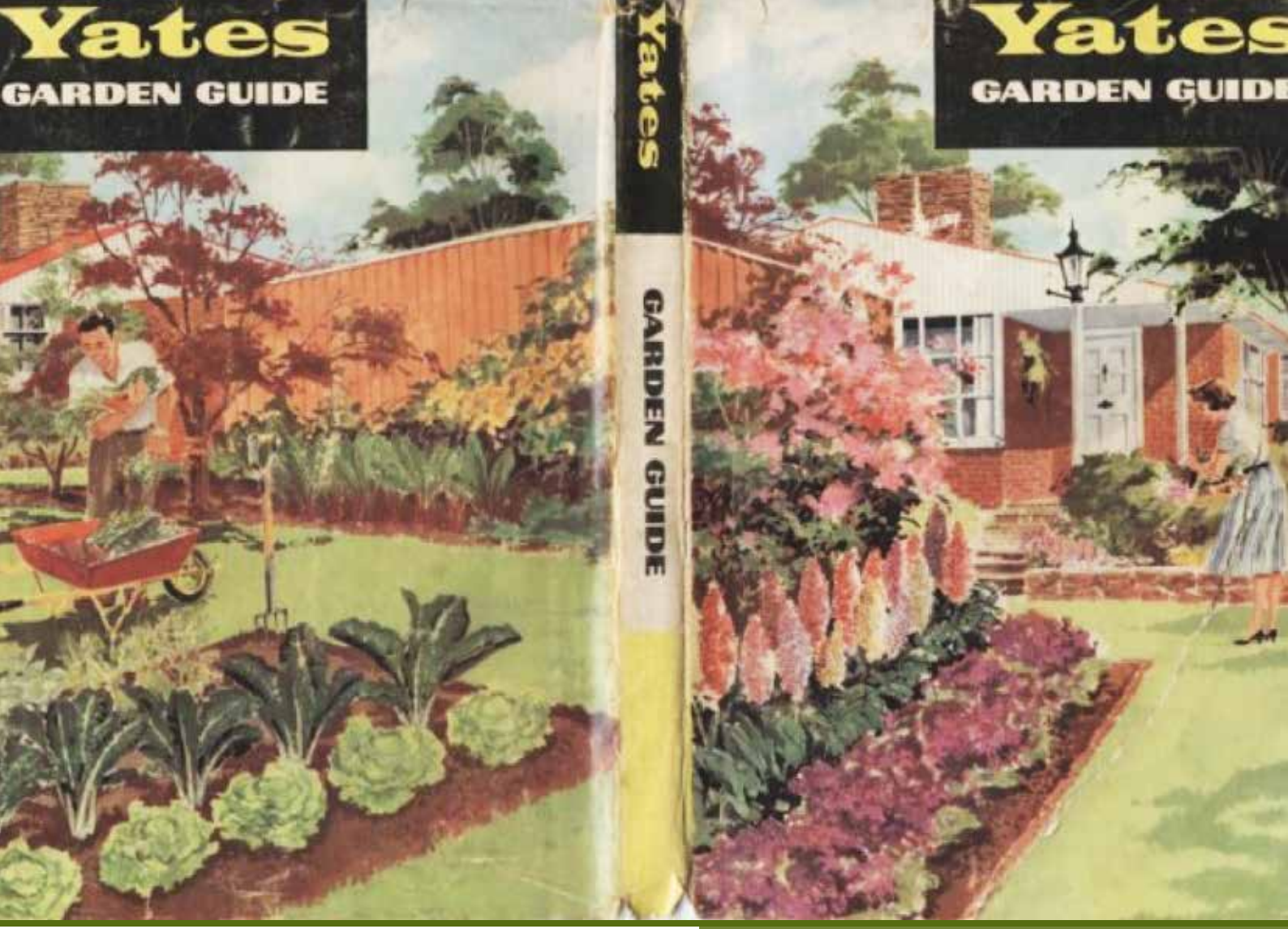
vol. 34, no. 4, April 2023

Australian Garden HISTORY

A Noah's Ark Project
The 1960s garden
Remarkable trees



The dust jacket of a 1960s issue of *Yates Garden Guide* shows the gender designation – Dad in the back with veggies; Mum in front tending flower beds – considered the norm in the early part of the decade

Image courtesy Yates

Judy Horton

The 1960s garden in Australia

A decade of change

The 1960s was a decade of change, both in Australia and overseas. I know, because I was there and yes, I do remember it. In Australia we were coming out of our post-colonial state of mind and our post-war acceptance of English and American leadership.

