

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



Photographer and date unknown

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0:00

This is an oral history with co- owner of "Bangala" in Bowral, Susan will be speaking with me, Lyn Barrett for the Australian Garden History Society and as part of the collaboration with the Berrima District Museum.

Susan, do you understand the Australian Garden History Society, in association with the Berrima District Museum, has copyright in the interview material that disclosure will be subject to the disclosure restrictions that you impose in completing the consent forms.

Yes, I understand that.

Okay, many thanks for this. May we have your permission to make a transcript of this recording.

Yes, you can.

Thank you. And we'd like to reassure you that neither the tapes nor the transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority.

And for the tape, this is the voice of Lyn Barrett , the interviewer for the tape.

For the tape, this is the voice of interviewee, Susan Hand.

The interviewer's voice will be in italics in the transcript. Susan, on behalf of Australian Garden History [Society] and Berrima District Museum. I'd like to thank you for agreeing to this interview. It's important to capture the stories of people who have created [Southern] Highlands garden history. And Susan, you have been in a very special group of these people in the Southern Highlands by restoring and protecting this unique part of housing and gardens. Thank you for rescuing this house.

It was my pleasure.

Susan, we're required to start with some the biographical details. So could you just start in the beginning, with sharing a little bit of your personal background with us.

Okay, following that, I was born in Rockhampton, Queensland in 1950 I'm the eldest of six children. Mother left Queensland after my brother was born and brought us to Sydney, where I was educated. I went to Woollahra Demonstration School, then Sydney Girls High and then went on to the University of New South Wales, where I obtained teaching a degree and teaching qualifications, and I did some postgraduate studies at Macquarie University in urban planning. Is that enough?

Okay, thank you. And I suppose we're here to talk about your incredible house and garden and the work that you've done in this garden. And just to give us some context of where this passion for gardens comes from, can you tell us a little bit about who would have been the greatest influences to you?

I was brought up in Paddington, and it wasn't renowned for gardening. I, our backyard had very little gardening. But I do remember as a little girl walking to school from Paddington to Woollahra and seeing Mother Nature coming up through cracks in the concrete. And even as a little girl, I used to think Mother Nature is pretty incredible. I think I always just had that connection, even though Paddington, at that stage, was, was not an area you'd say was gardened. My stepfather was a gardener. He was a passionate gardener. He was actually, actually had a horticultural degree from his hometown in Estonia, from Tallinn in Estonia, but he had to flee. He had to flee the Germans and the Russians, and ended up in Australia. But he was a gardener, and when they moved from Paddington back to Brisbane. He did create an amazing garden. And I think I was always, just always relating around, yeah, I did. I did. I'd grown up and left home by then, but I went back. Ralph's father, my husband's father. He was a very good gardener. He put plants in a bit of strange order, but he was a he was a good gardener, and he encouraged me. And I think our first home in Killara, where I had an all native garden, I did all of that by myself, without any help, just taught myself, and just thought, get your hands dirty. Yes, lovely, and just enjoy it. So I don't think there's been any particular person, although, having visited Great Dixter in the last couple of years, I can relate to that, that arts craft garden, in a big way.

Yes, and what about all the travelling that you oh,

yes, we...

You've been to a few gardens.

We've been to a few gardens in our day. Yes, how can you not go to England or Italy or, or France and not go to a few gardens?

Do you think they've influenced in the decisions that you've made? You thought, Oh, I like that colour combination, or I like that particular plant.

The thing about a lot of those grand English, French, German, Italian gardens, they're on such a huge scale that they didn't influence me. But you always find especially in England, where whole villages open up their gardens for a couple of weeks in summer. Yes, and you just, the English, I think are born gardeners, and they, I think their gardens influence me, because I see what you can do with a small area and how much. And I think, of course, Martha, when it comes to this garden, it's Martha Clark, who came here to help me move some roses in the beginning. I think because she was into natural succession planting without even knowing that that was the term. I think that has been the biggest influence.

Oh, that's wonderful. She is a great gardener.

She's a great gardener and well known, and she's a plantaholic, so, as I am and this idea of, and it ties into the arts craft theme, which I've based this garden on, because the house is arts craft, the idea of, it must imitate nature. It must have that change, not just a seasonal change, but it must have those combinations that nature has. So there's a woodland garden to reflect all of that sort of change.

