

Australian Garden HISTORY

vol. 32, no. 1, July 2020

Going virtual during COVID-19
After the bushfires





Liz Bennetto

Geelong Botanic Gardens: a walk through three centuries

Hitchcock Fountain,
photo Friends
of the Geelong
Botanic Gardens

Eastern Hill, on the edge of Corio Bay, was set aside in 1851 as the location for Geelong's botanic garden. Although it had spectacular views over the bay, it was exposed to harsh winds and had no available fresh water. The Wadawurrung people had cared for this land for 60,000 years, and it had provided food, medicine, tools and clothing. Near the Gardens, middens provide evidence of a diet rich in plants, seafood and land animals.

A survey undertaken in 1838 described the land as 'lightly wooded [with] gum and wattle'. However, neighbouring lime kilns consumed much of the available timber, and by 1851 there was little vegetation.

Nineteenth century: establishment 1851

Geelong Botanic Gardens is the fourth oldest botanic garden in Australia, after Sydney, Hobart and Melbourne. A committee of management was appointed in 1852 and the nursery site was selected, with paths laid out and a curator's cottage built before the arrival of Daniel Bunce, in 1857.

Daniel Bunce had spent some time in Hobart as a nurseryman and amateur botanist. He was very interested in the plants and people of Australia, having studied the Aboriginal languages and accompanying Leichhardt on one expedition, investigating plants and collecting seed. Bunce became a defender of the Aboriginal people at a time when many Europeans considered them to be ignorant savages.

As the first curator, Bunce planted and developed Eastern Hill as an extensive park to be surrounded by windbreaks, with shrubberies planted along the carriageways.

A conservatory was constructed (1859), followed by a 'pit glasshouse' (1860) and an aviary (1864). In 1862, Bunce established a small lake, where he installed black swans and ducks.

The 1860 *Catalogue of plants under cultivation in Geelong Botanic Gardens* listed more than 2000 species, including Australian native plants, which Bunce shared with other botanic gardens.

An article in Geelong's *Advertiser* in December 1863, reported:

To those who have not paid our Botanical Gardens a visit ... we say go at once. A rare treat is in store there for the most phlegmatic of mortals. What with the hum of bees, the chirping of small birds, the clear full notes of the magpies, the gorgeous panorama of varied hues and the delightful perfumes ... [it] seems to be a terrestrial paradise ... where nought but happiness ... (barring the mosquitoes, by-the-by) may be found.

Many of Geelong's prized heritage trees were planted during this period, notably, the magnificent *Ginkgo biloba*, *Jubaea chilensis*, *Fagus sylvatica purpurea*, *Quillaja saponaria* and *Corymbia maculata*. More than fifty trees in Geelong Botanic Gardens and Eastern Park have been listed on the National Trust Significant Tree Register.

Changes occurred when John Raddenberry (1872–1896) replaced many eucalypts with English trees and added new and rare species to the collection. He added garden structures: a large octagonal picnic rotunda, overlooking the beach; a smaller rotunda (still standing); and a thatched summerhouse, which provided 'private' access to the ladies' toilet. A replica of the summerhouse can be seen today.

Raddenberry's major addition was an enormous timber lattice fernery, with a pond, which he surrounded with a rockery of ferns and foliage plants. The fernery was reputed to hold the largest collection of ferns in the Southern Hemisphere. In this period of 'fern mania', Raddenberry's 1888 collection of herbarium specimens, 'The Fern Book', was compiled. Rediscovered in the ceiling of the Gardens' office, it is currently under restoration at Geelong Heritage Centre.

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897) was marked by the planting of an imposing avenue of *Ulmus minor 'variegata'* along the carriageway that led to the nineteenth-century entrance. Some of these unusual trees remain today.



Top Daniel Bunce, photo Trove

Bottom Ginkgo tree, photo Friends of the Geelong Botanic Gardens

Twentieth century: fountains, buildings, bequests, extensions

The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of reduced budgets and limited development for the Gardens. Market Square was becoming an important shopping centre, so in 1912 its fountains were relocated to the Gardens. At the same time, the Queen Victoria statue, also in Market Square, was moved to Eastern Park. The Customs House (1838), one of the oldest buildings in Victoria, originally from the waterfront, had been moved to the city in 1854, where it became the Telegraph Office. By 1889, it too had been moved to the Gardens. The Cabman's Shelter (1905) came to Eastern Park from its original site in the city in 1929. In 1997, a grant was obtained for its restoration.

