



Garden Design Workshop Weekend

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In July 2009 I had the great pleasure of joining the South Coast branch of the Australian Plants Society at the Eurobodalla Botanic Gardens at Batemans Bay for a Garden Design workshop weekend.. The branch, stretching from Batemans Bay to the Victorian border, takes in some of the most beautiful country in New South Wales.

It was great (as always) to catch up with some of our southern Study Group members there too: Suellen and Brian Harris, Michele and Brian Pymble, Maureen and Norm Webb and Joy Cook. Unfortunately information on the weekend just missed our May newsletter otherwise there would have been a greater Study Group representation.

It was a wonderful weekend, superbly organised by an exceptionally able Committee. The turn up was astounding - what us state Study Group leaders can only dream of! Well over 50 very keen individuals rolled up both days. The day began at 12 noon Saturday - with lunch at the Eurobodalla Gardens café, and afterwards we visited 4 gardens owned by members of the group.

The gardens were quite different and each had its own challenges which the owners wanted addressing. Two of the gardens were back from the coastal frontline on suburban building blocks, one was 5 acres further inland and the other was a frontline coastal garden.

The owners of the first garden had been there for 12 months - they had cleared the debris and now wanted to know what to do about specific areas of the garden - problems such as a steeply sloping block, shade, privacy issues, a huge gum in the small front yard, which got most of the sun, maximising their views etc. Following the Sunday workshop suggestions included, living fences and walls (especially suited to large house/small block scenario) and the use of light airy screening plants to "lift the energy" (a wonderful phrase I thought) of the small spaces available for planting.

The second garden is 6 years old and is in a newly built residential area, high up with sweeping filtered views -with great soil and a wonderful climate its owner's problem was that of overly luxuriant growth. Maintenance of the garden following multiple hip replacements was a consideration needing attention which some raised beds below the front verandah have begun to address. Another question was how to beautify, but keep fairly low maintenance, a large sunny courtyard area viewed from various rooms in the house as well as opening out into the driveway and garage areas. She wanted some imaginative easy care suggestions.

The group had some lovely ideas - break up the spaces of the large courtyard so it is pleasing to the eye, remove some of the pavers to grow grasses or herbs. Install a large waterbowl for the birds (she had previously found an running water feature very water inefficient and did not want to use it) and a small weeping tree for shade and habitat for birds. A partial low barrier at the entrance would add more intrigue by breaking up the large square space.

The third garden was a 13 year old 5 acre garden previously used for spelling horses. Its owners have been there for 7 years and are landscaping using native plants though keeping choice exotics which have withstood the test of time and are in keeping with the house and its history. It was a very rural site. A weatherboard house with a wide verandah built across the sloping block with views of the large dam. I was struck by the success of the *Acacia cognata* 'Green Mist' lining the front path to the central front door - they were huge, their abundant cascading bulk gave the front entrance a wow factor and a gravitas with which the adjoining buxus hedge (a legacy from the previous owners) could not compete. One of the owners complained of poor soil - I saw absolutely nothing in that garden which supported her claim! Ideas to link their various garden areas were asked for and the Sunday suggestions were: garden furniture and ornamentation, hard landscaping such as pathways, blending the bush areas into the gardened areas, more massed planting which reduces the lawn and therefore automatically links the gardened areas. The group also suggested the owners make a focal point of the large dam at the front of the property.

The 4th garden could not have been more different again (an example of the excellent planning that went into the weekend). On a frontline seaside suburban block, previously a holiday house and now, for the last 6 years, a permanent residence. The garden has evolved over the years accommodating enlarging the house and other building practicalities. The soil is 100% beach sand until 10 ft down, when it becomes pumice stone. The freshwater table is approximately 11 ft down. Every single green and living thing on the block has been planted by the owners and we had no cause to doubt this as we drove along the road - the only trees in the street belonged to this garden! The vast majority of the houses in the neighbour hood had no gardens - just a house in the middle of a square or rectangular grassed block of land. The owners said they had initially struggled as new gardeners to establish a garden on this fairly difficult site until they found 2 books which helped them to understand the type of plants which grew

successfully in their conditions - "*Growing Silver and Grey Foliage Plants*" by Roger Spencer and "*Seaside Gardening*" by Marcelle Montfries. This small garden is immensely satisfying. Privacy, protection and a sense of enclosure were ensured with artful plantings. The simplicity of pavers and pebbles matched the seaside feel, keeping it unfussy and practical. Wooden terraces, containing grass trees and taller plantings (which looked wonderful and hid the entertainment areas), provided a place to sit and enjoy the tracery of eucalyptus branches on the sky.