Do you want to talk about the arts and crafts movement and gardening?

Well, yes, I will, because it's significant. Yes, this this garden I would classify as an arts craft garden. It's a very hard garden style to define. I, Martha and I created this because I said I wanted arts craft because it's my favorite architectural style. So she set about doing what she thought was an arts craft garden. The visit to Dexter to just reinforced our ideas that we were on the right trail. And a little bit of research that I did previous to opening the garden to different groups highlighted some of the key points, and I was pleased to see that we had almost automatically done that, if I just let you know that art craft gardens, although difficult to define, one of the most important elements is that they relate to the house. And I think this garden does.

8:00

Absolutely.

They typically contain a cottage- garden, I would say a cottage- garden on steroids. And I do have that in some intense perennial beds, there's a degree of wildness, which some people might find a little wild. I'm not as wild as Dexter. But then again, I don't have a staff, five or six qualified gardeners, plus students, plus volunteers, yes, but it's that little bit of wildness. It's not a control garden. I don't believe that gardens should be just planted in one great big setting. You shouldn't just plonk a garden into its land. I think gardens should evolve. This one's taken 10 years to evolve to this, and even today, we move things from spots to other spots. My plants don't have roots, they have wheels, and we constantly move things to get them right. An arts, craft art garden does have a degree of formality, and that formality should be around the house, and we've done that with the a little bit of formal edging behind the garage there, and the formality at the front with the, the ever sprouting daphne's that have been toperied into balls, and the same maybush it might be wrong, that we've ,we've hedged across the front. So that's the formality, the China, the Japanese garden is another arts craft element. They were very influenced by Japanese so I've got an ode to a Japanese garden right next to the house. And another element is using the local building structures, the local stones. We were lucky enough that this house has all trachyte edging and gullies and paths all around so that ties in with that art craft thing, so a cottage garden, but with formality, using stone from as local as possible, and this trachyte comes from the quarry. That's the disused quarry that's just behind us, a wildness but formality around the house, and that main principle is that it must, must imitate nature. So we have two woodlands that are true, woodlands with constant, constant change in their plants and their canopies, a few areas where maybe we break the rules a little bit, just because we absolutely love those plants and have to have them. This garden has over 1000 different species in it, not all up at once, but that, that is an element of an arts craft garden. The arts craft movement was, was very big on discovery and exploration and collecting plants. And this house, in this house, in this garden is a plantaholic.

Well, there's some amazing collections and plants here. And one of the things I always notice is colour, new combinations of colour.

We have to thank Martha for that. She's got, she's got a good eye when it comes to colour. And another thing that I really have to thank Martha for is, well, apart from her extensive knowledge and passion, is that she said, right from the beginning, I'm going to create you a garden that has something of interest all the time. So I have a lot of deciduous shrubs that flower along their bare stems in winter, so there's always some color in his garden, apart from the hellebores and the old- fashioned virginias, which give you winter colour, there are lots of shrubs here that that give lots of colour and attract lots of birdlife during the long winters that we tend to have here.

and the carpets of fallen...

leaves, and the carpets, marvellous. Yes, they are. I was lucky to have, although there was no real garden here, there had been a garden. This house was in three acres, and there had been a garden, but over time, the land had been subdivided off, and the house and the garden had obviously not been cared for. I was lucky enough to inherit four very established old maples, and I made sure that they were not touched in any redevelopment of the garden, and they give us our autumn color and our autumn leaves. And I've added a few more maples over the years, and will probably continue to do so.

Who can resist the maples? Can you tell us a little bit about what would be a normal day in the garden here? Because the garden over an acre, and it's always so beautiful and beautifully looked after. What would be a normal day for you?

