



DEATH OF THE MIXED SHRUBBERY

STORY AND PHOTOS **CATHERINE STEWART FAILDM, MHMA**

Living in a part of Sydney with many heritage houses and gardens, I enjoy a morning walk past the old sandstone walls, elaborate metal gates and delicious fragrances that emanate from the many old shrub borders. Mock orange (*Philadelphus*), *Osmanthus*, the elusive but sweet *Rondeletia* and the heady perfume of *Acokanthera* all bring back the decades long gone when many of these beautiful old homes were built. While the houses remain in pristine condition with slate roofs repaired, timber gables repainted and the leadlight windows fixed, something much more serious is happening to the gardens.

A couple of months ago I stopped to admire one of my favourite front gardens in the best street. A low sandstone wall edges an amazing collection of interesting shrubs: blue flowering *Eranthemum* and *Ceratostigma*, pink *Rondeletia*, the deep purple tubular flowers of *Lochroma* and large, blousy masses of *Loropetalum* and *Spiraea* which are covered in creamy blossom in spring. Closely clipped dark green *Camellia* and azalea complete a picture of rounded shapes combined with open arching shrubs from one to two metres tall in an undulating sea of strong form.

It isn't there anymore. Every plant is gone, entirely removed. Instead of the sinuously curved garden bed filled with plants, there is a wide, straight edging. A marching row of *Magnolia* 'Little Gem' is accompanied by a groundcover planting of Chinese star jasmine. All that variety, replaced by just two types of plants.

What happened? Judging by the changes to the rest of the garden, one of 'us' is what happened. A landscape designer, buoyed by the absolutely certain knowledge that variety is not the spice of life but a big design no-no had renovated/rejuvenated this garden so that it now looked 'done' in the latest fashion. It

Clipped Balls of *Euonymus*, *Variegated Abelia* and *Buxus*
Photo: Judy Horton (above) Boring Landscaping (below)



does indeed look 'done' – neat, tasteful, restrained, even elegant but also like a thousand other gardens planted out with the usual restricted range of the usual suspects. It has probably made the owner happy, kept the landscape designer's wolf from the door and helped the profit of the nursery that sells *Magnolia* 'Little Gem'. (Which, incidentally, I think has got to be one of the most over-rated plant releases of the past decade and may become more of a 'Large gem' than the name implies). It has also destroyed some valuable plant material, increased the boring homogeneity of the world and forever lost the connection between the historical period of the garden and its house.

Why are we doing this to old gardens? Why are we so compelled to do away with the old? What is wrong with an old-fashioned shrubbery? Every heritage garden consultant and experienced

landscape designer I spoke to lamented the loss of plant material, the slavish following of garden fashion, the ego-driven designers who must make each of their gardens a clone of the last and, above all, the ignorance that prevents landscape designers seeing the heritage value of the garden right in front of them.

Colleen Morris, National Chair of the Australian Garden History Society and a professional heritage consultant, tells me that

“Shrubberies form an essential part of many old large and suburban Australian gardens. They obscure boundaries, providing a green backdrop for the garden and lower growing herbaceous perennials, which were often planted on the edge of the beds. Their role in large nineteenth century gardens was often as a foil for a large expanse of lawn or flower garden. Traditionally the shrubbery was of mixed planting so that some shrubs or plants were always in bloom to provide interest throughout the year. Choosing the right combination of shrubs required care so that, as one late nineteenth century journal wrote, ‘incongruous shrubs are not planted in juxtaposition.’ Upkeep required a light pruning of each shrub usually only once per year and not all necessarily at the same time. A well planned, planted and maintained shrubbery gives seasonal and often subtle pleasure (such as the delicious perfume of an insignificant looking flower) throughout the year.”

Until the garden revolution brought about by the widespread use of micro-irrigation during the 1980s, a variety of shrubs formed the backbone of every garden planting. Never watered, occasionally hacked down when they threatened to overtake the garden, planted in mostly unimproved soils and rarely treated for pests and diseases, these extensive shrub masses sculpted our gardens. Essentially a background of form and different leaf textures, they coped with pets and cricket balls, drought and flood while offering here-and-there year-round display of flowers.

While a few well-known heritage gardens are visited and revered, the vast majority are continually faced with renewal and rejuvenation. That’s fair – is it reasonable to expect that all landscapes should be forever preserved in some sort of time warp and not prey to fashion and whim? Perhaps though, we are looking at old gardens and not understanding them. We are seeing plants we don’t recognise and so don’t know how to maintain, (especially with a mechanical trimmer). We are seeing what has become an overgrown, tangled mess without looking for the structure or function beneath. We are seeing unrelenting walls of dark green foliage but not recognising the potential for interesting form and texture contrasts.

