Historic Gardens in South Australia
by David Jones

... On seeing a beautiful arbour the other day in a gentleman’s garden which we were looking over, we were much struck with the coolness and comfort attached to such places during the summertime, and wondered that they are not more generally adopted. What can be more cosy than ‘tea in the arbour’ when the heat in the parlour is 99 degrees. A nice green plot of buffalo grass with a few creepers around the arbour, and one or two seats around a table inside, where one can imbibe the fragrant and refreshing bohea, opens up a field for future enjoyment to anyone who will at once commence the erection of such a retreat from the oppressive atmosphere of the dwelling house after or during the continuance of a hot day.

The Garden and the Field, 1 April 1878, p. 175.

Gardens and gardening have brought dramatic changes to the South Australian landscape since the first European colonists came to these shores. Whether intended to be decorative or productive, they play an important part in our everyday lives. In turn, gardens reflect the everyday lives of those who tend or tended them: they have been influenced by the energy and taste of gardeners, by popular styles in particular periods, by the availability of plants and garden furniture, and by the local environment.

Today, there are many people who want to conserve plant material and garden designs from earlier decades. Some want to know more about the styles that were typical in different periods, some are keen to know suitable species to plant, and others want to do some background reading on historical garden designs and fashions in South Australia. This article reviews the current state of historic garden research and publications in South Australia.

Historical Development of South Australian Gardens

The first Europeans in South Australia had comparatively easy access to land where they could establish gardens and mixed farming. Gardens were immediately established to provide vegetables and fruit. Land on the Adelaide plains and in the adjacent Adelaide Hills was easily cleared. Settlers brought cuttings, seeds and other kinds of plants from Europe or made purchases at places en route to South Australia at Rio de Janeiro or Cape Town. Their European-trained eyes often saw the local vegetation as ‘dreary’ and many tried to clear away indigenous vegetation rather than retain it to provide shelter from hot sun and dry winds for new plantings. Hand watering was slow and laborious in the days before piped water was available. Once gardens were established, settlers helped each other with cuttings and seeds as well as sharing information and advice about successes and failures. Many also brought an enthusiasm for gardening and knowledge of gardening techniques.

From the late 1830s, plants, seeds and expert advice were readily available from nurserymen such as Thomas Allen & Sons, John Bailey, Charles Giles & Son and George Stevenson. South Australia was fortunate in the quality of the early nursery businesses serving the community. Stevenson, as editor of the Register, provided regular horticultural advice, and commissioned his gardener, George McEwin, to write The South Australian Gardener’s Manual (1843) to assist new settlers. British gardening magazines and publications also arrived with news of new plants and equipment available and suggestions about gardening techniques. South Australia had many settlers who had advantages in terms of education, material prosperity and personal contacts that assisted in the horticultural and agricultural advancement of the colony.

Garden styles in South Australia: 1836-1990
Prepared by David Jones & Pauline Payne

Garden styles in South Australia: 1836-1990
(from Gardens in South Australia 1840-1940).
In the first instance, gardens were established to provide fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs for the table. Progressively, this practice shifted to the back garden, while flower gardens were established in the front. Initially settlers constructed fences and hedges to keep animals out of gardens. Garden designs were simple: beds were often symmetrical, a path led to a house, and plants were grown close together. Later, circular or patterned beds, surrounded by a path, were introduced. Front gardens became a feature of cottages, houses and villas at all levels of society, especially as a venue to display flowers and specimens. Back gardens became more private areas, with space for vegetables, fruit trees, vines, a wood heap, poultry, and lines for drying the washing. In Adelaide, following the reticulation of water in the late 1860s to mid-1870s, there was a shift from the economic to the decorative in suburban gardens, and lawns were introduced as a feature.

State of Research on Historic Gardens in South Australia

'...a well conducted garden is one in which constant attention to order, regularity and neatness will be required from him who undertakes the ... due performance of every operation in the proper season, and in the best possible manner. Slovenly people can never have a good garden, because they are opposed to all rules of order and cleanliness: on the other hand, systematic and due performance of everything at the proper time, and in its season, indicates a well-regulated and orderly mind.'


