AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES

Interviewee:	MARIA HITCHCOCK OAM.
Interviewer:	DR. ELIZABETH CHAPPELL WITH LYNNE WALKER
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Good Morning, This is Liz Chappell and Lynne Walker speaking with Maria Hitchcock OAM at her home in Armidale on the 6th of October 2025 for Australian Garden History Society. Thank you very much, Maria, for agreeing to this interview. Are you also happy that this may also be developed into a podcast and available orally on our website?

Yes

That's wonderful, thank you. I've read your extensive resume and of course this morning we'd like to concentrate on the garden related topics. When did you first develop an interest in native plants?

I was living in Sydney and I joined the Sydney Bushwalkers. I went to one of the meetings and we had a man from the, it was called the Society for Growing Australian Plants, at that time. He gave a talk about growing eucalypts and I was hooked. It was amazing, and then I met Don [her husband] in Sydney Bushwalkers and we got married and we both joined the Society in the Parramatta branch and so gradually developed an interest.

That was in your student days or your early teaching days?

Early teaching days**.**

Then you went, I believe to various other country towns before you settled in Armidale.

Well, No. I actually spent three years teaching in Young, my bonded three-year stint, country service, when I first came out of teacher's college. Then I went overseas for a year and worked in Germany and travelled all over then came back. At that time my mother was ill with cancer so I stayed home and I got a couple of Sydney appointments and then I met Don and we married and then we decided to come to Armidale.

And what year did you arrive in Armidale?

1974.

It was after that time that you went back to university and did some further study and majored in botany?

Yes, so when I had my first child, Anna, I decided to do an external degree and I decided to do botany because of the interest. I also did a sub-major in archaeology and I did a major in German so I have a very interesting degree.

And of course you were born in Austria.

Yes, I was born in Austria but my mother came from northern Romania. In 1940 Hitler's bureaucrats came through all the German villages and offered all the people of German heritage passage to Germany to work in the factories, because that part of Romania was part of the Ribbentrop pact between Stalin and Hitler and it was going to pass into Russian hands. And so, the family had to decide whether they wanted to go to Germany under Hitler or stay in northern Romania under Stalin. Great choice! So the extended family decided to go to Germany and they got out of the train in Salzburg and went into a big refugee camp that had been established for the Romanian refugees. They had four children at that stage, a little one room with bunks, a little table and a little fuel stove. That was it. The camp had a communal kitchen and bathrooms and they had a visiting nurse and I think after a little while my uncle, who was a teenager at that time, was put into accommodation for young men and of course later on he was drafted into the German army. He was captured by the Americans and sent as slave labour to a French farm. When the war was over, the farmer didn't tell him the war was

over. My grandfather went to France to look for him, went from camp to camp, then finally located him and brought him home.

What a rich family history you have Maria. I do hope you have recorded that.

00.06.00

That's just my mother. I'll start telling you about my father, who came from Croatia.

Just tell us briefly, for the picture, because that informs who you are.

My father came from a very wealthy family in Croatia. His grandfather had been a merchant in Split and his father was in the Austro-Hungarian army as an officer and his mother, actually, I think she was his second wife, so his father was quite old when he was born. His mother was Austrian. She was from Vienna, because at that time Croatia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. My father was actually born in Sarajevo because that's where his father had been posted. But his father died when he was about three. So he went back to Zagreb and he lived with his mother and he had a younger sister and an aunt. They had share farms, so they had share farmers working their property and he became an electrician, he went to do his trade in – it wasn't Croatia – in Slovenia. Then the war broke out. He had two older brothers, one was a doctor. Both of them were killed in the early stages of the war. Then he was himself drafted into the army and while he was – he'd gone off to do training or something. He found out that his mother and his sister had been taken by the Serbian partisans and dragged off to Serbia. So he actually deserted and went looking for them. He got caught but managed to escape by climbing out of a toilet window, minus his trousers because they took his trousers so he couldn't run away. But he did anyway and he climbed out of a window. I think he found some relatives and then he joined up with some Croatian partisans and they told him how to get across the Austrian border so then it was a matter of escaping across the mountains and finding that particular farmer who helped people get across the border. He got across the border to Austria and made it to Salzburg and there was a priest there who was organising papers for Croatians and so he got some papers and then he gradually got some work, he worked for the Americans. He was actually quite a charismatic man, very social, quite a leader. I'm not all that social. I take more after my mother who was very shy and not social at all. Anyway, so they met. My grandparents were very upset that she was running around with this Croatian because the Romanians and the Croatians – well you know what happens in Europe they've all got these biases against each another. Anyway, I was conceived so then they had to get married. I turned up seven months later, after they got married. Then it was a real problem because the Russians had control of the Eastern part of Austria. You can imagine that refugees were flooding onto Austria, population quadrupled. The Russians had control of the Eastern side and they were sending everybody back. The British had control of the southern part of Austria and they were starting to send back all the Yugoslavs. They were called Yugoslavs in those days. And Dad started to get very worried that Americans would do the same, so he started looking for a way of getting out of Europe and the Australian government offered passage to Australia and he said 'Right, let's go.' You can imagine my mother's family. 'Australia, Australia, But it's so far away.' So she never saw her parents again.