It wasn't a straightforward departure. There were many arguments, protests and regretful backslidings. But Prime Minister Menzies' resignation in 1966 seems, in retrospect, to have marked a turning point. Australia was set on a new course. Clothing changed (remember the miniskirts?), lifestyles changed, workplaces changed, the ethnicity of the population was irrevocably altered by waves of migration and, in 1967 we even finally recognised our Indigenous people as citizens. Cities expanded to the outer suburbs, almost every family had a car and consumerism began to be a way of life. We relished our rising affluence. Change was everywhere, including in our homes and gardens.

Old and new plants

In the early years of the 1960s flowers reigned supreme. Annual displays in regimented beds were planned with meticulous care. Feature species such as well-grown dahlias, roses and chrysanthemums were entered into regularly held flower and garden shows. Conifers – especially miniature, bookleaf or coloured – were popular. Roses were mostly tall, upright hybrid teas with

tight, firm buds on upright stems, such as 'Queen Elizabeth' and 'Peace'. The heyday of soft, fluffy floribunda-stye roses was still far off in the future.

In 1964 the Federation of Australian Nurserymen's Association awarded gold medals to two 'new' plants: Swanes golden pencil pine (*Cupressus sempervirens*) from Swanes Nursery, NSW and *Pieris japonica* 'Chandlerii' from Bert Chandler in Victoria. These, like most other new plants, were chance discoveries rather than the result of deliberate breeding programs. Legislation for Australian plant variety rights, now plant breeder's rights, that would ensure a return to the grower was not introduced until 1987, so there was little incentive to devote resources to breeding ornamental varieties.

However, one enthusiastic plant breeder, George Taylor, had been so inspired by the great American plant breeder, Luther Burbank, he named his Burbank Nurseries after his hero. In the 1960s George embarked on an ambitious breeding program for the then very trendy evergreen azaleas. 'Silver Anniversary', one of his most successful and long-lasting releases, is still widely sold.

The 1960s was also the decade when we embraced the bush garden. Betty Maloney and Jean Walker's 1966 book *Designing Australian Bush Gardens* introduced the hitherto unknown concept of a planned native landscape. Sisters Joan and Eileen Bradley inspired interest in preserving and encouraging the surviving bush by devising a weed control program that allowed the bush plants to once again take over. Their first book in 1967, *Weeds and Their Control*, was updated to the more positively named *Bush Regeneration* in 1971. As Joan said in the later book: 'This not a book about killing weeds. It is a book about growing native plants…'