In 1980 the South Australian Historic Gardens Survey (1980) identified a number of significant gardens in the State, many of which have now been included on the Register of the National Estate. Properties identified included: Broadlees at Crafers, Forest Lodge at Stirling, Glenalta at Stirling East, Hill River Station near Clare, the Walling garden in Medindie, Narney House in North Adelaide, Parma at Stirling, and St Vigean's at Stirling.

These places were mostly significant gardens, in terms of botanical, design, designer or horticultural merit, and not the common gardens we see and tend daily.

Few gardens, or garden landscapes, in South Australia actually carry conservation controls. Historic gardens that are on the South Australian State Heritage Register (with period dates) include: Raywood (formerly Arbury Park) at Bridgewater (1930s), Strathalbyn Soldiers Memorial Gardens (1920s), Loreto Convent (formerly The Acacias) in Marranyville (c.1878), Undekarra at Burnside (c.1880), St Vigean's at Stirling (1883), Marbury School (formerly Wairoo) at Stirling (1893), Beechwood (formerly St Wilfred's) at Stirling (c.1893), Hostel (formerly Paralowie House) at Paralowie (1894), Wittunga Botanic Garden at Blackwood (1901), Burnside War Memorial Hospital (formerly Atunuge) at Toorak Gardens (1901), Bangalore Fruit Block at Renmark (1908), Victor Harbor Soldiers' Memorial Gardens (1918), Burdekin's Wildflower Garden at Basket Range (1920s), Glenalta at Stirling (1920s), Women's War Memorial Garden in North Adelaide (1923), Broadlees at Crafers (1926), the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden in Adelaide (1941), and the Cave Gardens Reserve at Mount Gambier (1925).
Since 1980, additional research has been undertaken to profile and review South Australian gardens, resulting in several research studies, together with a growing series of conservation plans that consider actual gardens or gardens in conjunction with residences. The Australian Open Garden Scheme has also enabled the opening of numerous gardens that previously were not publicly accessible or not identified in the earlier research. The forthcoming Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens (2001) will profile numerous gardens, gardeners, nurseries, and places in South Australia that previously were only afforded significance by virtue of family associations, oral knowledge, or accidental attention linked to a property or significant personality. Reports include Years of Endeavour (1982), Designed Landscapes of South Australia (1997), Gardens in South Australia 1840-1940 (1998), and Proceedings of the 12th Australian Garden History Society Conference (2000). Conservation plans include the Streets and Parks in Adelaide (1983), Victor Harbor Soldier's Memorial Gardens (1998), Cave Gardens at Mount Gambier (1999), Boer War and Pioneer Memorials at Mount Gambier (2001), Strathalbyn Soldiers' Memorial Gardens (1999), Loreto Convent (formerly The Acacias) at Burnside (1998), Lochend at Campbelltown (2000), Urrbrae House at Urrbrae (1996), Marbury School (formerly Wairoa) in Stirling (2000), Mount Torrens village (2000), Colonel Light Gardens suburb (1999), Inneston in Innes National Park (2000), North Bundaleer near Jamestown (1999), Partridge House at Glenelg (2000), Bundaleer and Wirrabara Forest Reserves (2000), and Adelaide Oval (2001).

Of these documents, the award-winning Gardens in South Australia 1840-1940 (1998) has been the most accessible to the public and provides benchmark information on garden styles and traditions. Particular styles addressed in the report include: the Cottage garden style (c.1840s+) on the Adelaide plains, and in the Adelaide Hills; Geometric gardens (c.1830s-1870s) in Adelaide; Gardenesque (c.1860s-1900s) in Adelaide; Victorian gardens (c.1870s-1890s) on the Adelaide plains and in the Adelaide Hills; Federation gardens (c.1890s-1920s) on the Adelaide plains and in the Adelaide Hills; Edwardian gardens (c.1910s-1940s) of both formal and informal variants; and Californian bungalow gardens (c.1920s-1940s) in Adelaide.

Historic gardens and landscapes in South Australia have only recently started to be properly analysed and incorporated into conservation studies, and due consideration given to their merit and benefits to the community and our heritage. Although it is a slow beginning, the increasing research, part of which will be profiled in the Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens (2001) will enhance awareness and due recognition in the State.

Contact
David Jones, Landscape Course Co-ordinator & Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture, School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture & Design, Adelaide University, Adelaide SA 5005 Tel: 08 8303 4589 • Fax: 08 8303 4737 E-mail: david.jones@adelaide.edu.au

References