Well, a normal day starts with a cup of tea in my pyjamas, walking around, seeing what's popping out of the ground, or admiring something, or just looking at something. By 10 or 11 o'clock, I'm still in my pyjamas, and I'm filthy dirty because I've started to garden in my pyjamas. A normal gardening day would go from that morning walk with a cup of tea until six o'clock at night, even longer, of course, on a summer's day coming in with dirt under my fingernails and a sore back, and discovering that the breakfast dishes were still on the bench. I'm lucky enough to have Martha no longer garden for me, but come and consult. I always promised her a young man, and we found one, and he never just comes and does the hard work. He's horticulturally trained. His name is Zolt. He's from Hungary. He's horticulturally trained, and under Martha's guidance, he's learning more. He's honing his trade. He's learning about Southern Highlands gardens. She comes and well, she says she'll consult, but she always does get her hands a little bit dirty. So there's three of us working in the garden on a Friday, with Ralph, sort of not gardening, but picking up our mess and helping us do a few things, but a normal garden day for me is just whatever needs to be done during the drought, it was just water, water, water.

It's just, this is not an easy site, because you've got the hill behind you, and it's sloping down towards the road, and then you have the very large trees.

We have those, no, the macrocarpas, yeah, we have those huge, huge trees. Maybe I would have removed them if I'd known I was going to extend the garden areas. But then again, I'm glad they're there. People think they're quite cathedral like, and they are, they are part of the history of the garden. I was lucky, and they're a landmark,

yeah, you can see them, yep, where they are. And you think, Oh, well, that's yeah. That has they, they were, they were planted as a hedge. And I was lucky enough to have a young, a lady turn up, who was brought up in this house from 1946 to 1962 and she was able to tell me a few things about the garden that she remembered. And she said that as a little girl, the, it was a hedge that lined the drive, and she used to run behind the hedge and play behind the hedge as somebody drove up the drive. Well, there are no longer hedges. They're magnificent. They're quite sculptural, and they're big. They do take the water. They take the water, they take the nutrients, although we've succeeded in planting under them. Now, after many years of trial and error, and I do have Terry Murchie come. He was the first person that ever came to this house, and he's still with me. He comes and he thins them out, and he makes sure they're still healthy and keeps an eye on them, because we do want to keep them, even though there are times when I think of I didn't have them, I could have some deciduous, more deciduous trees. But no, they're part of the history, and I'm going to keep them for that reason,

The, the terracing that you've done around the gardens to help retain water and plantings and things. They've been quite a labour of love, I should imagine.

Yes, we did discover when we got this place, it was so overgrown, so overgrown with ivy, acanthus, jasmine, oh, you name it, we didn't even realize that we had trachyte garden beds, that we had all these garden beds you can see at the moment. Ralph has been really good in restoring those. He's very good with his stonework.

Ralph being...

My husband? Yes, I think he must have convict blood, because he's very good at stonework. And he's, he's mended a few, and he's also built me a few more, in areas where the land sloped too much. He's, he's flattened it and given me that path in the front garden there under the pin oak. And he created that wall. We did discover the original stable stairs that were hidden under Ivy. And we cleared the ivy off, and Ralph rebuilt the stairs. They're the stairs. I call them the stable stairs because, because Rosemary Jones, who came here, the little girl, well, she was a little girl who was brought up here, now 70 plus. She said that they were the stairs that led to the stables that they had on the property, here was originally three acres. We did create the wall at the back when we renovated because we needed to have a flat area, and to stabilise the house [which] was literally under the pressure of the hill, but that that's where I kept the maples. I called Terry in and said, 'how do I make sure those Maples don't die? " He told me what time of the year and how far from the trunk to put the wall so that they would never be lost. So it's been an absolute labour of love. It's been, and it's been a learning curve, because I came here as a native gardener. I had a native garden in Killara. I did have a few, I'm a believer in multiculturalism, so I did have a few little colonial plants and few plants from elsewhere, but, but basically, it was, it was a native garden, which was appropriate for the site because we looked over the Garigal National Park, yes. So I kept, I kept it as native as possible, except for a little . . .

20:00

And out here in the Highlands, we have an Arts and Craft cottage...

and a completely different garden. I knew nothing about seasonal gardening. I knew noth... I didn't even know, I'd never had a rose. I didn't know a thing about roses. That's when I called Martha into to advise me as to why my roses were so sick. And she said they in the wrong spot. They need to be moved. And from that point on, I am now the gardener of over 1000 species of cool climate garden [plants].

I mean, your collection is amazing, if you it's a garden that you actually have to look into, because if you just skin the surface, you'll miss it. It's a stunning garden. It's absolutely beautiful.

