



More than Garden Etiquette

Chris Larkin

From the August 2005 issue of the Study Group Newsletter.

Bill (my husband) told me about a conversation he had at work. He was discussing water: water rates, tanks etc. with a colleague who said that 1,000 litres of water costs 0.75 cents whereas a 1,000 litre tank would cost him \$700, so where was the motivation to buy a tank. We have 2 x 5,000 litre tanks for the house and because we have just experienced the driest Autumn on record we have had to purchase 3,000 litres of water at a cost of \$70, not actually the cost of the water, which is free, but the cost of cartage. We have paid \$70 when a person on mains water would have paid \$2.10 for the same amount of water. So what is the motivation to put in a tank or two if you have the space to - it is hardly likely to be aesthetic or economic. But long before the government applies the carrot or the stick, some people install tanks and recycle their grey water because they are concerned to do what they see as 'the right thing' or the 'socially responsible thing' to do.

I have not long finished reading Tim Flannery's 'The Future Eaters', which although published in 1994 is still relevant today. I think it would be fair to say that Flannery argues that our environment has been shaped more by El Nino than anything else. From observing our own garden specimens we can see that many plants are amazingly adapted to periods of low or no rainfall - bunkering down and waiting it out until the relief of rainfall. Flannery's book is a great read if you have not yet done so; dealing with the 'ecological history of the Australasian lands and people' it is a good reference book to have on the shelves. With uncertain weather he postulates that this fragile land may only be able to sustain 15 million people - a few million less than we have at present. You may or may not agree with some of Flannery's arguments, inferences or conclusions but the book contains many facts and gives a perspective on the effects of human habitation for the last 60,000 years or so.

By this stage you might be asking what have water tanks and Flannery's book got to do with garden design. At the risk of sounding reactionary (or is it just my tendency to philosophise?) my point is that as adults (at voting age and beyond) we have a responsibility to become informed and make informed decisions in all areas of our lives. Is it possible not to know that water is a scarce commodity in most parts of this country because of our unpredictable weather, and knowing this ignore the fact that we need to conserve water? This is an ethical issue and ethics are not often spoken about in relation to gardening - or at least not directly. I don't believe I've ever seen a chapter that tackles it head on although it is implied whenever there is discussion of issues such as water usage, gardens for habitat, not growing weed species, growing Australian plants or only those that are locally indigenous, use of pesticides and so on. The ethics of gardening may be seen as burdensome. In fact ethics full stop might be seen as burdensome if you concentrate on the negatives; the things you should not do, or that you should try not to do or that you should try to do as little as possible. On the other hand e.g. conserving water, not growing weed species, may appear to be a merely a logical and responsible way of behaving given what we know and believe. No-one would argue that human society could easily survive without a set of beliefs that at their core are about how human beings should relate to one another for their mutual health and happiness, and by implication how we should treat this planet - the plants and animals so essential to our own ultimate wellbeing, and indeed survival. Ethics are socially and culturally determined. Some ethics have the sanction of law, water restrictions when they are applied have, but much of it, and most of it concerning the gardener, is open to change according to what we as individuals currently know and believe at any point in time. We know we are experiencing global warming; some people may believe that this is a natural phenomenon, others that it is the result of human activity, yet others may think it is a combination of both these things. If you believe the first then you may start to grow more drought tolerant plants accepting the fact that global warming is a trend, or you may put in a watering system to enable you to continue to grow the plants you want to grow. If you believe that human activity has any part to play then as a consumer and gardener you may believe that you can do more to lessen your own impact by installing a water recycling system and buying a rainwater tank for the garden. What we know and believe underpins our view of the world. How we behave as gardeners, the choices we make in this most deliberate of activities, indicates more than our taste in garden design and garden plants.

I am fond of saying that gardening is not an ethic free zone. (Is any area of human activity ethic free?) As people interested in garden design we can implore gardeners to think of more than their needs and tastes when designing a garden. I don't believe people who grow Australian plants, or predominantly Australian plants, are by virtue of that fact alone necessarily acting more responsibly with respect to their environments; they could be attempting to grow a rainforest in a desert for instance, although I exaggerate of course. Gardening for pleasure, rather than survival, is a largely western, somewhat indulgent past-time so we all need to be careful that self-indulgence doesn't over-ride or blind us to the need to proceed with caution and care for the environment. We need to become as informed and knowledgeable as possible about the bigger picture, about the state of the

planet and our local environments, and to question the impacts of implementing the garden design we would like. I am left wondering if questions of ethics were discussed more directly in relation to garden design whether the current trend for minimalist gardens and box hedges would have a hard time mounting an argument for their 'raison d'etre' - one can but live in hope.