



Grand Garden Designs



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State Library of NSW

Macquarie Street Sydney 2000 Australia
Telephone +61 (0) 2 9273 1414
www.sl.nsw.gov.au

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Survey coordinator & exhibition consultant: Howard Tanner
Collection development specialist: Sally Hone
Creative producers: Jennifer Blunden & Karen Hall
Creative producer, multimedia: Sabrina Organo
Curatorial liaison: Sarah Morley
Exhibition design: Jemima Woo
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Gardens for the 21st Century

HOWARD TANNER | Survey coordinator & exhibition consultant

In 2015 the State Library of NSW embarked on the Contemporary Gardens Survey to create an enduring record of the noteworthy gardens of our time, with input from their designers and creators – a kind of snapshot to represent particular trends and interests in gardens and garden making at this moment in time.

In her insightful and timely book *Garden Voices: Australian Designers – Their Stories*, Anne Latreille explores our history of landscape design and, in describing what unites the ideas and work of those who make up this diverse profession, observes that each designer ‘creates spaces rather than simply decorating them, is willing to take a chance, and displays artistry and imagination that can be breathtaking. Each understands plants – the component of a garden that makes it dynamic and adds the fourth dimension of time.’¹

Many of the ‘voices’ Anne recorded convinced me that the prosperity of Australia in the years since 1980 had enabled landscape designers to create a number of exciting, new, consciously designed parks and gardens. By ‘conscious design’, I mean a planned garden with a composed layout and the intended scene clearly envisaged. This conviction happily coincided with the Library’s plans to develop an exhibition on the history of gardening in Australia, and the survey and photographic exhibition grew out of that. We surveyed the larger innovative parks and gardens created in New South Wales since 1980 to document the work of significant New South Wales-based landscape designers, then commissioned well-known garden photographers to record a selection of these gardens for the State Library collection.

The first part of the project, the survey, began very much from the ground up. Suggestions from a number of industry stalwarts with a deep knowledge and experience of landscape design and construction in New South Wales began a journey of exploration, which involved a series of interviews with landscape consultants, and inspections of a selection of remarkable gardens. The landscape designers who conceived these gardens spoke of their excellent landscape training at Ryde TAFE, or at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra) in the 1980s.

The second part of the project was to commission leading garden photographers Jason Busch, Murray Fredericks, Sue Stubbs and Nicholas Watt to record a selection of the outstanding gardens. Each of the photographers reveals a different take on the subject, yet they have all brought to the exhibition wonderful images of some of the state’s finest new landscapes. The commissioned photographs, along with a selection of pre-existing images and written accounts from the interviews, make up the survey inventory and will form a new archive in the State Library’s permanent collection.

But why have we favoured larger gardens? A larger garden – or indeed a park – allows more expansive opportunities for creative expression than a smaller-scale residential one, and typically inspires other gardens and gardeners. The great botanic gardens, such as the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney and its satellites at Mt Tomah and Mt Annan, set high standards for landscape design and horticulture. Many gardens that were once private, like Vaucluse House

in Sydney’s east and Everglades at Leura, are now also in the public realm, and these provide a benchmark for the development of gardens by private owners.

Virtually every park and garden celebrated in this exhibition and survey is a highly personal creation, an artistic, living response to a particular place. Such places make most art and architecture appear inert, and connect in a special way with the visitor. Almost everyone recognises the harmony and sense of wellbeing that comes from progressing through a beautiful landscape. Like the human race, a landscape is part of a living, breathing world, with birth, rebirth, maturity and death as elements of an eternal cycle.

‘A larger garden allows greater opportunities for creative expression and inspires other gardens and gardeners ...’

Man-made landscapes are spectacularly grand in that they are the result of an enormous passion, vision and determination on the part of both the owners and designers to create something out of the ordinary.