New for new’s sake has become a part of a consumer-driven society that measures success by what we can buy. Gardens that look ‘bought’ rather than derived from trial and error and experimentation demonstrate material wealth. Heavy maintenance requirements for clipped hedges, topiary shapes and the water needed to establish new garden plantings confirms the garden owner as someone of means. Add to that our need to show control over nature and it is little wonder that the mixed shrubbery every day meets its demise.

Charlotte Webb, a landscape designer and heritage consultant based in NSW, sees in the mixed border shrub plantings established from the 1920s to the 1960s an extensive and strongly regional plant palette not found in modern gardens which no longer reflect the expertise of regional nurseries as they carry stock grown and trucked in from all over Australia. In these old gardens, *Viburnum*, *Weigela*, *Fuchsia* and *Hydrangea* species mix with an amazing array of conifers, rarely used in today’s gardens other than the ubiquitous cypress or juniper hedge. Recalling a 1970s wholesale nursery in the Southern Highlands that once grew over 350 lines of conifers, Charlotte comments that such variety would be very hard to find today.

Shrubbery





1. *Bauhinia*
2. *Brunfelsia*
3. *Chaenomeles*
4. *Dombeya*
5. *Eranthemum megalophyllum*
7. *Forsythia*
8. *lochroma*
9. *Spirea*
10. *Variegated Osmanthus*

Stuart Read, heritage officer with the NSW Department of Planning and landscape specialist, values old gardens for the lessons we can learn about dealing with drought, appreciating a wide variety of plants and ways of gardening that do not require hours of repetitive maintenance. Rather than succumb to a fashion fad of silver leaves or succulents, fanned by media and horticulture or real estate industries wanting rapid turnover, old mixed shrub plantings can provide the key for future garden making that must be without irrigation and for those with less time to spend on 'hands on' gardening. (To be sure, mid-nineteenth century gardeners did spend time working in their gardens but it was tending vegetables, annuals and roses, not their shrubs that occupied their time!)

Stuart notes that 'instant' gardens and makeovers perhaps reflect our short-term ownership and thinking, with statistics suggesting we sell our homes on average every 4-5 years. He adds that shrub borders also provide quiet haven for small birds, insects and much of the local wildlife which we would like to enjoy in established suburban areas.

Jim Fogarty, award winning Melbourne-based designer, sees lack of training and the operations of many self-styled but unqualified landscape professionals as a real problem for the appreciation of old gardens and their interesting planting schemes. He says

"Lack of knowledge and respect for plants is a key issue in parts of the design and construction industry. Many operators will keep their margins high by keeping job details low and often this means that potentially interesting planting schemes are replaced with mass planting of a small range of plants"

So how do we start to protect our heritage planting schemes from eventual destruction?

Remember your design training to respond to the genius loci of your site? That's not just the physical site, it's also the **heritage values** of the nearby architecture, the hardscaping clues that show a garden pedigree that extends back beyond your design training and the existing significant site plantings. You may have

decided to recognise trees in your heritage understanding but the **old shrubs are just as important.**

Put aside the designer's ego that demands the creation of a garden unique to **you.**

Properly identify the plants in the garden. Last year I saw near my house a very rare orange flowering form of *Osmanthus fragrans*, not usually encountered outside its native Japan. When I went back a couple of months later to ask the garden owner for a piece to propagate, it was gone, presumably removed by someone who had no idea what it was and couldn't be bothered to find out as it probably just looked like any other dark leafed shrub at the time. What a waste. Please use the identification service provided by your local botanic garden or bring in a heritage consultant to help you. While some old shrubs such as *Cotoneaster* and holly are now considered environmental weeds and may have to come out, there are many to take their place.

Research the plants you identify to understand how they should be pruned, perhaps bringing in a heritage experienced horticulturist for specialist advice.

Once you have recognised and researched the old garden mixed shrubbery, now come three difficult steps. First **you must persuade your clients of the uniqueness and importance of the heritage garden they own.** Not an easy task when new plants are somehow seen as always better than old varieties (not true) and there is a strong drive for the garden to look done in the latest fashion. Contact the Australian Garden History Society for someone local who can reinforce your evaluation and non-'total makeover' approach.

