

The story behind the book

***Burnley Gardens: their Design and the People who loved them* isn't a conventional history book. It's an "interactive, immersive book". Author Michèle Adler talks about her inspiration and her award-winning book about the gardens and history of Burnley School of Horticulture in Melbourne, which is part of the University of Melbourne.**

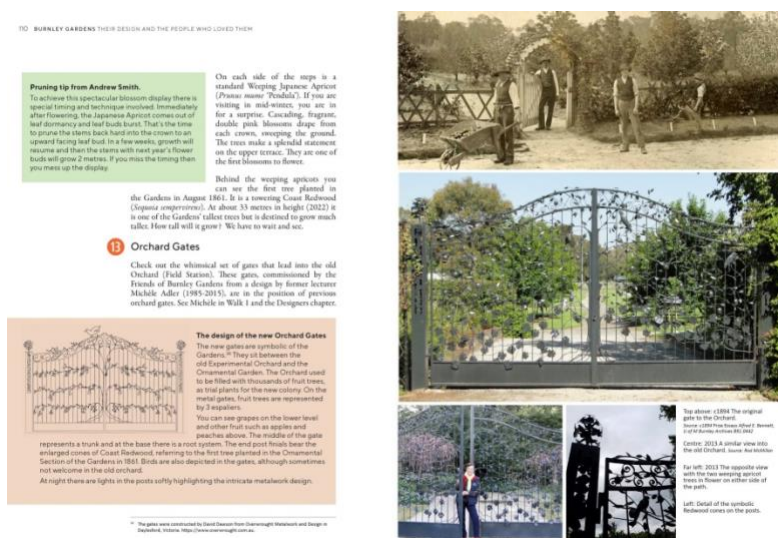
As a Lecturer in Horticulture at Burnley I took the students on garden walks to learn their lists of plants. It made such a difference to see the plants 'in situ'. Many know that Burnley Gardens is one of the oldest in the state and so every class, sun or rain, day or night, we walked spotting plants, marvelling at the size and longevity of the big old trees and the many flowers in season. The Gardens were a formative part of understanding the natural world around us.

It seemed appropriate to treat my envisaged *Burnley Book* as a series of garden walks, but including not only plants but also the history, the designers of various spaces, the reasons for design choices, and the stories. You 'walk with me', book in hand to discover so much more.



2024 Former graduate Michael Hatton, walking with the book in hand.

And there is flexibility built into the book. The coloured break-out boxes in the text allow the reader to follow various interests along the way. If design is your focus then follow the tan boxes; if People are your fancy then follow the purple boxes; if it is history then the blue boxes can lead you, and so on.



Double page spread showing the design of the gates.

The book covers the period from the beginning of the Gardens, 17 December 1860, until the present. Because of this I needed to do a lot of background reading and research. All up, it took me four years to write and edit. Then another two years until publication.

I *became* the Gardens; tracking down descendants of the founders, discovering plans, uncovering events, researching the wealth of information held in the Burnley Archives, navigating the Public Records Office (oh dear!), discussing complications and difficulties with other historians, interpreting maps, tracking down relatives of the designers, travelling to locations to 'feel' and understand our history, and to make sense of more than 160 years of the evolution of our wonderful Gardens. There were so many layers.

Finding out about people and events in the early years was difficult. Old photographs of the Gardens often don't bear dates or the names of people in them. It was painstaking but all exciting. Every little piece of the jigsaw in turn combined to make the big picture.

I discovered a lot of conflicting information that was at odds with some of our commonly held beliefs. Verifying and corroborating events, dates and people were all important for me so that I could re-write some of the errors and provide accurate information. That's why I have lots of footnotes so that future readers can track down where I found the information (the graphic designer hated me because I wanted the footnotes on each page for easy reference! and not at the back of the book).

For example:

- The land set aside for the Gardens was gazetted in December 1860. So, in my view the Gardens began in 1860. They were *officially* opened in 1863 but work had begun much earlier. Clearing the site started in January 1861. The first plantings were in the spring of 1861. Using newspaper reports, I have dated the planting of the first tree, *Sequoia sempervirens*, to August 1861 (not 1863 as was commonly but incorrectly reported).
- The siting of the Gardens in the original Alfred Lynch design is not where it ended up. I thank the graphic designer for his astute observation on this point.
- The exact location of the old Pavilion (no longer present) was established by Jane Wilson (Burnley Archivist) and I. We used old maps and combined information to place it; a composite map appears in the book (pages 188 -189).
- The date of the Rockery that Hilda Kirkhope designed is now confirmed as 1934.