So you were only a baby?

I was three. My brother was eighteen months old and it was fantastic.

With such a rich start in life, Maria. That must have informed your great energy.

00.12.22.

Now to Armidale, you and Don have just arrived in Armidale. You were teaching at that point.

No. I didn't get a job. I had left the Department so I didn't have a job. It was very hard to transfer into Armidale. You can imagine lots of people wanting to come here. Lots of teachers. Don got the job at NEGS which was very good so we moved up here. We'd already bought the land, we bought the land the year before.

Is this we're sitting now, where you now live?

Yes, We came up in about the end of '72, yes the end of '72, and some friends, he was an architect and he and his wife had been up here and they had stayed on a small farm and absolutely raved about the place, right. So Don came from Brisbane and he still had his father in Brisbane. I had my father in Sydney, my mother died young. So, we decided Armidale was probably going to be a good spot because it was halfway between the two fathers, we could visit each of them. So, we came up here. Very few hobby farms were on the market at that stage. We looked at a few places and then we came here and there were five blocks for sale. There was this one, that one and then there was three smaller ones, no not the middle one, there were two smaller ones. This is eight acres and eight acres and five and five. This one had the trees. The others had very few trees so we decided on this one. We lucked out because this is beautiful basalt country and perfect and also having the sort of stoney ridge running through the middle of it meant that I had an area of really good drainage. Some of the places the soil is really heavy, lots of clay. It is really hard to garden in some of those places. Especially with natives. A lot of the exotics are fine but for the natives you need good drainage for a lot of them.

So we bought this block and paid it off in about nine months I think. We were both teaching in Sydney at the time. And then came up here. Our architect friend was a real hippie. His wife was even worse, but we loved them. We said to Graham, can you design us a house. So he designed us a dome, a geodesic dome. It was magnificent, magnificent but nobody could build it. So anyway, we moved up and we lived in one of those little houses up near the Uni, O'Connell Street. And then I had Anna. In the meantime, we went around and talked to builders about building this house. Strangely enough the Dumaresq Shire Council passed the plans. They fell within all the regulations. But everything had to be custom built, all the windows, everything. They were all triangular, you know. You had this circular stairway that went up, it was sort of like segments that came off the stairway all these floors. The whole thing was surrounded by a small moat, with little bridges. Honestly, it was magnificent but nobody could build it. A couple of the builders said, 'You know what, you're never going to build this because it's so expensive, right. Everything has to be custom made. You're looking at, I think one builder quoted us over $60,000 and in those days, I mean. We built this house for $19,000. So that's the value.

I'm very pregnant. I want a nest and we had the first fight of our marriage. I said, right. We are going to tell Graham that we are not going to build his geodesic dome and Don was sort of loyal to his friend and I said, No, that's not going to happen. So, the next day I went downtown and I brought home one hundred and one house plans and we chose this one. We got some builders' quotes, and we got a loan and started building.

00.19.03

We set it out. We pegged it out ourselves because we wanted a passive solar house. We didn't trust anybody else to peg it out because Don did all the maths. I suppose, we weren't hippies but we were very much into the organic thing. We were some of the first members who

bought the Organic Gardening magazine when it first came out. So we knew about passive solar long before most other people. So anyway we got a loan for the house and started building. We moved in around Easter in 1975, so fifty years we've been here.

The property name Fangorn?

'Lord of the Rings', yes, both of us were absolute fans. The Fangorn Forest, yes. And two years ago we went to the South Island of New Zealand and I had the little booklet of all the sights that they used of the locations for the film. And I found the site used that was the Fangorn Forest. That was great.

You established your native nursery here, but I think before that you were already a member of the Society for Growing Australian Plants.

