

# Adelaide Botanic Gardens

*Last year I undertook a comprehensive training course to become a garden guide with the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide. The course itself was very enjoyable and greatly supplemented my knowledge of the world of plants. Some of the others in the course had a deep knowledge of flowering perennials or herbs or orchids but I was able to offer a deep interest in trees and woody shrubs and their timbers. Thus the emphasis of my walks has been on trees and their woods, although other aspects of the gardens are covered. I usually take with me a small collection of turned eggs which illustrate the beauty of the woods. This has been very well received by those taking the walks, especially visitors from overseas. The Botanic Gardens of Adelaide actually consist of four different sites – Adelaide Botanic Gardens, Mt. Lofty Botanic Gardens, Wittunga Botanic Gardens (near Blackwood) and Botanic Park. I will only refer to the Adelaide Botanic Gardens in this article.*

## EARLY HISTORY

During our training, the history of the gardens was an important focus, and although we may have been primarily interested in learning about the plants and things botanical, the history became a fascinating aspect of our walks. Adelaide was settled in 1836 and the Botanic Gardens was started in 1855, only 19 years later. The first Director was George Francis (1855 to 1865). The total area was 40 acres, set between the Hospital and the then Lunatic Asylum on North Terrace. Initially only 17 acres were developed. With a team of 13 men using hand tools only an imposing amount of work was completed. The first task was to fence the boundary. This was done with plantings of thorny bushes (White Thorn, Sweetbriar, several species of roses, Spanish Broom, Prickly Cactus and others). This was to deter theft of plants and to keep livestock out. Francis developed much of the plan of the early gardens, especially along North Terrace and the main north south walkway. Some of the interesting and most significant trees planted by him are:- Queensland Kauri (*agathis robusta*), a beautifully formed Hoop



*araucaria cunninghamii*



*schinus molle* (planted 1863)

Pine (*araucaria cunninghamii*) which is 40 metres tall, Small-leaved Moreton Bay Fig (*ficus platypoda*), a beautiful Red Cedar (*toona ciliata*) and by the main gates a Peppercorn (*schinus molle*). Although much smaller there is a Native Orange (*Capparis mitchellii*) from this period. These and other trees from his time are all more than 150 years old. George Francis retired in 1865 and died two days or so later. He was followed by Richard Schomburgk (1865 to 1891). Schomburgk's directorship of 21 years was extremely fruitful. He built on much of Francis's work and greatly developed the gardens. South Australia was a prosperous state during much of this period due to mining and pastoral leases and development of the gardens was rapid.



*capparis mitchelli* (circa 1860)

## AUSTRALIAN FOREST

Schomburgk's influence on the gardens and its design still remains. His major contributions include the Palm House, Fig Tree Drive with its avenue of Moreton Bay Figs, parterred garden beds, the rose garden, experimental garden and the Australian Forest.

In many ways the Australian Forest is one of his most important contributions as it went against much of the then current idea of botanic gardens. Part of his report in 1867 said – "Without doubt, when accomplished, this part will make one of the most delightful and picturesque portions of the garden" (Adelaide Botanic Gardens Conservation Study", Richard Aitken, David Jones, Colleen Morris, June 2006, page 87). I believe that the aims have been achieved. It is one of my favourite sections of the gardens with many large and beautiful trees and does simulate the feel of a natural forest. Much of it was planted in the period from 1867 onwards, with an emphasis of forest trees from eastern Australia. They have all coped well with our drier climate, but sadly some have shown stress during our recent summers and water restrictions. The paths through the forest are made from sawdust and woodchips. To walk through this on a hot summers day is bliss. Strangely, even in winter with rain falling, it is still a pleasant experience.



*brachychiton rupestris*



Although there is a large number of Australian trees in the forest, there are some which always attract attention. At one stage you round a path and see a beautiful specimen of a Bottle Tree (*brachychiton rupestris*). Further along is a fine specimen of the Illawarra Plum (*podocarpus elatus*) with its purple 'fruit' which seem to hang on for some time. Yet further along the same path are two large trees which show the contrast between our 'gum trees'. They are the Red Ironbark (*eucalyptus sideroxylon*) and the Lemon-scented Gum (*corymbia citriodora*, although still labelled as *Eucalyptus*). The two trees are close together and the hard dark bark offers a stark contrast to the smooth pale bark of the gum. Close by is a huge Flooded Gum or Rose Gum (*eucalyptus grandis*) with its very white smooth bark. This tree is labelled as Toolur, a name I am not familiar with. It is a majestic tree and is ranked as having exceptional cultural significance within the garden.



contrasting bark (Ironbark, Lemon-scented Gum)



eucalyptus grandis

## MALLEE GARDEN

To conclude this article, I would like to refer to the Mallee Garden. This is another example of an innovative collection within a Botanic Garden. It was largely developed by Noel Lothian (Director 1948 to 1976) during the 1950's. The plantings consist of many of the small species of *eucalyptus*, *acacia*, *dodonaea*, *myoporum*, *eremophila*, *hakea*, *santalum* and *banksia*. This garden is really important as it reflects the changing seasons and scenery typical of South Australia. It is not irrigated and therefore always appears in its true visage, i.e. from dull and brown in the summer to



Overview of the Mallee garden

green and colourful in late winter and through spring. Visitors always enjoy the walk through this small collection. There are some plants of high interest to us as woodies. Although not typical of the Mallee, there are fine examples of Waddi (*acacia peuce*), Western Myall (*acacia papyrocarpa*) and Red Mulga (*acacia cyperophylla*) with its beautiful mineritchie bark.

As stated earlier there is much more to the Gardens, but these are amongst my favourite parts.

**Ron Allen**