I felt that pictures and drawings were important. I tracked down:

- Lovely old plans of the former Principal's house in the Public Records Office. Those plans are in the book.
- Images of people long passed, because I wanted them to be 'real people' not just names on a page. So you'll see pictures of the members of the Horticultural Society of Victoria Committee of 1860, who were the visionary men (all of them men) who founded the Experimental Gardens (as they were known back then).
- For months (if not years!) I tried to find an image of founder orchardist T C Cole. Finally, I discovered that he was an ancestor of a good friend of mine. I wish that I'd found that out sooner!
- A rare image of Kath Deery (who designed the Native Garden) provided by her daughter. Apparently, Kath hated having her photograph taken. That image allowed me to confirm the identity of Kath in a photograph in the Archives (see page 202). She was wearing her favourite jumper in both images. Same jumper, same woman!

- The images of people/designers who worked at Burnley are from their time there. For example you'll see a young John Patrick, just as if you were sitting in a lecture with him in the 1980s.
- Despite a considerable hunt, I'm still looking for an image of Alfred Kursteiner, the designer of the Pavilion. He was a well-known Melbourne architect who was active for 40 years. Many of his buildings are Heritage Listed – but where is his own image? It's somewhere.
- Why the Gardens were named Burnley Gardens. The name was something I had never questioned previously, but where did it come from? You'll have to read the book to find out.

My book takes you on a journey that I too have been on; a journey that helps to better understand the significance of Burnley Gardens, not just to Melbourne and Victoria. They have been influential in the lives of so many people. Writing the book really drove the preservation message home to me. Through the book I hope that visitors will appreciate them better too. The Gardens are listed on the Victorian Heritage Register.

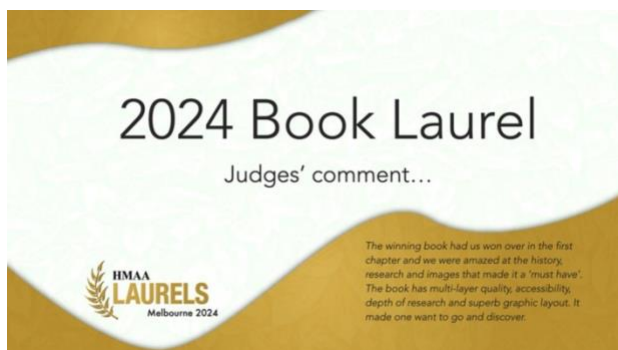
There have been so many contributors to the Gardens. What you see today is the work and inspiration of hundreds; from the many students who have worked in them as part of their training, to the gardeners who have cared for them, the people who designed them, the staff who steered them, the Friends of Burnley Gardens who have supported them physically and financially, and to the University of Melbourne who continue to protect them. They all deserve a big thank you.

Burnley Gardens is not 'just' a garden, they didn't just happen. They have been cleverly shaped and designed, often with scarce resources. Much has been done with voluntary labour. People who have loved them have remained attached to them for decades because the Gardens offer 'je ne sais quoi', something intangible, something entrancing.

When you get to know Burnley Gardens better, understand their circumstances, faults, foibles and flamboyance, then you appreciate them more.

I wonder what Alfred Lynch (the first designer of the Gardens) would think now; some of his original design is still there. Or William Phillips, the gardener who first tended the land and lived on site in the Curator's cottage? I like to think that their pioneering work has been appreciated and their dream has been fulfilled.

Find out more



Burnley Gardens received the 2024 Book Laurel from the Horticultural Media Association Australia. The book will be officially launched in October. Michèle is leading walks in Burnley Gardens on Sunday May 26 to celebrate BGANZ Botanic Gardens Day, which will be marked with an Open Day at Burnley Gardens, 500 Yarra Boulevard, Burnley from 10.30am to 3.30pm. Copies of the book will also be for sale during the Open Day. To join Michèle Adler's free walk, visit trybookings (www.trybooking.com/CRGSA).