



## Reflections

### Chris Larkin

*From the February 2005 issue of the Study Group Newsletter.*

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Each year seems to hurtle along at increasing speed; the frenzied pace reaching its climax around Christmas. For the keen gardener there is so much to do. On the home front I always try to plant out as many of my potted plants as possible rationalizing they may have a greater chance of survival in the ground when those punishing hot days strike. Mulching is another big task. It is no good mulching too early in the year, in Victoria at least, as mulch absorbs a certain amount of useful rainfall and is a barrier to small amounts reaching the soil. It seems the benefits of mulching far outweigh any of the negatives but if it is possible to remulch garden beds after useful, penetrating rains then so much the better.

Were there more Australian plant gardens in the Victorian section of Australia's Open Garden Scheme launched at the start of spring? There were certainly quite a few gardens to visit - old favourites like Elsbeth Jacob's and Bev Hanson's garden and quite a few new ones including friends and near neighbours who live in the seaside town of Ocean Grove. I went down and helped 'man the gate' for one of these gardens and was truly amazed at the level of interest. They had both received good publicity in the local paper and experience says that this is the single best aid to ensuring a good attendance. The weather is the wildcard that no-one can plan for and they were lucky on both days. I thought I was quite familiar with the plants in my friends' seaside garden but after being asked to identify plants realized how little I knew of the specifics: on the whole I knew the plant genera but not the species. I guess this isn't so surprising as there is a big difference between what will grow happily on sand at the seaside compared with what I can grow on clay at the Foothills of the Dandenong Ranges.

Rainfall in Ocean Grove is much lower but then so too are summer temperatures as a generalization because of a cooling seabreeze. Tolerance of salty winds and, in this case at least, alkalinity are added factors for plant selection. There are a lot of grey foliated plants that grow happily near the beach and they look right in the context: *Eremophila* and *Adenanthos* species also do much better than here and look good. I guess this is what plant designing for different sites and locations is all about - responding to the human requirements for shade and shelter but doing it in a way that takes into consideration the context; selecting plants that are at home in environment; using some of the indigenous species if possible.

Around Melbourne we had very good rainfall in the second half of the year and a relatively cool spring and start to summer. I recorded the highest rainfall in the 5 years I've been doing it and a friend, who lives a bit south of here, said it was the highest for 8 years for her. More importantly it was useful, penetrating rain. Gardens are looking lush with new growth and large remnant eucalypts around me that have been increasingly stressed over many years of drought, have also picked up. With few hot days spring flowers lasted longer and the overlap in flowering times produced even more colour and interest than in the recent past. Now in early January, summer has not produced its blow torch for more than the odd day.

Long term forecasts, for what they're worth, are for below average temperatures throughout this season. But much hotter weather is inevitable; it generally waits until the children are back at school. In the meanwhile I garden in the early morning or late afternoon, or somewhere where it's shady. I'm doing a lot of pruning to shape and invigorate plants and all the time I'm plotting and planning those sections of the garden needing some reworking when the season breaks - hopefully sometime in autumn.

I'm also planning to screen off more of the garden from neighbouring properties as one development beside us has the go-ahead and there is a proposal in process for subdividing the property in our view line. Now instead of framing the dam in front, which they propose to drain and build on, I will be rushing to establish a screen.