Yes. When we arrived, we'd been members in Sydney but there was no Society up here so two years later, and probably a good idea because at that time we had a baby and we were building and all that and couldn't have dealt with anything else, and Don with a new job. Two years later, that was August '77 I remember that because it was about two weeks before Ben was born. I seem to do these things just before babies are born. And so Nola Parry, the Parry family is famous around the Central Coast for running wildflower farms and nurseries and things like that. They have quite a history. In fact one of their grandsons now runs a wildflower farm down near Kempsey, no Gloucester. Nola was a member of the Society and she had obviously been asked to start a group up here. So she came up. We rounded up a dozen people which we needed and we got it going. I think I was the first Chair. So the Society got going. In those first few years there were hardly any natives in the nurseries. People started to come out of the woodwork with expertise, and that was great. We started to run these big flower shows. The first flower show we ran was at Legacy Hall and we had already got together and propagated a whole lot of plants, really interesting stuff. Well, the line up, the queue went for about a block and a half and they were all lining up to buy these plants. That was amazing. Then after that we ran a number of flower shows, until we got a bit tired of it. We had to collect a lot of jars and we ended up getting a little shed on someone's place and storing the jars and the planks and all the stuff you need for doing a big show. I suppose the last big flower show I organised was for the Bicentenary and that I'd invited all the garden clubs to put in big displays as well and I remember in particular the Walcha Garden Club, it might have even been Gillian Oppenheimer at that time who was instrumental. They decided to do a display of Oxley's journey, depicting Oxley's journey. They had all these big potted plants. I think we had a stage area, it was in the Uniting Church hall, the stage area and they built this thing of the elevated journey. It was fabulous, absolutely fabulous. It was a really great flower show.

00.24.30

Of course the Bicentennial was when you started to get involved in public gardening, for want of a better word, with the Arboretum Committee.

I'm trying to think. Before that of course I was involved with, I was a member of the Environmental Education Committee. Lyn Outrim was the Inspector of Schools or Director of Schools here at that stage. She contacted me and asked me to become a member and we visited quite a number of schools advising on how to do school gardens and things like that. So that was fascinating. I remember one particular school where the Principal loved Agapanthus and the whole school was full of Agapanthus. He was raving about his Agapanthus and I said 'Don't they flower in summer?' because he was going on about the wonderful flower show

and I said' Don't they flower in summer when all the kids are on holidays?' I don't think I was very popular.

So this was an optional programme for schools or was it part of the curriculum?

No it was just Lyn's project. I was also involved with Thalgarrah for a little while. They had a big garden.

Can you just explain Thalgarrah?

Thalgarrah Environmental Education Centre is out on the Rockdale Road. David Kenneally was the teacher in charge and he wanted to establish a native garden so I helped him along with that a little bit. So there were little bits and pieces here and there. So in 1980, or 1981 I was teaching at TAFE. I was asked to teach a course on growing Australian native plants at TAFE and it was really popular. Then, this is probably around about the late '70s. I'm trying to remember the dates. It is all blending around about that time, so then the teacher in charge came and said 'We're desperate for a teacher to teach about herbs.' I said, 'I don't know a lot about herbs." She said 'Oh that's alright,' she said. 'You know about plants so you can teach it'. 'I said OK, I'll have a go.' So that ended up really popular too. So the teacher who was going to do it had gone overseas. When she came back she found that someone else had taken over her course. That led me onto a lot of TAFE teaching. I taught courses in just about everything – I went up to Guyra and taught basically the garden club or whoever they could get in, mostly exotic plants but I did throw in some natives as well. I went to Glen Innes and did a course there. I was asked to teach unemployed youth. Oh boy! That was fascinating. I had all these misguided youth, is my way of describing them, one in particular who was a big burly guy. I had them doing a lot of gardening. We put in a lot of gardens around the TAFE. They built me a little greenhouse at the TAFE and we did a whole lot of propagation. There was a particular group, you couldn't go in early in the morning because the smell of beer would drive you out the greenhouse. We were doing some gardening. I used to run this around about 11ish. I was driving in and listening to an article about tattoos on the radio and they were saying that young men with 'mother' and love hearts are usually pretty docile, but if they've got snakes and knives and stuff beware. So we are doing this gardening and this guy takes off his T shirt and it's all snakes and knives. I thought 'Oh, wow' He ended up being quite a baby. It was amazing dealing with some people. Look, it was very sad, I taught another course with older unemployed men who had very few literacy skills. Another one of those students met me in the street one day and we started talking. He said 'I'm goin' to gaol tomorra'' and I said 'Oh. That's a shame.' I said 'Listen, when you get there, tell them you want to learn to read,' I said. 'You are so close, so close, you just really need to have some really good instruction.' It's sad, it's sad. There is not a lot you can do for these people they make some very poor decisions in life often because they have no money, and no means.