The owners didn't have any specific questions, however the Sunday group suggested the possibilities of a curved rather than a straight path to the front porch and wider paths around the house and through the garden.

The second half of the weekend was on Sunday from 9 - 12. We gathered in the Eurobodalla Botanic Gardens in chairs under a large awning - people quickly deciding to move outside as the day warmed up along with the birdsong! I handed out a summary of Garden Design principles. The workshopers were then asked to split into 4 roughly equal groups and assigned a garden each with half an hour to address its individual problems and provide suggestions.

A spokesperson was assigned from each group and at the end of the session these individuals summarised the recommendations to us all. What a fantastic job they all did - it showed not only a keen interest amongst this group on garden design but also a very knowledgeable base. I am sure all the garden owners as well as the participants were enriched by the experience.

Following this, John Knight the manager of Eurobodalla Botanic Gardens spoke to the group about both the history and the design of the Gardens.

Begun in 1985, they are unique in that they are the only Botanic Gardens in the world to consist of and feature purely indigenous plants. They were created on a part of the buffer zone around the catchment of the main water supply for the area which is at the confluence of 3 local rivers. A lot of the soil on the site had been removed to build the dam and replaced with rocky clay. From the very beginning the gardens have been the result of a collaborative effort with Council, John, his committee and Friends. Events are held regularly in the gardens in order to make the local community aware that this asset exists and to encourage them to use it.

Important considerations from the beginning were - fire mitigation plans, maintenance access, disability access and the importance of recognising that visitors age! A bushfire swept through the gardens in the 1994 and the very attractive Visitors Centre, designed by local architect Stuart Whitelaw, with its pull down shutters and rules governing its surrounding plantings (such as, height restrictions, "prune and keep pruning", and limiting plantings of oil -full plants) reflect the awareness of the ever present possibility of bush fires.

The site has temperatures ranging from -5 to +45 °C and it is difficult but necessary to grow some coastal specimens. In order to reflect the full palette of plants that locals can grow in their gardens. Each volunteer / Friend adopts a garden bed or propagates or does non horticultural but equally as important maintenance duties (all under John's watchful eye) and this has made management much easier. Friends also fundraise for the garden, helped considerably by their extensive nursery on site.

John has very definite ideas about the function and design of paths in a large public garden. The main paths were to be wide - wider than normal as people like to walk together 2 or 3 abreast, discussing their journey as they go. He wants to encourage people to explore the bush (rather than go to the beach - an option in this geographically blessed part of the world) but not feel threatened - hence the wide paths which give a feeling of security. For the more adventurous there are secondary, smaller, unmade paths which meander deeper into the bush.

The Arboretum area (established in 2003, also called the Eucalypt and Angophora Lawn) consists of clean trunked (therefore fire resistant) species - *Angophora costata*, *Eucalyptus rubida*, *E. pilularis* (only bark is at the bottom) and *E. maculata*. This is a very restful area, the trunks like so many totems, inviting children to play amongst the trunks whilst remaining visible to their parents; some seats are flanked by eucalypts planted closely on either side and then encircling the seat - one feels securely protected by some strong and attractive friends!

Sadly there wasn't time to explore the remaining 3 areas, consisting of Water Area (brings birds animals and insects - a tree with a bird is better than a tree!); the Lake and Coastal Dune Complex Garden and the Open Grassland areas.

These gardens are a testament to the knowledge, hard work, dedicated community spirit, foresight and optimism of John and his band of volunteers and Friends - it must be the envy of many Botanic Gardens in Australia.

Some plants that caught my eye:

- *Eucalyptus cypellocarpa* - mountain grey gum, beautiful bark
- *Correa lawrenceana*
- *Isotoma axillaris* - prostrate, pale mauve starry flowers
- *Nematolepis squamea* (was *Phebalium squameum*) or satinwood, tall shrub.
- *Pomaderris aspera*
- *Grevillea mucromulata* x *G. baueri*
- *Baeckea imbricata* (wonderful hedge)
- *Aotus ericoides* (spiky form, abundant yellow flowers) - one of the Fabaceae family.