

Our Golden Dream

Welcome to the Emu Valley Rhododendron Garden – **created, managed and now owned by volunteers.**

The Emu Valley Rhododendron Garden as it is today - a haven, a refuge, an adventure land, a woodland delight, a kaleidoscope of colour in spring and again in autumn, a cool green oasis in summer, a bird watcher's delight, brisk exercise for the heart and lungs, solace for the soul, a travelogue, a learning experience – so many different and varied experiences in one small garden.

If asked to give a brief summary of how we came to be, it would have to be the story of PEOPLE. From the small band in the beginning it has snowballed, over the years, to a multitude of enthusiastic people doing extraordinary things with a generosity and interest that has been so overwhelming.

In 1977, members of the newly formed Rhododendron Society, in northwest Tasmania, started looking around for a block of land suitable to start a new garden.

Fortunately, at the time, a recently retired farmer and member just happened to have an area of land that the local council deemed unsuitable for subdivision. The 11 hectares (30 acres) was offered to the Society on a lease for 99 years at a peppercorn rent.

The chosen site formed an amphitheatre facing east and looking down towards the Emu River. The area had been logged in the late 1960s and the new growth of eucalypts, acacias, under story plants and blackberries had completely taken over. The steepness of the land meant that it was never farmed.

Walking into this untamed valley the intrepid members were undaunted by the enormity of the task in front of them but were able to visualize the potential of this becoming a garden. The more they explored the more the vision expanded itself and ideas started to flow.

They found a reasonably flat area at the base of the escarpment with many natural, free flowing springs that could lead to lakes being formed and the undulating topography could showcase a display of rhododendron plants.

Our benign climate and reliable rainfall would enable us to grow, in the open, rhododendrons from the Himalayas to New Guinea, including many that are endangered in the wild.

The object of building this garden was to display species and hybrid rhododendrons in a woodland setting and also to create a gene pool of available material for scientific research and hybridizing.

In 1981, The Australian Rhododendron Society National Council members were invited to inspect the site and to plant our first rhododendron called "Golden Dream"- for that is just what it was – a dream that one day this garden would become a reality.

So the work began. Local farmer members got enthused and helped with tractors to clear the arable areas of land. In the heavily timbered areas members of the local cricket club came in to fell trees and take away the firewood to be given to needy families.

Planning continued and as the area became cleared it was decided to plant hybrids in the centre section with species planted around the perimeter as they grow geographically in the Northern Hemisphere. Each of the countries being planted out with rhododendrons, conifers, deciduous trees and other garden worthy plants endemic to them making a series of mini botanical gardens. This has proved to be a winning combination.

The first major construction was a large lake to collect the water from two free flowing springs, one each side of an area of solid ground. This solid ground was used to construct the lake wall. Early plantings became focused around this first water feature with a bank of fairly mature hardy hybrids planted on the eastern side of the lake and hybrid deciduous azaleas lending colour and perfume on the western side amongst existing tree ferns, some of which being over five meters in height.

Building service roads was the next major construction. This further opened up areas towards our boundary lines and enabled us to combat the wildlife— namely wallabies, rabbits, hares, possums and wombats. They had become a problem amongst our new plants, and so with the help of a group of unemployed people, the whole garden was fenced.

Pathways were established following contour lines, for easy walking, and extending to the foot of the escarpment to the west. Along these pathways more planting took place with a large collection of big leaf rhododendron hybrids nestled beside the tree ferns.

We have been blessed with our members many of whom have had so much to contribute. For example, one such member came to a meeting and said “I don’t know much about rhododendrons but as a retired cabinet maker/builder I may be able to help” He and our other volunteer carpenters have built most of our buildings, - another took one look at our rock walls and said “I think I can do that” – he is still with us and still building those walls.

Thursdays became working bee days – where members were happy to work in the nursery, in the garden planting, weeding or opening up new areas. Lunchtime on Thursday becomes a bit of a social event when all come in from the far corners of the garden and you get to catch up with one another. Great camaraderie and many decisions have been made at these gatherings.

In 1988 – Australia’s bicentennial year- we were fortunate to receive funding from the Federal and State governments which enabled us to build the ground floor of our main building, situated above and overlooking the main lake. On the completion of these works we were officially opened by the Tasmanian Governor of the day. The opening prompted a further influx of people wishing to join in and become members and a very valuable addition they became – each having differing talents to contribute to expand our enterprise.

Apart from workers in the garden we have had a remarkable number of people to work with us collecting entrance fees and many other ways for making money to help in our development. One such lady, a pillar in our local area, had a tremendous talent for collecting money for us in the various raffles we held. On her death we found she had left us a considerable amount of money sufficient to build tearooms on our slab in her honour.

The garden became too valuable to be left unattended and it was decided to find a caretaker. This caretaker would need a home and it so happened that a hundred kilometers or so away, a mining company were relocating some of the company housing. Approaches were made to the management and one of these houses was procured. Our enterprising infrastructure members first built the footings on the chosen site to place this building then proceeded to the mine township site and with chain saws split the house in two – had it loaded on to two trucks and delivered to Emu Valley – all for the “usual price”.

Our first caretaker was an electrician, and at this time we were building our nursery complex, and his help was greatly appreciated.

One of the main pathways led down through the area where we had decided to plant our Vireya collection down to the lake. On the other side was a level area near where we planted our very first rhododendron - here we had decided to build our main gazebo. A local service club became involved at this time building the foundations for this gazebo. Our carpenters built the structure and the roof was eucalypt shingles. These came from a patch of trees on a member's property nearby. Off we all went complete with a picnic lunch. We enlisted the help of an elderly shingle splitter who demonstrated how it was done – most of our members became involved – ladies included! At the end of the day we had sufficient shingles split to cover the roof.

