, that's fine, on one condition, you support me to join the IDS and so that was how I got into IDS.

Well, and from that point, now, I mean, you're very much part of the IDS, and you're very involved in writing for the Australian chapter or group of IDS, and writing quite regularly or putting out a newsletter. That, I think, is fascinating. You've been doing that for last few years?

40:02

Yes, I've been writing a newsletter for just coming up six years. in total it's nearly 230,000 words that I've written. My original idea there came about because I took over the vice presidency of the Society for Australia, (which is the only official position) in 2020. That year was covid and I was concerned that with covid, and with all its restrictions, if there wasn't some sort of regular information going out, these societies ran the risk that they could close or be maintained. So I decided, well, I'll start writing and to have a Tree Treat and write about a particular tree. The first one I did was about *Rhodoleia forrestii* which is a member of the hamamelis family. It has beautiful flowers and I thought, I'll just do that plant as it is something obtuse. And there won't be anybody who knows much about it to criticize my lack of information on it, and then people quite like that. Because of a mailing list that I'd inherited from the previous vice president. It went to a number of overseas people, and to my surprise some of them wrote back to me. One asked "I'm interested in that tree. Have you seen it flower?" which I had. I kept on going with the newsletters and over time, it's become a lot bigger than I anticipated. I had retired in 2019 so it fitted in well with retiring. I think it's important that you have interests after you retire, otherwise, you tend to vegetate. You need to have some sort of intellectual stimulation. Over time, I've become more confident in actually writing botanical articles. I started off with being fairly superficial, I have to admit, but I've now developed techniques to trawl the internet. Usually, I start with Wikipedia, but the references from Wikipedia I find are generally more useful than Wikipedia itself, with the exception that unfortunately, a lot of people write for institutions that have their articles behind firewalls that you can't access. I no longer have access to a university library, etc, which I used to but with the exception of that, I can usually track down lots of information on most subjects. So the articles have become more botanical. I've written series on Banksia and Eucalypts and Brachychiton and its been extremely valuable for myself. It's a way I learn about plants. Surprisingly I have been to various meetings and had people say, "I read that article, I get those newsletters". So even though the mailing list might be just a couple of 100, it seems to be being distributed to more and more. And there are people who have been working at Kew Gardens whom contact me every now and then about articles. So I feel it's been worthwhile doing it.

I think you're quite right. That mix of learning, it's ... kind of ... continuous education for yourself. I understand exactly what you're saying there. As well as perhaps storing that information for yourself and others, which they can come back to as well. As you mentioned in there - and so far, we've been talking a bit about maples - I know you've got an interest in oaks mote recently perhaps. But we might be missing that strong interest which we started with, which was the native Australian bush. The other thing that you do a lot of is, is bush walking and walking through the bush with people. And I think the important part of that, it seems to me, is

that you enjoy taking people into and showing them your local bush. Or going to some area you haven't been to, to see interesting plants. Is that an interest that's separate to your gardening, or kind of somehow embedded within that?

Australian natives. I have to admit, I'm not the best at growing Australian natives. There are certain ones that I can grow. I've got collections of conifers and I've got collections of Brachychiton, but I must admit, a lot of the ones that grow in the dry sclerophyll type of territory I struggle with growing. Having been to Western Australia a couple of years ago, I suspect that I'm providing them with too much care. In WA they seem to like harsh environments, sand and more sand so I am trying that . But with many natives I accept seeing them elsewhere. I do love native bush and I like seeing plants in the wild. Nothing gives me a greater thrill than seeing plants in the wild. It doesn't really matter where. In 2023, I went and saw all some maples growing in the wild in Korea and before that in Japan, or doesn't really matter where, I just like seeing things in their native environment. The practicality, of course, gardens are becoming more necessary to preserve a lot of those species. But we've already discussed that. It is the same for the native bush, I love going into it. And it doesn't matter whether it's dry sclerophyll, (which is the predominant areas around Southern Highlands), or whether it's the cool temperate rainforest, tropical rainforest. or whatever. And as you've mentioned, I do like taking people into those areas also. I joined a walking club when I retired; the Southern Highlands walking club. Unfortunately, a colleague and myself have become notorious. We tend to drag the chain, and I have found the best way to get around that, is to be the last person. I take the role of being what's called the Tail-end-Charlie at the rear of the group. That allows me to duck off, take a picture of a plant and get back without anyone noticing that I've actually left the fold. Also, I'm sure to the annoyance of some at times, I like to tell them about plants and why they are growing there and why they are different. It's a way of learning for me also. When we go on walks, I'll stop and talk about a plant and why I think it's of interest. On a recent walk out to Ahearns Lookout in the Nattai NP [National Park], I identified a Banksia, that I'd looked at multiple times before. After we returned it was pointed out to me that that banksia was actually indigenous to the small area that we walked. I find that fascinating. Why is it there? Why only there because it seems to grow so easily there. Regarding taking other people, I recently took some members of the International Dendrology Society on a tour of Northern Queensland. I had been to Northern Queensland with the general IDS group a couple of years before, but there were some other areas that I wanted to see specifically and so this time, the itinerary included going to Mount Spurgeon and hopefully also Mt Bartle Frere. Unfortunately, we achieved most of the things we wanted, but the region had unseasonable rain, and over 400 mm of rain fell overnight when we were on Mt Bartel Frere. We were washed out and it wasn't safe to proceed. So we actually had to turn around within 500 meters of the summit. We couldn't go on and 50 leech bites later, I got down to the bottom.