¹ Anne Latreille, *Garden Voices: Australian Designers – Their Stories*, Blooming Books, Melbourne, 2013, p. 1



SEA PEACE | Ewingsdale, North Coast. Lead designer: Lisa Hochhauser. Photographer: Nicholas Watt

INFLUENCES ON AUSTRALIAN GARDEN DESIGNERS

Since the 1960s a growing appreciation of the Australian landscape and its more remarkable plants has echoed the sentiments of 19th-century travellers such as botanical artist Marianne North and landscape gardener William Guilfoyle, who wrote of their admiration for the handsome rainforest trees and flora found along the east coast. Following World War II, Australia's most famous traditional garden designer, Edna Walling, celebrated the attractive natural circumstance found along country byways in her book *The Australian Roadside* (1952); sisters Betty Maloney and Jean Walker brought native gardens into popular recognition through their publications, especially *Designing Australian Bush Gardens* (1966); and from 1964 onwards, designers Bruce Mackenzie and Harry Howard promoted the use of indigenous plant species to regain landscapes appropriate to Sydney. By the 1990s there was clear recognition of Australia as a generally dry continent with uneven weather patterns, and of the need for gardeners to use drought-hardy plants and to minimise the use of water.

In more recent times a number of spectacular, high-profile new Australian parks and gardens using a distinctive and largely Australian palette have attracted significant public interest. Among them are Fiona Brockhoff's hardy coastal garden, Karkalla, at Sorrento, Victoria; Taylor Cullity Lethlean's Australian Garden (1995–2012) at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne, Victoria, with its remarkable

indigenous planting, lakes, and landforms from red sand evoking inland Australia; and McGregor Coxall's serene lawn, shrub-bank and bush path with water elements in the Australian Garden (2006–2010) at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, which if it had been in New South Wales may well have been included in this survey. The impressive Barangaroo Headland Reserve, also of great interest, would almost certainly have been included had it had several more years to reach a condition worthy of being recorded. Designed by Johnson Pilton Walker/Peter Walker & Partners with horticulturalist Stuart Pittendrigh, Barangaroo Headland Reserve adjoining Sydney's Walsh Bay uses massive sandstone plinths and plantings that replicate the flora of Sydney in 1788 to simulate the original Sydney Harbour shoreline. Its design clearly evokes the grand scale of the more structural and abstract landscapes being commissioned in the USA.

New gardens in Australia, and in New South Wales specifically, have also been influenced by significant overseas gardens and gardening movements. Before World War II, the design of nearly every Australian park and garden was based on English styles, with some influence from the USA brought back by Australian architects who visited America in the 1920s and 30s. US influence was later strengthened via popular movies and magazines, notably California's lifestyle magazine *Sunset* in the 1950s and 60s. It promoted outdoor living, with redwood decks, barbecues and swimming pools in landscaped settings, and Sydney quickly followed suit.

example of Nicole de Vesian's La Louvre garden in Provence, France, where these concepts have been translated to suit a Mediterranean setting. For these designers, de Vesian's work offered a clear basis for the adaptation of Japanese ideals to suit the drier circumstance of the Australian garden. The garden **Ooralba**, at Barrengarry, set high on a plateau overlooking Kangaroo Valley and fringed by sandstone escarpments, frames vistas to borrowed landscapes and culminates in an engaging maze of clipped, mounded hedging (of *Elaeagnus pungens*), a perfect example of cloud pruning. In a similar vein, a seaside garden at Berrara, south of Jervis Bay, uses traditional shrubberies clipped into rounded and undulating forms to frame views of waves crashing along the coastline.

A trans-Atlantic phenomenon emulated in Australia includes US-based Oehme van Sweden's sweeping banks of native grasses. Dutchman Piet Oudolf's masterly deployment of seasonal field plants can be seen in his own garden at Hummelo in the Netherlands, at Scampston Hall in Britain, in Chicago's Lurie Garden and along New York's High Line. Both Oehme van Sweden and Oudolf represent a significant current trend in landscape design, clearly reflected in recent Australian gardens with sweeping banks of flamboyant grasses and low-lying foliage plants. This approach is evident in the new garden at **Eagles Bluff** in mountainous terrain near Tenterfield, and in the seaside Norfolk Island pine groves underplanted with *Miscanthus* and *Poa* grass at **Haxstead**, Central Tilba.