00.31.30

And that was some years ago. I would imagine that it would be more critical now.

Yes, and drugs now, they weren't as prevalent in those days, but drugs now are creating enormous problems. You know we heard overnight about that fellow in Sydney shooting out a hundred bullets shooting at the passing cars and one person is critically injured in hospital. Can you imagine driving along Parramatta Road and suddenly 'pop, pop, pop.' The taxi driver said the side of his car was just peppered.

Can I lead you to some good news stories of working with youth, were there times when gardening was a real breakthrough?

Oh yes, yes. I think that's right. Some of these young men went on to do gardening jobs and I taught them skills that they could take on later on. It depends on their life choices as well. I found with high school teaching that the difference between teaching in a public school and a private school because I taught at Armidale High, NEGS and PLC. The difference is the horizons. In public schools especially with the boys. In public schools, the boys tend to get their horizons according to what dad, uncle, grandpa is doing. They tend to follow in those footsteps and they are very heavily influenced. The girls are a lot more, let's say they go their own way a bit more. The boys, especially in a rural area, it was very difficult to teach some of the boys because their whole ambition was to work on the farm, to ride tractors and stuff like that. They weren't interested in the higher professions at all. The kids who went on to higher professions usually had family that had a background in that way. Whereas in the private schools they came from families of means and therefore the horizons were a whole lot higher. They are told all the time 'You can achieve this' and had role models, everything. Whereas in the public schools it's not that way. Especially with the Indigenous kids. Indigenous boys were almost impossible to teach, depending on the family they came from. In Armidale there are certain families who you know the kids aren't interested at all in education whereas other families, it is getting better, the kids go on to do all sorts of wonderful things. But it depends much on the family in Indigenous communities. I did a Masters in Indigenous Studies on Literacy, attitudes towards literacy, and I did a huge survey at both Armidale High and Duval and did comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, Aboriginal girls, non-Aboriginal girls, Aboriginal boys, non-Aboriginal boys. So, the Aboriginal girls were almost on a par with the non-Aboriginal girls in their attitudes towards literacy but the Aboriginal boys were way down there and that I think is where the Government needs to do some real work.

00.36.20

I'd best pull you back here to gardening topics. With your Masters in Aboriginal Studies, I assumed that is what led you to your expertise in bush foods as well as native plants.

No, because my interest in bush foods comes through native plants not through the Indigenous usage. I'm interested in Indigenous usage but no-one, or very few people, are going to use bush foods the way traditional Aboriginals did. You're not going to dig up Bulbine and roast it, you're better off with carrots and parsnips. So this is the thing and this is where people get confused, so my interest is in bush foods is as edible native plants.

You established your nursery here in 1981 I think. What was the impetus for that, Maria?

I established a nursery mainly, well to make a little bit of money I suppose, but also because I was doing a lot of propagating and people were looking for interesting plants. I actually sold through the markets, right, but when I started teaching I gave it away. But then I started it again once I retired. And I started selling through markets again and then I ran into a drought and that was terrible. No-one wanted to buy plants. Don said to me, because I was going to give it away, and he said, No, keep it going but let's be smart. Let's go online. So then I went fully online and I never looked back. Only because I established a niche market, it was the frost and drought hardy plants, cold tolerant natives and a lot of people don't realise many suburbs of Sydney have frost. My biggest markets were Sydney and Melbourne and so I learned an awful lot about growing native plants and marketing. If you think about it, if you're trading online, you're competing with every nursery in Australia. You've got to have a very specialised group of plants otherwise you won't sell anything. The biggest problem with selling online is the transport. And I was very lucky that here in Armidale we've got a carrier called Nifty's, Neville Northey, and he did a deal with Metro State Securities and he was charging $22 a box

of plants anywhere in NSW delivered within three days. That was amazing. Unfortunately for interstate plants I had to use Australia Post and that was problematic at times. Anyway, we managed. I had to learn to pack things really well. I had one incidence when I was selling waratahs. I'd get the waratahs up from Proteaflora and a lady in Queensland ordered half a dozen. Anyway I sent them off but the man at the post office here misread the postcode and he put in the last four digits of the phone number. Ten days later the lady contacted me and said 'I haven't received my plants' and I said, 'Alright I'll look into it', and then we started chasing it and then we found that it had gone to Victoria and in the post office where it landed in Victoria they realised there was a problem and re-directed it back to Queensland. Three weeks later she gets her waratahs in perfect condition. Of course, I'd given her instructions on how to rejuvenate and everything. Perfect condition. Everyone praised me for my packing.