Well, a lot of people say that. They say there's so much to look at. I always say something, yeah, different, and that's, that's the aim. I think, yes,

I know that you do a lot of open gardens, that you share the garden, and that you often share the garden with for Welby or for hospitals or garden clubs. What's the work involved in getting ready for an open garden?

Oh, lots.

This is always pristine.

Oh yes, I've opened. I opened for a weekend for Welby and St Luke's. I've got another one coming up from a garden club in Sydney. I've opened for local garden clubs, an [Australian] Garden History [Society]Conference, the Botanic Gardens, yes, I opened for their weekend. Yeah, I'm always happy to open. I'm happy to say yes, that I am reminded to open. Well, do you want to show it at its best? But you also know that the people coming there are gardeners, and gardeners can be can be critical. They can also be very supportive of your garden, but you just want everything right. So to open for a garden club is a hell of a lot of work.

How far out would you be getting ready for?

It's two months till the next one, and I'm already focused. We were already doing things in a way, having a garden club come or opening it for somebody makes you get those jobs done, those jobs that you put off, that you do, that it does make you focus. And that's a good thing. You become very critical yourself and you want everything perfect. That's a burden you put on yourself. But I'm, but every time I have opened the absolute joy of people, people, asking questions, saying lovely things, I always put out more chairs and tables when I have an open garden so people can sit in the garden. Yes, I think gardens should be I don't, I don't sit in it very often, but I love to see people sitting in it. I love to see people sit and feel at home in the garden. I just, that brings me the greatest joy. So it's worth it, it's worth the effort.

Well it is, and it's very generous, because it's not only the amount of work, it's extra manures, oh, fertilizers and extra help in the garden, trips to the tip.

It is a big job, but the garden, the garden is improved because of it. So it does. It costs you money to open for an open garden, but the garden benefits so and you enjoy and enjoy it, and you meet and people, and people come up to you in the supermarket, like happened only the other day when a woman walked up to me and said,

"you're the lady with the lovely garden in Clarke Street." And I said, "Oh, am I, oh?" She said, "Yes, I've always remembered, are you opening your garden again?" So it is worth it.

Yes, lovely. Thank you. Where would be your favourite place in the garden, if you have to, or how you...

I've got two. I've definitely got two. One I think most people get to enjoy, and that's walking through the woodlands. Yes, because they're constantly looking good, they change. But they're constantly looking good. It's always a surprise. And there's always a surprise there, and that's probably the most established, so even if I don't work hard in it, it looks okay. But I've got an absolute favourite spot that people don't get to see unless they are here later, later in the day, and that's walking down those stable stairs, walking around that curved wall that Ralph built, built me, with the hose in my hand, spraying lightly through the undergrowth of under the pin oak, which at the moment is covered in hellebores pachysandra, no pachyphragma, sorry, pachyphragma, bluebells, hydrangeas, disporum. The hydrangeas coming into leaf. The disporum is coming up, the francoa is coming into bud the ixia is coming through, and seeing that in the late afternoon light is just a joy, and I don't think a lot of people get to see it because of the time of day. Normally, I know where it is and it's a quiet spot, and I'm hoping that Ralph could capture that one, because that's...

and is that, if you were ever feeling upset about anything, would that be a place that you'd head into? You'd head down there, up to the woodland, and just find your quiet spaces.

I just think being lucky enough to have a garden to walk through for everyone is just healing. You, you, you just, you just zone out. Yes, you know you zone out if you paint or draw, and you zone out when you're in a garden, well, I do. My focus, is focus on the plants and what you're doing. Yes, I don't know. I really feel, especially in this day of covid, how important it is for people to have a green space.

They are saying that young people are starting to actually...

Garden, good, and it's making them feel good.

And it's something in it...

touching Mother Nature. Yes.

What would be your favourite creation here? There's an awful lot of them.

Besides the woodland, the woodland is special. Um, the pathways...

The pathways because you've put a lot of those wandering pathways...

with a hose and, and, yeah, pathways, the walls, the walls that Ralph created to enhance the trachyte garden walls were already here. Definitely the woodland, the wall garden is starting to be quite amazing, quite amazing. Yeah, the veggie gardens, the perennial beds, everything. Well, everywhere you turn, really, I suppose.

Really, I suppose, yeah, this has been, you've had to think about, it's been...