'In recent decades, the Japanese garden has become an important source of spatial concepts and textural ideas.'

In recent decades the Japanese garden – with its use of massed clipped shrubs, known as 'cloud pruning'; of 'borrowed landscapes' incorporating features of the landscape beyond the garden; and of subtle conjunctions of stone and gravel – has become an important source of spatial concepts and textural ideas. Several Sydney-based designers gave the

The use of architectural foliage, strongly textured and coloured plants in clever combinations, as at **Lindesay**, Darling Point, is another identifier of modern landscapes, as is the creation of gardens consciously designed as settings for contemporary sculpture, like the courtyard gardens at **Pirramimma**, Wentworth Falls.

And what of the influence of the extreme, perhaps contrived, drama of some of the modernist gardens abroad? American Martha Schwartz's landscapes – powerful examples of installation art – are hinted at in Richard Weller and Vladimir Sitta's Garden of Australian Dreams in Canberra, while Charles Jencks's Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Scotland, with its smooth, curving sculpted embankments, finds direct expression in Michael Bates's formative garden at Tallawong, Mount Irvine, in the Blue Mountains. While roof gardens are part of a long tradition, the greening of high-rise buildings is a new phenomenon, especially the concept of the vertical garden – with planting trained over external frames on a tall building – which has found expression in French designer Patrick Blanc's One Central Park residential tower on Sydney's Broadway.

Given the drought conditions prevailing from time to time over much of Australia, there has been an emphasis in recent years on 'dry' gardening and the use of tough plants suited to these conditions. While many indigenous plants fulfil this role and have found favour since the 'bush garden' movement of the 1960s and 70s, inspiration has also come from new gardens in the Mediterranean and California. Among these are the somewhat austere gardens of Spanish landscape designer Fernando Caruncho, where rectangular basins of water are flanked by gravel paths and hedging, and a softer accent is provided by rolling drifts of clipped *Escallonia macrantha* – a style emulated at **Ooralba**, Barrengarry. In Caruncho's Spanish projects, the broader landscape of ancient olive trees, cypresses and golden wheatfields becomes an extension of the garden. In the Greek isles, landscape designer Thomas Doxiadis has created important transitional landscapes between new villas and their windswept hillside settings, retaining gnarled juniper trees and merging new, tough low-scale planting, such as *Pistachia lentiscus*, with the native vegetation, an idea also found at **Eagles Bluff**, Tenterfield.

Recent books showing us inspirational examples of outstanding modernist country gardens in California – designed by Pamela Burton, Andrea Cochran and Bernard Trainor – clearly convey various possibilities for sophisticated dry gardening,

all applicable to much of Australia. Included are images of bold plantings of clumped grasses, *Echium*, *Euphorbia*, sage and rosemary, and of grouped olive trees enfolding an outdoor lifestyle, with terraces, fire pits and lap pools. A thoughtful translation of these ideals can be found in a number of country gardens in New South Wales, where the use of substantial areas of tough plantings creates a sense of a verdant oasis in a generally open landscape, and in particular with the placement of a swimming pool, water trough or ornamental pond providing cool contrast and welcome relief in a hot climate, as at **Garangula**, Harden.

INNOVATION IN LANDSCAPE DESIGN

In exploring innovative landscape designs in New South Wales, many exciting new gardens came into view. Most were designed to complement the natural setting, with new garden elements placed into an established landscape.

At **Thubbul**, near Bermagui on the far South Coast, lofty forests edge both the sea and a wide lagoon. Accommodation on the property is provided in several pavilions, and beyond them masonry walls define garden spaces set with sculptures and flowering shrubs. Further into the forest, another pavilion – faintly reminiscent of architect Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion – overlooks a lake filled with waterlilies, and paths take you deep into a forest understorey accented with low palm-like burrawangs, a primitive form of cycad. Architect Philip Cox has loved and nurtured this beautiful landscape for nearly 50 years, providing a subtle layering of introduced elements. The garden is a fusion of natural beauty and understated design, a rare kind of improved wilderness.