To access this gazebo on foot we needed a bridge across one end of the main lake. Once a design was settled upon we looked for sponsorship. Our President asked his daughter, who just happened to be working for a large company in Japan, if they would agree to help sponsor the bridge. They agreed and their sponsorship enabled us to purchase the steel for the structure. A member who worked for an engineering firm asked his boss would he sponsor building the bridge – his answer was “I will give you two men and a week and after that I will start charging” – needless to say, at the end of the week the bridge was completed, loaded onto a log truck and delivered to the garden – the chap who owned the log truck knew of a truck mounted flying fox so that was set up near the main gazebo and cables laid out up to a tree beyond where the bridge was – the front edge of the bridge was connected to the flying fox the other end had a set of wheels mounted and down through the trees it went and landed perfectly on the foundations. Our carpenters moved in and fastened the deck and another piece of infrastructure was in place.

It was around this time that a problem arose with our lease. Our landlord's rates kept going up and his insurance company was not happy with members wandering the garden without adequate insurance. Finance was tight but we made a momentous decision to purchase the property outright and a wise member stated we ought to take out debentures. This was duly done and the garden was paid for and all debentures were repaid over the next few years with some electing to donate instead of being reimbursed. WOW – we, the members, now OWNED the garden.

Planting continued at a great pace. A generous donation from the National Rhododendron Ladies Committee, and other donations from among our members meant we could purchase a large number of plants.

More areas were cleared and another walking track around the side of the hill was created. This track was to continue around the garden and bisected most of the countries where species grow.

A few of our members had already been growing species rhododendrons and some of these were to start the collections in Japan, North America, Yunnan, Northern India and Burma. Conifers and deciduous trees also started to appear.

The last large lake was built in Japan – now known as “The Sea of Japan” complete with two small islands and stepping-stones across one end.

We needed buildings to add to the Japanese Garden to make it look more authentic. Over the spillway from this lake a covered bridge was constructed using illustrations and descriptions of existing bridges in Japan. This was a nightmare for our builders but they rose to the occasion and the result was outstanding – very much used and admired with countless photos taken because of the picturesque nature of the structure – a very worthy adjunct to the area. A sweep of lawn connects this bridge to a Japanese style teahouse on the other end of the lake. Across the stepping stones and then on to the pathway round the edge of the lake through a marvelous collection of *Acer palmatum* of every shape and size giving visual delight in early Spring and stunning colour in autumn – the reflections in the lake adding to the delightful feast for the senses. Further along the path around the lake we come to the many varieties of flowering cherries – nothing to rival the flowering cherries in Japan, of course, but putting on a better display each year as they mature.

In 2001, the year of our Centenary of Federation, we were extremely lucky to have been chosen as the site for an outdoor concert over two nights, featuring the renowned pianist. David Helfgott. A week of preparation saw the construction of a stage built out over the lake, tiered seating set out around our amphitheatre site and marquees, giant poles housing enormous speakers, lighting effects of different colours showing upward through the trees, fog machines creating atmosphere amongst the tree ferns. The outcome was sheer magic. People who attended still talk about this event -certainly one of the highlights of our thirty-year history.

Let us fast forward to 2005. A federal election was looming which led to the opportunity to fulfill a long held ideal of finally building a convention centre. A clever couple from amongst our most valuable asset – our members-wrote submissions – the result being this magnificent building built on the original slab, giving us views of not only the garden but borrowed scenery from beyond the Emu River on to the farmland behind the lookout at Round Hill. The building was architecturally designed to represent a tree, with the large expanse of green roof you look down on when entering the garden to represent the leafy canopy and the curved timber beams supporting the roof representing the branches. The large area of roof has the added bonus of providing ample rainwater stored under the initial concrete slab in the form of two seven thousand gallons tanks – has always been sufficient for our needs and makes a lovely cup of tea!

This building has greatly added to the ambience of the garden and an international conference was held in October 2006. It is used for wedding receptions and many other functions throughout the year.

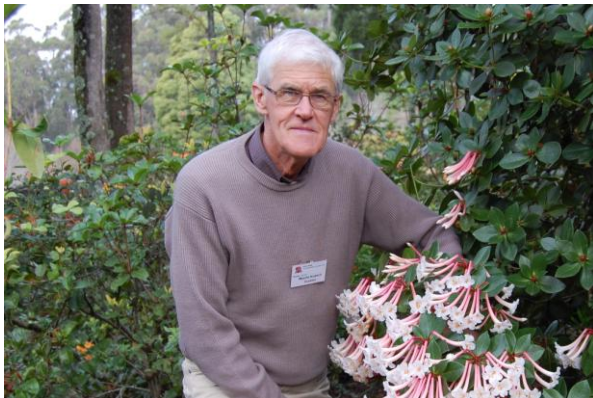
The many provinces of China are about to be enhanced with new plantings of species and by the construction of a Chinese pavilion in Hubei. The plans have been approved and we have four pallets of authentic Chinese tiles for this pavilion and another about the same size in Sichuan.

After these buildings a high point in Nepal beckons – a delightful area that overlooks the whole garden and a suitable building is being investigated.

From the humble beginnings of one rhododendron and eleven hectares of wilderness the garden has matured to the extent that the early plantings are now large bushes and we have in excess of 450 species in 16 countries plus a large collection of vireya all growing and flowering well.

How wonderful if we could organize a gathering of all the people who have gone before to come back and see what they helped us to achieve. As I said before it is the people who have made it happen – just the right people, with the right skills at the right time.

Long may it continue to be a living tribute to our pioneers, current workforce and members yet to come – a tourist asset for Burnie and Tasmania.



Maurice Kupsch
Life Member and
Honorary Curator

May 25, 2012