I think this shows not only determination, but also a practical sense that even within, you could probably see or smell the flowers that you could sense them being there, but you did make the sensible decision...

48:44

... it would have been unsafe

It was still bucketing down rain. The area where we camped was six inches underwater. The tracks that had been a small puddle the day before were now halfway up to your knees underwater. This is on the side of a hill and it was also windy and misty. And so it was, there was no doubt that you had to turn around.

Well from Bartle Frere, or near Bartle Frere, back to your garden. I do want to look at the opening of the garden to the public, which we haven't talked about much - just a passing mention ... - and you've been opening to a whole range of groups here. Obviously, there's a bit of a pattern here. You're enjoying showing people your garden and talking about the plants, and about what you know and have discovered yourself. So you've been doing that back to about 1994 I think, when you first opened. So it would have been a young garden then?

As I said, Mariese's roses and other plants, by 1994 they were looking quite impressive, and there were banks of flowers. I should say, virtually none of them are in existence anymore. As a garden matures, things change. But yes, we opened at that time, for the Australian Open Garden Scheme. It was one of the first times. I think the Australian Open Garden Scheme started off in Victoria, and then it expanded fairly quickly. And so by 1994, New South Wales was well and truly involved. I can remember we were inspected by, I won't mention his name. When he came along at the end of a drought, I could almost hear him say "Oh, you, you want to open do you?" with a very underwhelmed summary. I suspect that we may have been included [it] to open because there wasn't anyone else at the time, but by the time it was open, it was actually quite attractive, and there were lots of things to see and there were rudimentary garden beds here and there, and so you could see what was happening. We opened the following year and the garden was more improved. That opening made memorable by a willow-leafed pear in the Rose Garden, which we saw today. The night before we opened, we had a gale through, and the entire top of the willow-leafed pear broke off, except for one leaf I had to quickly chainsaw the remains of my willow-leafed pear in the Rose Garden. The roses were, however, were looking quite good, and you could see them a lot better because the pear was no longer there. By that stage, the Australian Open Garden Scheme was winding down. It was also it was tiring to participate. You had to sit around all day for the weekend, that you were open, so it wasn't a really enjoyable thing. Subsequently, we found that opening for special interest groups who would come and visit the garden all together was a much better way. I think people who have gardens always like to show their garden. And so interest groups started to come along. We have had various garden groups, school fundraisers, and later the Southern Highlands Botanic Garden. We were one of the first gardens to be open for them. That is a much, much better way of having it open because it's concentrated and you get assistance. With the Australian Open Garden Scheme, you got no help whatsoever. You had to do it all yourself including sitting at the gate all weekend. Opening for the specialty groups and the Southern Highlands Botanic Garden changed that changed the experience from being a chore into a really great thing to do. There is nothing better than having people coming around and enjoying your garden. I think that's why you have gardens.

52:46

I can see the connection there, with the bush walking as well.... [phone rings and we take a break in the conversation]

So Simon, your interest in gardens, as you've just said, is really [that] you like that intimacy of talking to people and having that connection, which I can see throughout your life, really. And you've, quite recently, I think, become President of the Highlands Garden Society as well, which perhaps on the surface, seems odd, given your interest in natural bushland collectors, the dendrology. And now, a very 'garden' focus, which you've almost talked about - you've been pushed almost into the beauty of gardens. Why have you taken that role?