A different relationship with wild, rough country is found at **Eagles Bluff**, south of Tenterfield, which has severely cold winters and hot summers. Here sweeps of lawn and banks of subtly coloured ornamental grasses and shrubs transition the garden seamlessly from the new homestead into the wider valley landscape. There is a fast-flowing stream, and in wet weather the rugged escarpment is punctuated by waterfalls. An interesting aspect of this outstanding



THUBBUL | Murrah, Bermagui, South Coast.
Lead designer: Philip Cox. Photographer: Jason Busch

new garden is its modernity, given that designer Carolyn Robinson had previously perfected the traditional Australian country garden at **Glenrock** on the northern outskirts of Tenterfield. Carolyn comes from a family of farmers and gardeners who have a real interest in soil quality. The granite landscapes of Tenterfield produce relatively poor soils, but provide the basic material for Carolyn's numerous fieldstone walls. Irrigation is possible at **Eagles Bluff** but is used sparingly, as drought and an inadequate water supply are regular issues, so Carolyn favours tough, drought-hardy plants. At one point in 2015 the river stopped running and the dam was dry, and hand-watering from large storage tanks enabled the garden to survive. This responsible approach to gardening in a dry climate is characteristic of thoughtfully designed newer gardens.

In complete contrast, the garden at **Sea Peace**, inland from Byron Bay on the far North Coast, sits on an escarpment with distant views of the Pacific Ocean. It turns its back on paddocks and broad-acre residential development to recreate the wondrous native forest that existed before the land was cleared for dairy farms. Subtropical trees are layered with orchids and staghorns, and underplanted with *Heliconia* and *Hedychium*. Handsome palm groves fringe the swimming pool, while stands of hoop pine edge a large lake. A new aerial walkway links the existing garden to a large shade house that provides a suitable environment for precious forest plants. Here rainfall is reasonably reliable. The regeneration of the subtropical forest was begun some 40 years ago. Landscape architect Lisa Hochhauser has since given the property a design framework, preparing a comprehensive plan, and detailing paths,



EAGLES BLUFF | Tenterfield, New England. Lead designer: Carolyn Robinson. Photographer: Nicholas Watt

‘Virtually every park and garden celebrated in this exhibition and survey is a highly personal creation, an artistic, living response to a particular place.’

terraces, ponds and key plantings. The garden has been layered with suitable but unusual plants obtained from specialist nurseries or from the wild by Harry Moulton and Clayton Holmes, who are in essence modern-day plant-hunters. While **Sea Peace** is not in any obvious way linked to the grand tropical gardens of Bali, Singapore or Sri Lanka – notably Geoffrey Bawa’s Lunuganga – it may more clearly share with them certain lush characteristics as it moves towards maturity.

For some, the classical garden ideal remains, but may be interpreted in new ways. At **Horse Island**, on Tuross Lakes near Bodalla, the former paddocks and woodland have been transformed to become sweeping lawns among tall-trunked eucalypts that frame views across the lake to distant mountains. The garden is somewhat formal but provides a distinctively Australian experience in that it uses only indigenous plants. At **Nestor Farm**, near Berry, the idea behind many great English gardens – smooth lawns descending between clumped trees to a lake – has been reinterpreted to grand effect using distinctive east coast rainforest trees such as *Buckinghamia* and *Flindersia*. Both of these South Coast gardens are realisations of their owners’ long-held ideal of a familiar landscape recreated in a distinctive and specifically Australian way.

Tobermory at Moss Vale recalls the wonderful articulation of the sorts of architectural plans found at Roman sites such as Hadrian’s Villa outside Rome. Laid out by landscape designer Peter Fudge, massive, finely trimmed hedges line the entry drive before curving into a clipped circular enclosure in front of the house. Elsewhere hedging forms large garden rooms, or frames an outlook into open countryside.

The adventurous altering of landforms for visual effect, and an understanding of the role of water in tempering a hot climate, are found in a number of rural gardens, including those at **Garangula**, Harden, and **Wirra Willa**, Somersby. **Garangula** was a most amazing commission for Vladimir (Tom) Sitta as a young professional: he was provided with excellent resources and required to give it his total attention over a two-year period.