You won a business award for the nursery I believe.

Online. It was for an online organisation. And of course there is hardly any competition here because none of the nurseries sell online here. So I was about the only one.

00.42.07

I was interested in Wollemi pines too. I had a friendship with Greg Bourke who was the curator of Mount Tomah Botanic Gardens and I found that Greg was growing Wollemi pines for translocations, they wanted to spread them around these other gullies in the Blue Mountains for security in case the original gully got burnt out. My Wollemi pine had developed cones. I said to him, 'Greg, how are you doing this?' So he told me how to successfully propagate the Wollemi pine. Well, that first year I ended up with 300 trees and I ordered some special boxes then I started selling them. I made a lot of money out of those Wollemi pines. Since then there have been good years and not so good years. They need a lot of water in the summertime which is when most people lose them, especially during a drought. The university lost theirs, for example, during a drought. Bridget did buy more from me to replace them. I have no idea what's going on there but I hope they are alright.

The one near Booloominbah certainly died. But there has been so many trees lost there for various reasons.

So that was fascinating. Then I read a paper on growing Wollemi pines from cuttings and I thought I'll give this a try, so I tried two different forms. I had a tree that had a side branch, some of them have these side branches and it had the tips, the growing tip is the top. Anyway, I took some of those tips and tried growing them but I've had no success in getting them to strike. But I then took some of the ends of the branches, they often, the branch has a new little branch that grows out of it. So I got them to strike, to grow roots. The only problem with them is they won't put up a trunk, they just keep growing out which is fascinating. I love it! I love experimenting with all sorts of things. That was fabulous.

At the moment, you know, I'm running the Grafting Study Group and I read about the tomato growers in America and how this particular company or scientist worked out that if you keep the grafted plant in the dark for up to a week or something then they will develop their callousing a lot faster. So we're running a project at the moment called 'in the dark'.

Your personal garden here you have had registered as a private botanic garden. How did that come about, Maria?

Well, back in 1981.

00.46.30

If we can take you through your personal garden, then we'll talk about your public garden activities after.

I think in '81 I was asked to take leadership of the Correa study group from a lady in Tamworth who was the leader at that time. The Australian Plant Society, the national body, takes responsibility for these study groups that started up a little while before that and essentially a leader runs the whole show. So I took on the Correa Study Group. You have to put out newsletters and basically grow as many as you can yourself and encourage other people. So that's what I did. And I started building up the membership. I got it up to about a hundred, I suppose, all over Australia. I started putting in a big collection. Then I started travelling. Every winter we went south and collected. I arranged with Mount Annan Botanic Gardens and the National Botanic Gardens. I collected for them. I ran - they call them 'Correa crawls' right - I ran these 'Correa Crawls' for the members in lots of different places. Probably the most memorable one was Kangaroo Island, we had about twelve of us. I'd booked the lighthouse cottages for us to stay in. Which was fabulous. We were able to take our vehicles across, and the ferry was the older ferry where everyone got seasick just about. One of my members from Victoria was so sick she had to go and lie down the first day on the Island, she was so ill, whereas the rest of us found the first fish and chip shop. So anyway we then did a lot of collecting and documenting and so on and that was really good. My youngest daughter Sarah said to me, 'Mum can't you get an interest in tropical plants so we can go north for a change in the winter instead of going south every year?'

So I ran the Correa study group and because I had the collection, I learned about the, well it wasn't Plant Trust in those days, it had another name, it is run out of Melbourne Botanic Gardens and essentially what they do they register private collections, anything and everything if you've got a collection you can register it with them. So I have been a member of that, for about $30 a year, I've been a member of that for quite a number of years now. At that time, every year I had to send a spreadsheet to BCNI or something like that Botanical Collections National International. I'm not doing that now because along the way I joined the BGANZ (Botanical Gardens of Australia and New Zealand) along the way. I did that because I wanted to have some significance of the collection and I found out that I could be an individual member, I didn't have to be a fully-fledged botanic gardens, I could be an individual member and just advertise as a botanic gardens. There are a number of private botanic gardens around and it just means that the government is not paying for people to look after plants. I have got a number of rare and endangered plants as well. So that's how the collection started. I've tried to keep it going. I tend to lose quite a lot because of the fact that I don't have town water. I'm dependant on the bore water and our seasons are just so difficult up here. You know, we get these long drought periods. A lot of Correas are drought tolerant to an extent, but I just don't have the time. I suppose, and the water to keep a huge collection going. I've got quite a lot in pots and I can look after them. I'd love to hand on, but no one else wants to. The good thing is that you can hand on some species to botanic gardens. So Don and I did a trip to Flinders Island and we, to our knowledge, that Flinders Island form of *Correa reflexa* had never been put into cultivation. So we collected it and I now have it in cultivation. I also found that there was *Correa alba, Correa reflexa* and then there was a form of *Correa alba* that I thought was a bit of a hybrid. I got in touch with Marco Duretto at the Sydney Botanic gardens and said to him, 'I think this might warrant a sub-species'. He wrote back and said no, it still falls under *C. alba*, but I am not convinced. It is one of those things. It is with like my *Banksia serrata* 'Superman'. I found that on the mid-north coast, when I was helping out with the Banksia Atlas back in '87 and the leaves are twice as long or more of the normal *B. serrata* and the spikes