I wouldn't say I was pushed into the beauty of gardens. I did do art as a subject when I was at school, but I do admit to liking the beauty of plants more versus the beauty of the whole thing. Getting back to the Highlands Garden Society, the Highlands Garden Society has been functioning since the 1970s I think. Unfortunately they were struggling to get somebody to take on the presidency. I was asked whether I would do it, but I like you, I agree that it's not necessarily a role that I thought that I should take on. I did say to them that, look, you know, my interest is more botanical, and not necessarily flowers and things like that. I suspect it was more out of, if I didn't do it, there was no one else to do it, so I took the role on. As I have said I felt that my strengths were more botanical and not necessarily garden plants although I do feel I have a reasonable knowledge of garden plants because I am around them all the time. During my tenure I have tried, in some ways, to make the Highlands Garden Society more interested in plants. I don't know that I have necessarily convinced lots of members to change their directions, I think they still overwhelmingly like the beauties of gardens, rather than necessarily what's in them, but I've been trying. The sessions that I've run have been on types of plants. we have had sessions on camellias , sessions on hydrangeas, and on propagation. I have actually tried this throughout my involvement with the Highlands Garden Society. I've done lots of lectures, and I've always taken a slightly different approach to most of the other speakers. For the first talk they asked me to do, I had hinted quite strongly that I would like to do one on maples. But rather than just showing pictures of lots of maples, I actually went through the botanical features of maples, what they've been used for, where they grow, the difference between types of maples and so on. I tried to make it a much more botanically focused story. Of course, you have to finish with a garden group saying what maples are going to be best for you? Which ones are going to look good in this environment and which ones are going to be better to grow in the sun or the wet or dry, et cetera. But think everybody who has a garden likes plants, and are interested in nature. To have, have a garden [you] have to know about pests, about fertilizers, about watering. You've got to know about lots of things. So you tend to have an interest in lots of things. The person who asked me to do that first talk, was very ambivalent about me talking when I said what I was going to talk about. Despite that, at the end of it, he said, "that was really good." That emboldened me, so whenever I've talked about things to the society I don't necessarily talk about a garden. For example, the most recent talk to the garden society was about the recovery of the Nattai Bush after the bushfires of 2019. It's not directly related to gardens, but you can always take tangents talking about how it impacts on your gardens.

58.00

This is a lovely connection through to the Australian Garden History Society as well, because this is an oral history for that society, and I was going to ask you what involvement you've had with that society. But also the topics you're talking about are very much front of mind for the society at the moment, as to what a

garden is, what a garden history society should talk about, the connection between gardens and 'natural', if I can use that word, systems. All very pertinent, all that you've been saying. So have you had a connection with the local branch of the AGHS.

Well, I think I'm the Associate Member with Mariese as the primary member of the garden history. And yes, again, it gets back to we all like everything to do with gardens, whether it be historic gardens, etc. I think it's the garden history is extremely relevant in terms of longevity. Our garden now is 40 years old, and it's really only now reaching maturity. And so gardens that we're seeing too often, they're only just young gardens, et cetera. I think keeping these historical gardens is so vital. We've mentioned about preservation of trees and diversity. A lot of the old gardens are where you find rare and unusual trees because they were available then and they may be no longer available. In a maple talk that I gave to the International Maple Society, the highlight that's very relevant to Australia is that, unfortunately, our best gardens are all probably in the highest bushfire risk areas, and so the importance that, that all of us get together and preserve what we can in case there are devastating fires, so that we can bounce back. It is all tied up with maintaining these gardens against global warming that I truly believe in. We are going to have to change but the lessons we've learned from old gardens are critical.

And on that, when we were walking through your garden here this morning, you were pointing out ... and I think you used the term jungle for your approach - perhaps the ideal approach to a garden, and that there's some logic behind that and what you see in terms of Australian gardens. So I was interested in your views on perhaps what we do right, and what we could do more of in looking after Australian gardens - whether heritage or history, or whether new gardens.