The second step requires you to work out how you can **manage and supplement the existing shrubs to create a garden which reflects some of our modern taste while not destroying the old.** Research appropriate shrub plant lists and look for those that provide some foliage colour and texture contrasts to what you already have. Rejuvenation pruning of old shrubs can work wonders, creating strong shapes and invigorated plants.



The third step is **finding those old-fashioned shrubs** for your supplementary planting. Peter Whitehead of the famous **Rast Bros Nursery** in northern Sydney tells me sadly that he has been unable to source *Rondeletia* for some time. You may have to use your ALLDM connections or scrounge some cuttings and propagate the plants yourself. (Or ask someone much better at that to help you!) Stuart Read has compiled a list of **sources of old-fashioned plants**, specified by plant type and old-fashioned garden furniture etc. Download from www.heritage.nsw.gov.au (navigate via About Heritage/ Landscape & Gardens/Heritage Gardens)

The shrubberies you preserve with just a subtle reworking will be more drought tolerant than a swathe of grasses, thrive without installed irrigation, cope with occasional downpours unlike a mass of succulents and require only a yearly prune. They will keep that essential feature, **plant volume**, that is missing from the design of many modern gardens. Most importantly, they will keep that vital connection between the heritage value of the house and its garden environment as one is always impoverished by the loss of the other.

FURTHER READING AND RESEARCH

www.heritage.nsw.gov.au

www.heritage.vic.au

www.epa.qld.gov.au (navigate via cultural heritage/ owning a heritage place/ landscape maintenance)

www.environment.sa.gov.au/heritage/index Publications for sale include *Gardens in South Australia 1840-1940*

Australian Garden History Society visit www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au AGHS has a very useful collection of publications available including its monthly journal and *Studies in Australian Garden History* (ISSN 1448-3858) plus a wealth of expert advice and consultants.

National Trust of Australia publication *Interwar Gardens* ISBN 095776572X www.nationaltrust.org.au

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Shrubberies (opposite page and right)



OLD-FASHIONED SHRUB LIST

Abelia spp.
Abutilon spp.
Acokanthera oblongifolia syn
Carissa
Aucuba japonica
Azalea cvs
Backhousia citriodora
Bauhinia galpinii
Berberis spp
Brugmansia spp. (syn *Datura* spp.)
Camellia spp. and cvs
Ceratostigma willmottianum & *C. plumbaginoides*
Chaenomeles speciosa cvs
Cistus spp. and cvs
Clerodendrum ugandense
Coleonema pulchellum
Cordyline spp. eg *C. australis*, *C. stricta*
Cornus capitata, *C. florida* cvs and *C. kousa*

Deutzia spp.
Dombeya spp
Elaeagnus pungens
Enkianthus japonica
Eranthemum pulchellum
Escallonia spp.
Euonymus japonicus
Eupatorium megalophyllum
Euphorbia characias ssp. *wulfenii*
Forsythia spp. (esp. *F. viridissima*)
Fuchsia spp. & cvs
Gardenia spp.
Hibiscus mutabilis, *H. syriacus*
Hydrangea macrophylla cvs
Hypericum x moserianum
lochroma cyaneum and *I. fuchsiioides*
Justicia carnea
Kolkwitzia amabilis
Loropetalum chinense
Mackaya bella
Mahonia spp.

Michelia figo
Mussaenda cvs
Nandina domestica
Nerium oleander
Osmanthus spp.
Pentas lanceolata
Philadelphus coronarius
Photinia spp.
Pieris spp.
Pittosporum spp.
Plumbago capensis
Plumeria acutifolia
Prunus glandulosa
Punica granatum (and 'Nana')
Pyracantha spp.
Reinwardtia indica
Rhaphiolepis spp. & cvs
Rondeletia amoena
Rosa cvs
Rosmarinus spp.
Rothmannia globosa
Ruellia macrantha
Sarcococca spp.
Spiraea spp.

Syringia spp. & cvs
Tamarix petandra
Tecomaria capensis
Tetradenia riparia (syn *Iboza*)
Teucrium fruticosum
Tibouchina spp.
Viburnum spp.
Vitex trifoliata & *V. agnes-castus* spp.
Weigela spp.

OLD-FASHIONED SHRUBS NOW CONSIDERED WEEDS

Cotoneaster spp.
Buddleia davidii
Coprosma repens
Crataegus oxycantha
Ilex spp
Ochna serrulata
Polygala myrtifolia
Rhaphiolepis indica
Sambucus nigra
Spartium junceum
Tecoma stans