can be twice as big or even more of the normal *B. serrata.* And Anne Taylor who was running that project out of the herbarium of Western Australia said to me, send some samples to Alex George in the herbarium and get him to have a look at it. So anyway, I sent these samples and I said, I think these are quite different to the normal *B serrata* and I had the cheek to suggest that they be called *grandiflora*. And he wrote back and said, 'We don't like amateurs naming our plants,' Rude man. I know why his marriage fell apart. So I called it 'Superman'. I've been spreading it around as 'Superman'. Fantastic plant. It got hit by the snow.

00.56.01 Recording 1 ends.

PART 2.

Thank you, Maria for continuing this interview. Can I take you now to the bicentennial year and the Armidale Arboretum, which were involved with that.

So what happened with that was Bill McCarthy who was our local member at the time, Thelma [his wife] was a member of the bicentennial committee in Sydney and Bill invited Marilyn and I, Marilyn Pidgeon, to design the arboretum, and Marilyn would take the eastern part and I would take the western part. And he said 'We will have a budget of about $20,000 and you'll have to try and bring it in around about that amount. In the meantime, Council had also enlisted John Wrigley to do the water gardens. John of course had designed the Botanic Gardens in Coffs Harbour and also Canberra and he was a very well- known native plant person and I think that his quote was about $60,000, so we had the rest of it, right. There was an engineer on Council at the time, who we were liaising with, and he told us that we would have two gardeners to maintain the gardens and so Marilyn and I virtually worked around the clock then because we only had a few weeks to do this. So we turned up with the plans and then they sent them off and then we got the grant. So you have to realise the context of this. A few years earlier, and I think Peter MacGuire may have been involved, there was a move to develop a wool village and I suspect it was to be on Peter MacGuire's land up near the airport and they, a small consortium of local people got together and they, I don't know whether they actually put in the application, but they certainly had an application for a wool village for the bicentenary and it was going to cost $10 million. And Bill explained that the bicentennial money was being divided up per head of population so, Armidale having a population of 20,000 at the time was eligible for $200,000. We couldn't ask for more than that. So, we got the grant and we started supervising the work on the arboretum. The water gardens went in. There is a natural spring on the arboretum where the water gardens are. Originally that spring fed a few small water holes and, I don't know for sure but I suspect, there were Aboriginal encampments on those little water holes because we know, it was recorded that there was a big fight near the railway station at one stage. Those small water holes went down through Armidale High's grounds and down towards the township. So it would have been a natural place for encampments. Also being high ground, it would have been good vantage. Also, of course, we know that the Banbai, the Dhunghutti, the Kamilaroi and the Anaiwan used to get together in the summertime for ceremonies and things.

00.05.00

So the Council when building the water gardens they diverted the spring so it came out where the big pond is, so it would fill the big pond then there was a pump that would pump the water up to the waterfall at the top pond, then it fell down. So there is a big pipe coming up so that any overflow goes into the storm water system. And then I designed the top part to be a

series of regional gardens, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and set about planting. TAFE got the grant for mulch and I got the boys to mulch the big garden and also there was water laid on. But the water wasn't really accessible because of the way the Council had put in the pipes and I don't quite understand what was going on there. I enlisted the help of anyone I could to help with the plantings. We got it going. The other side I designed a senses garden for blind people and the Council organised for a children's project where the children carve designs into bricks and then they would fire them and that was the outer wall of that garden. We had the walls built and then I got Armidale High kids to come in and fill the gardens with soil, which they weren't very keen on doing but I think they were told, 'Do it or else.' I did a lot of research on gardens, playgrounds for the disabled. We went to Sydney and had a look at, it might be Nobby's playground or something like that, and so I suggested that we have a playground for disabled kids above the shelter shed. So the whole thing stated to take place. Council was a bit, I wouldn't say not co-operative but, you know, just not all that forthcoming. I found that if I worked with the workers themselves that was really good. What happened then, a couple of weeks or a week before the official opening, Marilyn and I were told that the gardeners were withdrawn. We would only get mowing and there would be no-one to maintain the gardens.