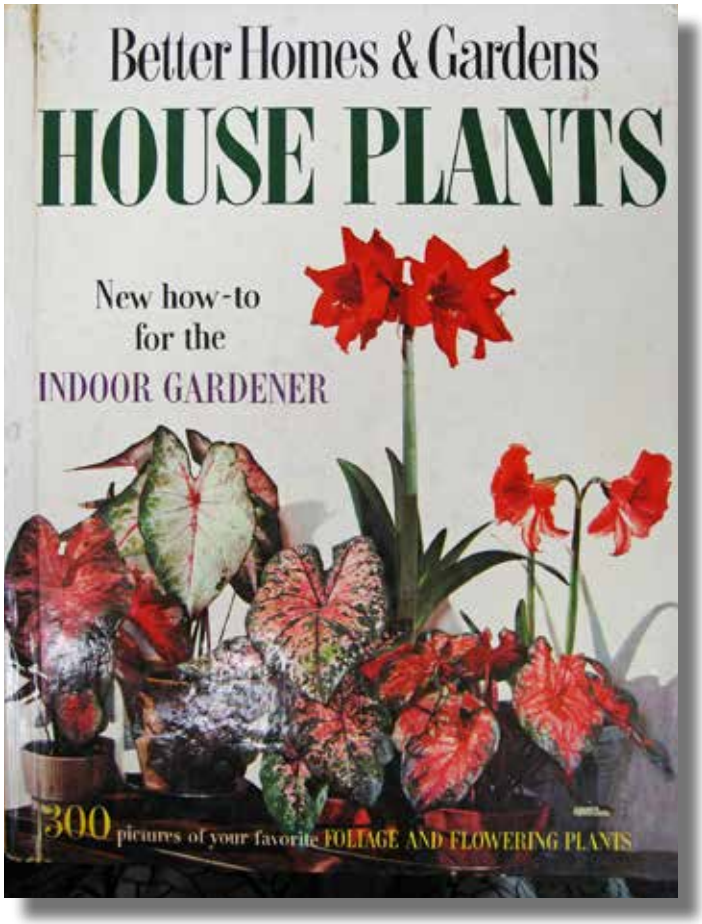
Some native plant introductions had near universal appeal for everyday suburban gardeners. Since the 1940s David Gordon had been collecting and growing Australian native plants in what was to become the Myall Park Botanic Garden at Glenmorgan in Queensland. The Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) website describes how '[i]n the 1960s [Gordon] planted a group of grevilleas believing they would hybridise. He was rewarded with a red-flowering grevillea that he named after his eldest daughter Robyn shortly before illness claimed her life. Subsequently *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon' and *Grevillea* 'Sandra Gordon' were both awarded the title of 'bestselling Australian shrub'. The ANBG concludes that the almost continuously blooming *G.* 'Robyn Gordon' persuaded the average gardener to include native plants in their home gardens and public parks. Canberra's ANBG was first opened to the public in the early 1960s, thereby encouraging a national focus on Australian plants. In 1965 the State Botanic Garden was officially opened in Kings Park,

Nina Crone writing fund recipient, Jasmine Rhodes, wrote about the emergence of the bush garden in *AGH* Vol. 32 No. 2 October 2020

https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/product/agh-vol-32-no-2-october-2020/

To find out more about the fund and how to donate, go to: **https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/funding/nina-crone-writing-fund/**

Open garden opportunity in Brisbane, c. 1960, JE Hardie, State Library of Queensland



Left *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon' became a popular choice for suburban gardens, photo Judy Horton

Right *Better Homes & Gardens* cover, photographer Kim Kruse who commented I got this fab book at the recent Alachua County Friends of the Library book sale...It was also cool to see that some gardening trends that I thought were new had actually been around for years! Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Perth, which sits in an eco-region that is one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. Its focus was on the conservation of Western Australia's flora.

In 1957 garden writer and native plant enthusiast Arthur Swaby organised a well-attended initial meeting in Melbourne to establish the Society for Growing Australian Plants (now nationally known as the Australian Native Plants Society). Societies were subsequently set up in other states with their first federal conference held in Canberra in 1962.

The 1960s and 1970s have been described as a golden era for indoor plants. As well as decorating the interior of domestic dwellings, owners of many businesses were prepared to pay indoor plant rental companies to decorate and maintain displays in commercial buildings. Philodendrons, rubber trees, umbrella trees and African violets were some of the varieties most in demand.

New approaches to gardening

The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 led to a complete mindset change regarding the use of chemicals and their effects on the environment. The book is often regarded as the catalyst for the modern environmental movement and is thought to have, for the first time, made us aware that human activity could profoundly affect our natural surroundings.

Science was helping gardeners in many ways. When Dr Kenneth Baker from the University of California (UC) came to Australia in 1961 to work at Adelaide's Waite Institute, he outlined the UC's revolutionary concept of soil-free potting mixes. Before this, plant growers used to dig soil and mix it with manure and other additives to make potting mixes. Understandably the results were hit and miss, and the production process was highly destructive to the environment.