10 years of constantly adding, there were no gardens here. It was just grass, just undulating grass.

And, and you've made a garden that fits so comfortably with this house, it's such a gorgeous house.

Bit by bit, I was really pleased that Martha, she's, when she turned up, she said, "I'm not a garden designer, I'm a horticulturist". But in a way, that's underestimating or underselling herself. But luckily, she and I both believe not planning a garden on a piece of paper from scratch. I know that works for some people. It works very well for certain types of gardens, but I wanted a garden that evolved over time, so we just kept adding different garden beds, different layers. Yes, Martha tricked me a little bit. She'd say, she'd say, "Oh, we could do a nice garden bed here". And I'd say, "oh", and she'd say to Ralph, "you'll have less lawn to mow". But she didn't say, more fertilizer, more plants, but no, she was right, bit by bit. it's a...

it's a family garden, isn't it?

It's a house home, well, and it's a garden...

not like a stereotype.

29:35

No, it's a unique, it's a one-off, it's a one-off styled house, and it's a one-off style garden, but it's got elements of borrowing from- I've seen some beautiful structured gardens. I mean, the Highlands is just full of amazing gardens. Robertson, Robertson has some of the most amazing, big acre formal gardens. They're just everywhere. Although we've lost Perennial Hill and we've lost The Chinoiserie, but we still have Red Cow Farm, there are so many amazing gardeners here, gardens here; and by some very well-known gardeners. And there are gardens that are completely different to this one, yes, that are straight lines and stylized and very controlled, and they are magnificent. They wouldn't have suited this house, and they wouldn't have suited this site, but I admire them, and I can take elements from them. So, there's no there's no one...

I think this is a unique garden because it has its own personality. You can't say that this came out of any of any designer. This is your design.

It's evolved. It's evolved. It's an expression of Martha and myself and Ralph. Actually, he might call all plants daisies, but he does have a good eye for levels and shapes, so he's created a lot of those curved walk ways, and the walls, he does have a good eye for that.

So, I know that you have collected a lot of different species of plants, and you collect not just the yellow ones, but you collect every colour available. So, what would you say that you were most passionate about?

Plant-wise?

No, anyways.

Oh, anyways, what am I passionate about? The variety, the variety, the, the different, the different, very rare. You have some, I've got some very rare I've got some very rare, my adored hydrangeas, I think. And I found out only a little while ago that this house in particular, in its heyday of gardens, and the street in general, was known for its hydrangeas. So, but I've always adored hydrangeas. I think they're a very giving plant. They give when they're in flower, they give when the flowers go off, and they give in a vase, and they give when the flowers in the vase go off. They're a very giving plant. So, I'm passionate about my collection of hydrangeas.

Which you've got some very unusual ones.

Yes, I was lucky enough to get some from Moidart that came from Joan Arnold's garden. Before she died, she asked Graham to come and take cuttings of all her hydrangeas. Schofield, I forget his first name from the Blue Mountains, who had the other half of the collection. He came here to, to check out with Graham the hydrangeas. I'm passionate about my hydrangeas. I'm passionate about collecting different types and different species. I love my unusual hellebores, yes, I love my wood anemones, yes, in the woodland that are just about to come into flower, yes. I'm getting very...

I think your species tulips,

Oh, species tulips. Oh, I only wanted species tulips. I have weakened. I have some others, but they're magnificent. I like, I really like old plants and pure plants. Yes, species plants do. That's, don't ask me the Sophie's Choice question, because I can't answer it. There's nothing. The only thing I've removed of late, Jonquils, okay, that's the only thing. Everything else I fight to keep,

Well, finding room. I should think, for everything that you've got. If you could be a tree or a plant what would you be?

If I could be a tree or a plant?

Quite interesting. What people say.

I wouldn't be something showy. I'd be something small and quiet,

Oh, where would you start? Oh, I have so many. Actually, there's one out there. Now. Would it be seasonal? I would have been seasonal. I love dogwoods. I absolutely and utterly adore cornus, dogwoods. I haven't successfully grown one in full flower of late, finding it a bit hard to do. I've, seen them in England, and I absolutely adore them. I would love to be a beautiful, beautiful dogwood, but that's not going to happen. Oh, what would I be? We have too many favourites. I have too many favourites. I'm growing very fond of maples.