00.09.11

Yes. It was hard, but what do you do, because I had put so much work into it. And continued to do after that. I did a lot of the maintenance myself on the native garden and I also for Arbor Day and National Wattle Day, I invited schools to pay for a grove of trees and a plaque. Council put in the trees but not the plaques so nobody knows who donated what. It was just a travesty basically and Poh Woodland was working with Council at the time and I had an International Peace Grove for international students. There were all sorts of things which I had started but absolutely no recognition at all. I was pilloried basically by the Council. Anyway, I ended up walking away, I was just…There wasn't any point in continuing with it.

That is very disappointing Maria. Now at about the same time you were developing your special interest in wattle and clarifying Wattle Day. Can you tell us a little more about that?

00.11.01

So again, we go to Thelma [McCarthy] about '86 I think, Thelma came to me with her daughter, Janice and said, 'Janice is working as a primary school teacher' and Janice said to me, 'We've come to you because we know you know your native plants and everything. We need to know the words of the Wattle Day song.' And I said, 'Oh, gosh, Thelma, I don't know.' As it turns out, you see I went to a Catholic school and Catholic schools didn't do any of that stuff, but the public schools did. So I said, 'give me some time and I'll do some research.' So, I did and gosh, it opened up this enormous treasure trove of all this wattle stuff. All the wattle poems , the songs, through school magazines, through various archives and some of the archivists were fantastic and so I realised there was this amazing history so I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister with a couple of recommendations, because I found out, that's right, I'd written first of all, maybe it was that one, I'd written, I'd said that National Wattle Day be celebrated something like that. I got a letter back from the Minister for the Arts saying that actually our national emblem has never been formally gazetted. So, I then turned around and wrote another letter saying, 'Please formally gazette National Wattle Day.' So that started that ball rolling and then I went onto 'Australia All Over', Ian MacNamara, 'Macca', and asked for his help. Unbelievably all the letters started arriving. So, I got sheafs this thick, all the letters from all these people who have anecdotes and stories from their childhood, copies of poems and so

on, all came out of the woodwork and so I started putting it all together. Anyway, what happened then in April, I think, of '88 the Labor party had a get together at the racecourse, some big Labour Party do at the racecourse and they had invited Graeme Richardson who was a Senator in the Labor Party at the time. So, I contacted Thelma and I said, 'Thelma look, I believe you are having this event and Graeme Richardson is coming. Can I please have five minutes with Graeme Richardson at the racecourse?' And they let me have five minutes with Graeme Richardson at the racecourse. And then, on a park bench at the racecourse in five minutes with him sitting next to me and me with my folder, and I'd highlighted, and I had to convince him that doing the emblem and wattle day were important for the bicentenary.

Well done!

How I did that, I have no idea. I probably wouldn't be able to do it today. Anyway, a couple of months later I got the letter saying they are going to do it, Wattle Day, no not Wattle Day – the emblem. They said, 'Wattle Day is another thing.' So I was then invited to Canberra for the official ceremony of the emblem and I planted a tree with Hazel Hawke and a few other people in the Botanic Gardens and at that time I went out to dinner with the staff and I said that I was going to write this book and they said, 'We'll publish it.'

00.15.58

That's wonderful. That was your first of, by my count, six books Maria?

Something like that**.** So, that was 'Wattle'. I then set about trying to get illustrations. I loved J.H. Maiden's *Trees of New South Wales* and Margaret Flockton's drawings and I asked permission from the Botanic Gardens to use Margaret Flockton's drawings in that book and I love that book because these drawings are just magnificent. So that book went out there.

So 'Wattle' was the first of your books, I think you've written two on Correas, is that right?

No just one.

And on acacias, wattles?