The period between 1945 and 1960 saw the demolition of the old fernery, which was falling into disrepair. By 1960, the Gardens had nearly doubled in size, with extensions to the south and west. The rose gardens were established, the A.L. Walter Conservatory was constructed, and new gates were donated by a grateful Danish migrant.

The sculptures of the Japanese cranes that had previously graced the driveway of the historic property, St Albans Homestead (1873), and more recently Eastern Beach, were moved into the Gardens. The bequest of the Florence E. Clarke Geranium Conservatory in 1972 saw increased interest in the geranium and pelargonium collections.

The Friends

In 1985, after a particularly dry summer, with voluntary hand-watering of the Gardens, the Friends of Geelong Botanic Gardens was formed. The Friends worked to improve the facilities, seeking finance for the construction and staffing of a teahouse. The rose gardens were redeveloped with the assistance of the Heritage Rose Society, and a dazzling perennial border was developed. A group of trained guides and a nursery to support the Gardens were also established at this time.

As strong advocates for Geelong Botanic Gardens, the Friends recognised the need for public awareness of its scientific, educational, recreational and conservation functions. Programs were planned, activities arranged, and funds were raised from such events as the popular summer program, 'Music in the Gardens', regular botanic art classes, special talks and trips.

The Friends lobbied for renewed Council attention to the Gardens, culminating in an evaluation and master plan for conservation and development, undertaken by Chris Dance Land



Design and jointly funded by the Friends and the City in 1995. The main recommendations of the study were to:

- open up the Gardens towards the city and Corio Bay, incorporating plants appropriate for the environment
- redevelop 'Bunce's Lake', collecting the precious stormwater, which had previously drained into the bay
- reconnect with Eastern Park's history
- promote education, conservation and ecology.

An advisory committee, which included two representatives of the Friends, advanced the implementation of the master plan. The City's Department of Environment and Recreation appointed John Arnott as the new curator to lead work on the master plan, with Chris Dance as design consultant.

Twenty-first century: new ideas and a new look

Work on the 21st Century Garden began in 2000 and proceeded swiftly with the enthusiastic involvement of the entire Gardens' team. The basic principles of the design were to open up the Gardens to the city and the waterfront and to promote plants adapted to drought conditions. Indigenous plants and local materials were to



be featured. The main planting themes were designed to focus on regional relevance, plant adaptation and plant evolution.

The opening of the 21st Century Garden in September 2002 created huge interest – and some controversy – with both locals and visitors. It was unlike the traditional European botanic garden and some people were shocked by the stark landscaping and the absence of lush green lawns, but it was eye-catching and innovative. The 21st Century Garden soon became an important tourist attraction in the Geelong area.

Renewing Eastern Park

Annette Zealley arrived as the new Director in 2007, and work continued on stage two of the master plan, with an increased focus on Eastern Park. Senescent trees were replaced, and original avenues of the park restored.

A new stormwater-harvesting facility enhanced the park, as well as supplying water for the Gardens and other plantings in the city. On the site of Bunce's lake, there is now an attractive expanse of reclaimed water, edged with indigenous plants and enjoyed by water birds.

With help from the Friends, grants were obtained for the rejuvenation of the 1880s rotunda and the 'ladies' kiosk'. In 2019, the reconstructed



Walter Conservatory was opened, and a new visitor facility built for the many groups who use the Gardens. In 2019, the Friends of Geelong Botanic Gardens received a Heritage Victoria award for their outstanding support of the Gardens.

A walk through three centuries

Visitors to Geelong Botanic Gardens today approach the gates through a modern regional grassland drive. Unique metal gates and sculptures mark the entry to the 21st Century Garden, created around a basin of granitic sand and local rocks. Through the Hansen Gates is the twentieth-century garden, with its sweeping lawns, feature trees, the conservatory, the teahouse and the new visitor facility.

Iconic urns and a fountain mark the entry to the original nineteenth-century garden, where colourful beds of flowers, magnificent heritage trees and interesting historic buildings can be seen. A visit to Geelong Botanic Gardens is certainly a rewarding trip back into the past!

Left Ladies Kiosk, photo Friends of the Geelong Botanic Gardens

Right 21st Century Garden, photo Friends of the Geelong Botanic Gardens

For information about visiting the Gardens, guided walks and other Friends' activities, visit the website: www.friendsgbg.org.au

Liz Bennetto is a voluntary guide at Geelong Botanic Gardens.