The design is partly formal but always with an inventive twist. Hedging to the entry drive is angled to provide certain viewpoints that reveal hidden gardens, and an avenue of lemon-scented gums takes the eye to a symbolic horse trough then out into the drier pastoral landscape. Mist and water emerge from a conical stone structure, feeding a rill that flows to the swimming pool. Garangula’s garden, polo fields and pastoral acres are beautifully neat and kept to an unusually high standard, perhaps reflecting the owner’s Swiss ideals. At **Wirra Willa**, architect Matthew Woodward has provided new focal points for the garden designed by Michael Cooke; a stylish glassed-in pavilion, framed by planting, overhangs the central lake, while a modernist garage buried in the hillside is topped by a cleverly resolved roof garden. Here the basalt soil, spring-fed lake and coastal rainfall originally made the land ideal for a commercial citrus orchard, and now a lush garden has been created around the lake, incorporating fine stands of eucalypts, angophoras and turpentine trees.

Landscape opportunities in a big city are different, and in Sydney the survey discovered several innovative new gardens as settings for historic houses. The garden of **The Hermitage** at Vaucluse is centred on a large Gothic Revival house overlooking a generous lawn and a framed view of Sydney Harbour and the city of Sydney. Clever planting, recently introduced by landscape architect Daniel Baffsky and



HORSE ISLAND | Bodalla, South Coast. Lead designer: Christina Kennedy. Photographer: Jason Busch



WIRRA WILLA | Somersby, Central Coast. Lead designer: Michael Cooke. Photographer: Murray Fredericks

The Abbey, a fantastic Gothic Revival stone house in Annandale, sits atop a sandstone walled terrace with views to the city. Garden designer Will Dangar has enriched a grotto, a fountain court and old iron trellises with highly textured planting, and made a side courtyard private by planting a bank of glossy-leaved *Magnolia*

‘For some, the classical garden ideal remains, but may be interpreted in new ways.’

nurtured by horticulturalist Andrew Price, secures wonderful privacy for the garden, and a large kitchen garden has been established in a small, secluded valley. Another historic ‘marine villa’, the National Trust property **Lindesay** at Darling Point, has had its garden vista cleverly reworked to reveal its original subtropical character. A rich tapestry of architectural foliage and flowering shrubs, resolved by landscape designer Christopher Nicholas, reveals a fine understanding of plant groupings.

grandiflora Exmouth, and *Brachychiton* and *Cupaniopsis* trees.

In Sydney large private gardens are rare, so inventive outcomes in public gardens are vital. **The Paddington Reservoir Gardens** is an extraordinary reuse, for public recreation, of the ruins of a 19th-century reservoir, with elevated walkways and pergolas, and sunken gardens set with tree ferns, *Xanthorrhoea* and eucalypts. Colourful striped deckchairs encourage the public to linger and relax. The hand



PRINCE ALFRED PARK | Surry Hills, Sydney.
Lead designer: Sue Barnsley. Photographer: Sue Stubbs

‘In Sydney large private gardens are rare, so inventive outcomes in public gardens are vital.’

of artist and landscape architect Anton James is evident here. **Prince Alfred Park**, next to Central Station in Surry Hills, has been reworked by Sue Barnsley as a haven for urban dwellers and urban exercise. Its redesign shows the importance of having a park like this for swimmers, tennis and basketball players, yoga and Pilates enthusiasts, and runners and fitness fanatics, while still accommodating walkers, picnickers and family outings. Ancient trees have been retained, the public swimming pool enfolded by grassy hillocks, and the giant figs along Cleveland Street underplanted with rough native grasses to offer a subtle transition from busy road to quieter parkland. In another example, Daniel Baffsky’s outstanding roof garden above the apartments at **MCentral** in Pymont brings a meadow and a surprising sense of space into the heart of the city.