What about vistas? If you, what's your ideal vista within the garden.

Greenery, greener greenery, variety of texture and shades of green and colour in the right combinations that, if I had to, I'd say a garden must feel green and clean and soft and renewing. And there are elements of that here I like, I like. And a garden must be good to look at, not just from the garden, but from inside the house out. Yes, it must have that element.

That's, that would be one of the good descriptions for your garden. There is a softness to it. There is, there's nothing that's jarring.

Yeah, it's got a flow.

It's got a lot [indistinct words] yeah...

Complimentary, yes. And I'll say it again. That's Martha and her eye, yes, to put, because she'll, she knows what will be in flower at that at that time of year, and what else will be. We just put some oranges, reds and pinks in, but they won't be flowering at the same time. She's very good at knowing that, yes, that, you know, we don't want that. There's a bit of Monet here, a bit of the bright colours. But she, she's very good at knowing that, what will be up, and therefore we don't, won't fight with that hot pink, because hot pink will come up later, so we'll have it near a paler pink or a cream. Yes, she's very good at that, because it doesn't always work. Mother Nature decides when she really will come into flower or not. But the plan is there.

We've had a terrible drought over a number of years.

Yes.

Bushfires.

Yes, but we got that rain in time to just [indistinct words] this spring of magnificence. The whole of the Highlands had the most beautiful autumn, didn't it?

And it's having a magnificent spring because the blossom is, yes...

Oh, I'd have to add philadelphus to my list. Oh, sorry, I just remembered the philadelphus is about to come out. I'd have to add those to my list of a plant that I'd like to be, a double one, probably not a single

Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

Well, I could talk about it forever, obviously. Oh, I just hope it brings everyone joy. I hope it, I hope people feel that it gives back to them when they come to see it, that they feel renewed. I left my garden in Killara and have never gone back to see it. If they pull down the house, I won't care. We built the house, but if they pulled it down, I wouldn't care, but I can't go back, because if the garden isn't there, I will just feel empty. This garden, I've always said that I want my ashes thrown in it, but I will be leaving it, hopefully before I die, because we're

getting older and it's, it's a big garden, I just hope, well, I won't let anyone have it who doesn't want to keep it as a garden, as simple as that.

And you'll take your favourites with you?

Oh, I definitely will. Of course, the idea is to downsize. I don't know how I can take my favourites and downsize, but that's the plan. But I like giving from the garden. If someone says they like something, I'll dig it out and let them have it. I mean, I bet I think all gardeners are like that. Yes, and it's a little bit of insurance too, that if you give it up to someone else, if you lose it, you can get it, get it back. But why wouldn't you? Why wouldn't you just share it? It's, it's nothing. Just dig it out and let them have it. And most plants are quite happy to go to new homes.

Well, on behalf of the Australian Garden History Society and the Berrima District Museum, we thank you for your experiences and insights into this property here in the Southern Highlands and your garden, which has been a major undertaking because you've not only built this garden in a particular period of time, but for a particular house. And you've been custodians of this property, otherwise it would have disappeared completely. It would have I think. It's absolutely incredible what you've done here. We've been able to record this conversation with you, and that we'll be able to put it into the various places for safety.

Well, I'm pleased it'll be there, because I think the Southern Highlands is gardens. The Southern Highlands is definitely gardens. And I think there's a really good reason to record them and keep them. It is a unique, it is a unique climate to have a four- season climate so close to Sydney that's hot and humid. Now that people can access from Sydney, they can access it from Wollongong, they can access it from Canberra, and they can have a little bit of England with an Australian tone. Yes, I do think it's unique. And the number of gardens that are here, that are hidden, that are just amazing and are preserving our plant varieties is just something worth, worth recording and keeping and encouraging. Absolutely. And I just remembered the plant I would want to be my favorite plant. How could I have forgotten her? Astilbes? They're, they're popping up out of the ground, yes, and they, they are probably my favourite perennial plant, astilbes, and there's about probably 15 different varieties. There's purples and pinks and whites, and it doesn't matter.

I think you've got all of them, haven't you?

Not quite, not quite. You've got to go to England to see the collection of astilbes. But I'm aiming for it.

Thank you. Susan.

A pleasure.

Interview ends: 42 minutes 47seconds