Scientifically based advances in plant propagation were made in the 1960s. Glasshouse misting systems and hormone treatment to induce root formation were introduced into production practices, vastly improving strike rates. Tissue culture, propagation from tiny plant pieces under sterile conditions, was also first introduced in Australia in the early 1960s. Widely practised these days, tissue culture has enabled propagation on a much broader scale and has allowed international distribution of plant material.

In a 1962 issue of the *Seed & Nursery Trader*, seedling growers Newports advertised box-grown seedlings that didn't need to be transferred before sale. Not long afterwards foil punnets were introduced and soon rigid plastic punnets took over. Plastic pots in all sizes replaced the pre-used kerosene and fruit tins that were the standard

Above Empty kerosene tins used as plant containers at Swane's Nursery, Ermington NSW c.1960, photo Ken Turnidge

Left Tree potting with Miss Swane, 31 March 1966, photo David Cumming, part of AC ACP Magazines Ltd. photographic archive including Pix magazine negatives, 1930s–1980s courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

plant containers at the time. Mind you, at least the tins would break down eventually, unlike our contemporary plastic pots that last for years.

The arrival of modern marketing

Flemings Nurseries in Victoria were pioneers in the production of catalogues filled with useful information that were, most importantly, illustrated with coloured photographs. Flemings was also a leader in recognising that coloured labels were invaluable selling tools.

Gardening magazines evolved from leaflets filled with earnest growing advice to glossy productions that inspired gardeners to design their own landscapes in line with the latest trends. They introduced new concepts such as curved lawns, pebble gardens and outdoor lighting. Genial and knowledgeable horticulturists such as Kevin Heinze and Allan Seale entered homes via radio or the newish medium of television and attracted a retinue of loyal followers.

As we became more car-minded, plant nurseries evolved into retail destinations. The proprietors of modern 1960s garden

The Mirrabooka house was designed to preserve the distant views and to blend seamlessly with the garden, photo Michelle Reid

centres often weren't horticulturists and had not grown the plants they sold. Their skills were in merchandising, marketing, display, sales and professional business practices. Plenty of parking, eye-catching displays at the entrance and children's playgrounds were staples. Later came cafes, gardening lessons, home decorations, gift wrapping and much more.

Lifestyle and landscape changes

As the 1960s progressed many social changes became evident. Women moved resolutely into the workforce, meaning that family units had less time for gardening. Outdoor entertaining spaces became *de rigueur* for new houses, with patios and barbecue areas and, in affluent suburbs, swimming pools. Functional areas for clotheslines and garbage bins were hidden.

'New Australians', post-war migrants, had bought homes and were making their stamp. In many older suburbs traditional English-style red brick houses became surrounded by edible plants such as olives, grape vines, pomegranates and beds of vegetables. Second generationers grumbled that 'Australians don't have veggies in their front yards' but their complaints were mostly unheeded.

A new breed of modernist architects came to prominence, largely inspired by the works of the recently deceased Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin. Too many to name, but in Australia Harry Seidler and Robin Boyd are two of the most cited of these 'mid-century moderns' who believed in blending the house with its natural environment rather than the earlier idea of beating the Australian landscape into English-style submission.

Another mid-century modernist was Bruce Rickard. I recently visited the privately owned, Bruce Rickard-designed *Mirrabooka* in Sydney's north-western outer suburbs. As well as being a Chapter Councillor with the Australian Institute of Architects, Rickard was a founding member of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. In 1961 architect Rickard and owners John and Judy Reid collaborated to ensure that *Mirrabooka* nestled comfortably into its surroundings while retaining most of the distant views. Keen gardeners, the Reids planted a now well-established arboretum (including many rare trees) throughout the garden, leading the couple to become members of the International Dendrology Society and many other horticultural societies. In 2020 the *Mirrabooka* house and garden combination was listed on the NSW State Heritage Register, thereby recognising one of the finest examples of house and garden marriage produced during that jumbled melange of change in the 1960s.

Judy Horton is a Sydney-based horticulturist who worked for many years at Yates where she was responsible for updating six editions of the best-selling *Yates Garden Guide*. She writes regularly for *Gardening Australia* magazine and leads tours for Botanica World Discoveries.