Sydney Harbour’s charm derives largely from its diverse topography and the various wooded peninsulas that project into obvious lines of view. One of the most prominent is **Bradleys Head**, which has an active lighthouse still used for navigation, and old sandstone gun fortifications topped with the foremast of *HMAS Sydney*. The design of new landscape elements was entrusted to Craig Burton. Responding to the curving rhythms of the site, he

added grassed steps that descend to an old stone jetty on the waterfront and form an amphitheatre. On the upper slopes he created a Naval Memorial with circular bronze plaques set among the paving and enfolded by curving sandstone walls. The changes to the landscape are highly considered and give a certain gravitas to this significant historic site.

As part of the survey of contemporary gardens, and in honour of the 200th anniversary of the Royal Botanic Garden Sydney, we also explored more recent botanic gardens. The Blue Mountains Botanic Garden at Mount Tomah was established in 1972, too early to be part of the survey, but it has a wondrous panoramic outlook from its projecting rock walls and cascades, possibly inspired by the work of Mexican modernist architect Luis Barragán. We also inspected the Australian Botanic Garden Mount Annan, begun in 1984 south-west of Sydney near Camden, but concluded that further time and more funding are required for it to reach fruition.

Opened in 2003, **Mount Penang Gardens** at Kariong near Gosford is an intriguing fusion of botanic endeavour and artistic design. An extraordinary commission, funded in part by the Commonwealth but entrusted to the state, it represents a high point in recently established major public gardens. Here, a team that included Anton James and Craig Burton created a truly distinctive landscape. Entry is across a blue-clad bridge over lotus-filled ponds with cascades. Large precast cement panels form ramparts and indents set with botanical plantations. Vine-clad steel sculptures, fountains and distinctively shaped bottle trees provide further visual accents. This remarkable public garden deserves to be better known and better maintained, and to be provided with better access.

A number of fine traditional gardens were also inspected for the survey. While these were outside the brief for contemporary gardens, they are wonderful in their own right and are included in the garden survey’s inventory.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

And what of the future of these gardens? Gardens, of course, are ever changing and we cannot know whether they will be maintained in a considered way in the long term. Public parks and botanic gardens are more secure in this respect, but large private gardens would be fortunate indeed to enjoy a sequence of responsible and informed owners into the future. A number of these private gardens seem currently to be at a peak of perfection and several owners are producing books to record this special circumstance. Other owners are contemplating conservation covenants or the establishment of well-funded trusts to oversee their properties, so that these special places can survive in their entirety, ideally properly maintained and allied to programs enabling research and public access.

The making of a larger garden is an age-old pursuit to create one’s own earthly paradise, a beautiful retreat from the everyday world. An expansive garden enables the exploration of new and bold ideas, and the Library sees the recording of these remarkable contemporary creations as an important reflection of our age. In our cities, thoughtfully designed urban parks fulfil this role in a more public way. All require a singular design vision, a number of years for the plants to reach maturity and for the intended composition of the landscape to be realised. Time itself will play a part, and any grand concept will be tempered by the performance of the plants, and of the landscape’s custodians.

The many new parks and gardens created recently in New South Wales are a worthy response to our ongoing need for special landscapes that provide a serene and harmonious contrast to city settings and the pressures of urban life.

HOWARD TANNER

Howard Tanner is a Sydney-based architect and writer with a longstanding involvement in landscape design and history.



‘The joy of designing this garden was in letting the surrounding landscape inform what we did within the boundaries of the garden ... The challenge was to create a garden that felt as though it extended to the horizon.’

LANDSCAPE DESIGNER HUGH MAIN, 2016

Ooralba

BARRENGARRY, SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS

Lead designer: Hugh Main

Photographer: Murray Fredericks

This garden, north of Kangaroo Valley, is set on a plateau with a sandstone escarpment as a distant backdrop. Thoughtfully composed garden spaces, each leading on to the next, conclude in a dramatic maze formed of cloud-pruned shrubs. Key influences on this designer are the rocky terrain and clipped shrubs of Provence in the south of France, and the secluded, understated and reflective character of traditional Japanese gardens. Main also favours a restricted colour palette that emphasises grey-greens with accents of silver.