So what happened, I wrote, in 2010 I did the Correa book because I was still running the Correa Study Group and the Australian Plant Society doesn't have a publishing arm and they said to me if you want to publish anything then you will have to find your own publisher. It is strange how life does twists and turns. When my kids were very little, I had a little playgroup and Averill Chase was one of the members of that playgroup and her husband was working for Council as the Deputy, second in charge of the gasworks and he had been promised the job when his superior retired. Anyway, when his superior retired Council did the dirty on him and put someone else in. So, they ended up leaving the area and went on to much bigger things, right. I mean, gosh, they are so well heeled now and they wouldn't have been nearly like that if they had stayed here. He went on to be manager of Shell in Fiji and all sorts and then he's bought a factory in Sydney. And Averill decided to become a literary agent. I wrote to Averill, and said, 'Listen, Averill, I want to publish this Correa book. Can you find me a publisher?' So because she was my agent she found me Rosenberg so that's how the Correa book got published. And then a couple of years later Rosenberg asked if I'd do a second edition of the Wattle book but this time with colour, a lot of colour photographs. So that was the second edition. I called it *A Celebration of Wattle* because in the first one they left out my big chapter of actually celebrating Wattle Day.

00.19.35

I didn't finish about that big celebration in Canberra. I talked to Senator Ray at that Celebration and I said, 'What happened to Wattle Day?' And he said, 'No, you'll have to do that yourself.' Anyway, so then I set about writing to every state Premier and Chief Minister and the first one that replied, 'Yes, that's fine,' was the Northern Territory, would you believe. The last one was Queensland. I think I might have missed about two Premiers in between because they kept changing their Premiers. Anyway, I just wore them down. When I got a negative letter, I'd write back with more arguments. Gosh, I had energy in those days. So, I wore them down. Finally, I got the last letter from Queensland, bundled them up and set them off to Canberra to Senator Ray and said, 'Now do it, here they are' and they did.

Now that was under the auspices of Australian Plant Society?

No, purely me. I have been very disappointed and I have said to the Society, 'This is your game. This is something you need to build up and so -- they are not a very proactive organisation, let's put it that way. I was once invited to speak at, I think it was, the Bendigo conference on future trends, and this is going back to about '86 or something. And I said firstly, you need to change the name from 'The Society for Growing Australian Plants' to the 'Australian Plant Society' or the 'Australian Native Plant Society'. Secondly, you need to combine all the magazines into one edition, with state roundups because Queensland people don't know what New South Wales people are doing, South Australian people don't know what Western Australian people are doing, right. I said, the third thing you need to start looking at some merchandise. I said, 'You've got some wonderful artists in the society and you could easily start producing some merchandise. At that time there was nothing. There were a number of things I suggested, but anyway, most of it fell on deaf ears. I think Canberra was the first one to change the name a few years later. They changed their name to 'The Australian Native Plant Society' then gradually the others. The magazines have never changed because Victoria and New South Wales had a feud on about the magazine and New South Wales wanted to keep a stranglehold on the magazine, so that never changed. They missed out completely on the merchandise. They could have made a lot of money. And I got the reputation of being a ratbag.

However, Maria, in 2018 you were awarded a Member of the Order of Australia. Tell me the background to that.

Crazily, the person who nominated me, and I know who it was, nominated me for my community work, for the Ratepayer's Association and the local area community, a lot of my community work. I gave her my CV and when the people on that committee looked at it, they decided that my environmental work was more important so they gave me my OAM for Conservation and the Environment, which I am so thrilled about because a lot of people get their OAM for work in the community that it doesn't seem all that important but Conservation and Environment, that puts me a step ahead. So that's what happened there.

Finally, because this is for the Australian Garden History Society, can we trace through your membership of that organisation.

So, I became interested in the historic homes. I had been a member of Australian Garden History Society years ago, when it first formed in Sydney and I was in fact asked to be the after dinner speaker at an event in Moree that they were running. They were running a weekend and so I went to Moree and I was allowed to join the tour. And at that time it absolutely blew my mind because the wealth in these places out in the bush was astonishing and so I guess that was always in the back of my head.

So, we're talking about late 1990s here?

No, we are talking about 1980s, early ‘80s. I was really just starting to make a name as a native plant person at that time. I had a young family so let that membership lapse until a few years ago when I thought I wouldn’t mind joining the AGHS so I came along to a few meetings and went on a couple of trips and so on and then became the newsletter editor.

Now you are joining the National Management Committee.

That is the next step I guess, because I want to learn a little more about how the whole organisation runs. And if I can make a contribution I will. But I realise it is a fairly entrenched (Lynne Walker: No, No, it isn’t). Oh. You sort of get the impression that, a bit like the National Trust. You get the impression that there is a bit of an entrenched hierarchy.

I might wind up here. Thank you for such a thorough and really frank interview, Maria, that is really splendid.

00.27.06 Interview ends**.**