What I've learned is that Australian environment, particularly the hot sun late in summer, is extremely harsh on plants. A lot of the plants that we plant are forest plants, so they need to grow in a community. They're not out in the open. A lot of the gardening information that we get comes from Europe, where they've got much lower UV, light, sunlight, etc,. They can plant plants out in the open and have them as specimen trees. I think there's the, there's a limited number of trees that we can do that in Australia, just because of the harsh climate that we've got. I have found that over time, my survival of plants is now is so much better than it was than when I started. Yes, there's been a learning on the garden itself, where you should plant things and where you shouldn't plant things. But I also think the communities of plants help other plants survive. It means you can't have specimen trees in symmetry out in the open, but I like having them, and if I need to have them in a jungle, I'll have them in a jungle. I know where they are, and I enjoy them however they are,

Which is different, perhaps, to what, what your parents might have done the UK and others still do in the UK.

Yes, the [UK] approach just won't work in many areas of Australia. A good example of that is magnolias. I started off collecting a range of magnolias, especially the species. I had to give up on that because their larger leaf, particularly when it's papery, burns in the Australian summer. The most important thing you need to learn, I think, with gardening, is that it's not the average weather that's important. It's the extremes of weather that are important. 2019 probably taught me most about that. If anything survived 2019 you knew it's probably going to survive any other dry season but then the next two years after 2019, we had the wettest years we've ever had.

And plants that I had in in areas that had never been underwater before suddenly were underwater. So that highlights that in your individual gardens, you do need to know what is potential is but also that extremes of weather may dictate what you can successfully plant.

And I think the other thing you mentioned to as we walked around, was soils. And I think that's something that is also probably

... underestimated as well.

I'm very guilty of underestimating that. I've been aware that my soils are probably deficient, because people have told me that the Southern Highland soils are very acidic, which I accepted as it is good for a lot of the things that we grow. But the soils are largely granite based, or microsyenite based, which is very similar. So therefore they're likely to be very low in calcium, very low in phosphorus and sulfur. Now, growing Australian natives low in phosphorus is not a problem, but a lot of the introduced trees, of course, are dependent on phosphorus. So I've underestimated the importance of soils. The one thing our soil here is very well drained. That, of course, means it does dry out in in the drier season, so we mulch a lot. But yes, I agree that soils are under appreciated. After many, many years, in fact, only two years ago, I had our soil analyzed to see exactly what it was like, which confirmed it was extremely low in those elements. But I should have done that years ago.

Well, Simon, we're coming to the end of the interview and there's so many other things we could probably talk about today, but I want to just give you the chance if there is anything we haven't mentioned? Whether it's about your life, or whether it's about your view of gardens in the future too. Anything you want to impart to those who will listen to this.

Well, the main thing I want to say is, and I don't know that there is an answer to it, is, what concerns me greatly is the gardens are not high on the agenda of a large proportion of the population anymore. Block sizes are being cut up, even in an area such as Bowral or Southern Highlands. People literally have moved to the Southern Highlands to be in a garden and surrounded by them. But all the larger blocks are being cut up and the land is being used for housing with very little insight as to what it's going to be like in the future. I've already mentioned the concern I have with that is it means that the plant choices are getting less and less because people don't have the space to choose very much anymore. How do we as a group change the focus so that people do go back to, you know, a much more, I think, pleasant lifestyle, where they have beauty, plants, whatever around their surroundings rather than relying on a few Botanic Gardens and thinking that, that's all that matters.

It's a lovely place to end, but I do have a trivial question to finish on, though. You call your property here Coombe Woods. That's a name that might be familiar to people from other places. What's the origin of that name?

Well, when we came here, all the properties in the area had names. Must have been a nightmare to the post office trying to work out where a house was when they went out the first day, because there were no numbers

or anything like that. So, we thought long hard. We'd always like the name coombe. It's old English, and it means a small elevated valley. Effectively the property is in a small elevated valley going down the side of the Mittagong Range. We were trying to think of various combinations using coombe. We'd grown up near a street called Wythicombe Rd which wasn't appropriate. I think Whitty refers to reeds or something maybe willow. In the end, because I was planting a lot of trees, and I was thinking, well, it's going to make a woodland, so we thought of Coombe Wood. It had a nice ring to it. And so that's what we selected. We were mortified about 10 years later when reading a magazine we came across that Veitch and Son, nurserymen in England had a property that was called Combe Woode. Thankfully, I don't think they had registered the name, so we haven't had them ringing up and asking us to change it yet.

It's a lovely name, and I gave it a plural, sorry. So I apologize for that, but Coombe Wood. So thank you again, and thank you Lyn for the recording, and thank you, Simon for giving us your time.

Thank you.

Interview ends: *1 hour 08 minutes 50 seconds*