

A lush garden scene featuring a pond in the foreground that reflects the surrounding vegetation. The background is dominated by a dense wall of colorful plants, including large pink and red rhododendrons and various ferns. A large tree with a textured trunk stands prominently on the right side of the garden. The overall atmosphere is serene and beautiful, with sunlight filtering through the leaves.

# Stories of the Gardens

Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden  
George Tindale Memorial Garden  
National Rhododendron Garden  
Pirianda Garden

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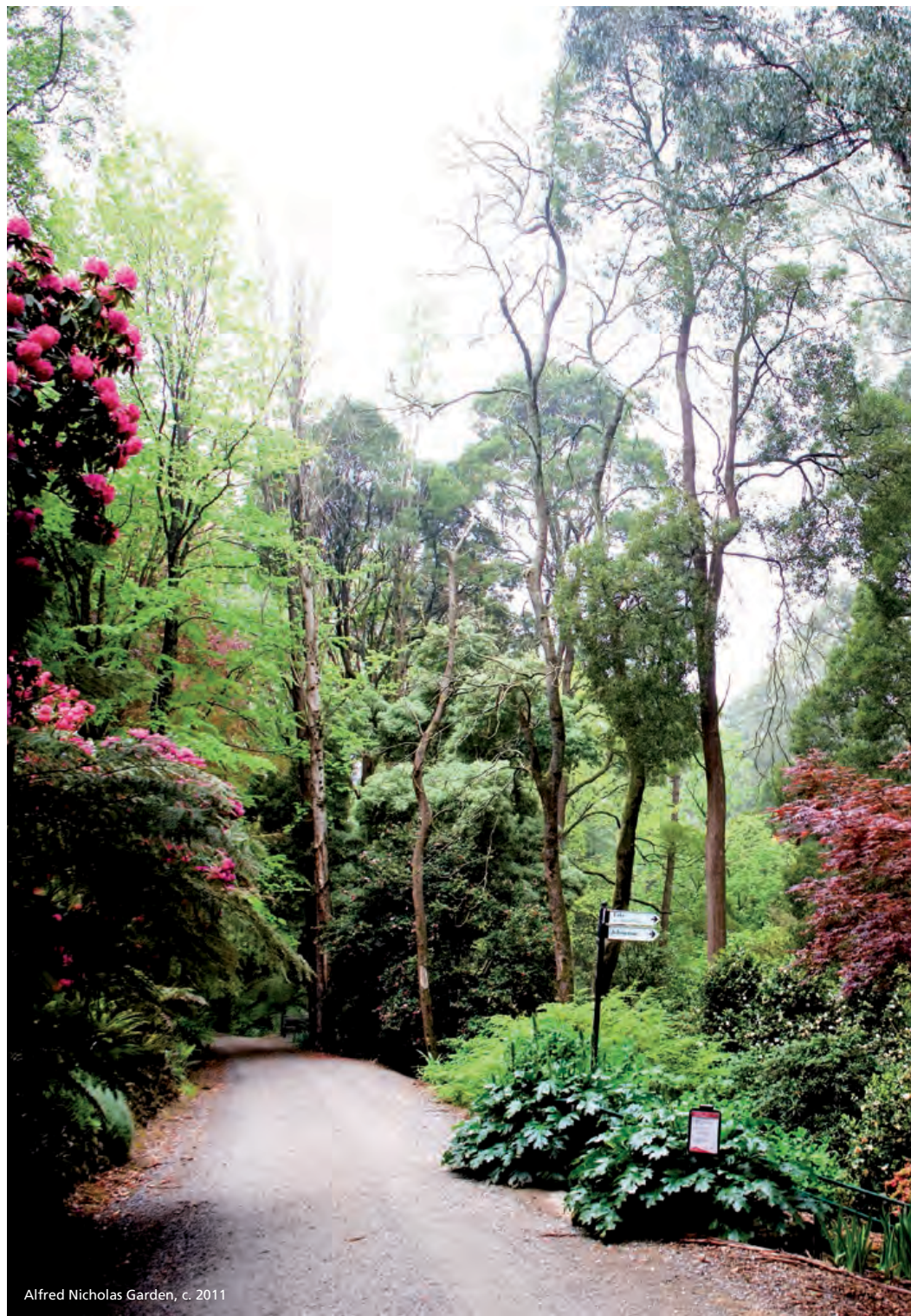
Compiled by David Beardsell



Kurume Azaleas, National Rhododendron Garden, Spring 2008

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Alfred Nicholas Garden, c. 2011

## Introduction

The Dandenong Ranges, Victoria, on the doorstep of Melbourne, are home to several iconic public gardens with outstanding landscapes and botanical features.

Families and other enthusiasts established the gardens at various times during the twentieth century. They were sometimes referred to as hill stations because their location in the cooler climate of the Dandenongs enabled the wealthy to escape the summer heat of Melbourne.

The gardens in these stories were bequeathed to the Victorian Government from wealthy families and passionate horticulturalists. Parks Victoria is now the custodian with responsibility for their management and maintenance.

The initiative for documenting the stories of the four gardens was supported by a Community Heritage grant. Material

was sourced using oral history and original references. These provide fascinating insights into the history, development and the people involved. Each story is distinctive.

The Dandenong Ranges, a tranquil, low-level mountain region, is recognised for its cool climate by comparison with areas close to Melbourne and north of the Dividing Range. Rainfall is comparatively high at 1000 mm per year, and the rich acid soils derived from ancient basalt rock mean that a distinctive range of plants can be grown.

The eastern slopes are tall open forests dominated by majestic mountain ash and grey gum trees with a rich understory of tree ferns, blanket leaf, and pomaderris. Messmate and Peppermint eucalypts grow on the more exposed western slopes.

The traditional Aboriginal owners of the Dandenong country are the Wurundjeri people who were nomadic hunters and gatherers that used the Dandenongs as



Eugene von Guérard *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges* 1857, oil on canvas 92 x 138 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Gift of Dr Joseph Brown AO OBE 1975

their summer hunting ground. Mount Dandenong was called 'Corhanwarrabul', meaning a beautiful place where birds sang, kangaroos jumped and lyrebirds performed.

The Bunurong people also regularly visited the foothills of the southern Dandenongs to hunt and trade. However the regenerative power of the tall open forest has mostly covered up the presence of these groups.

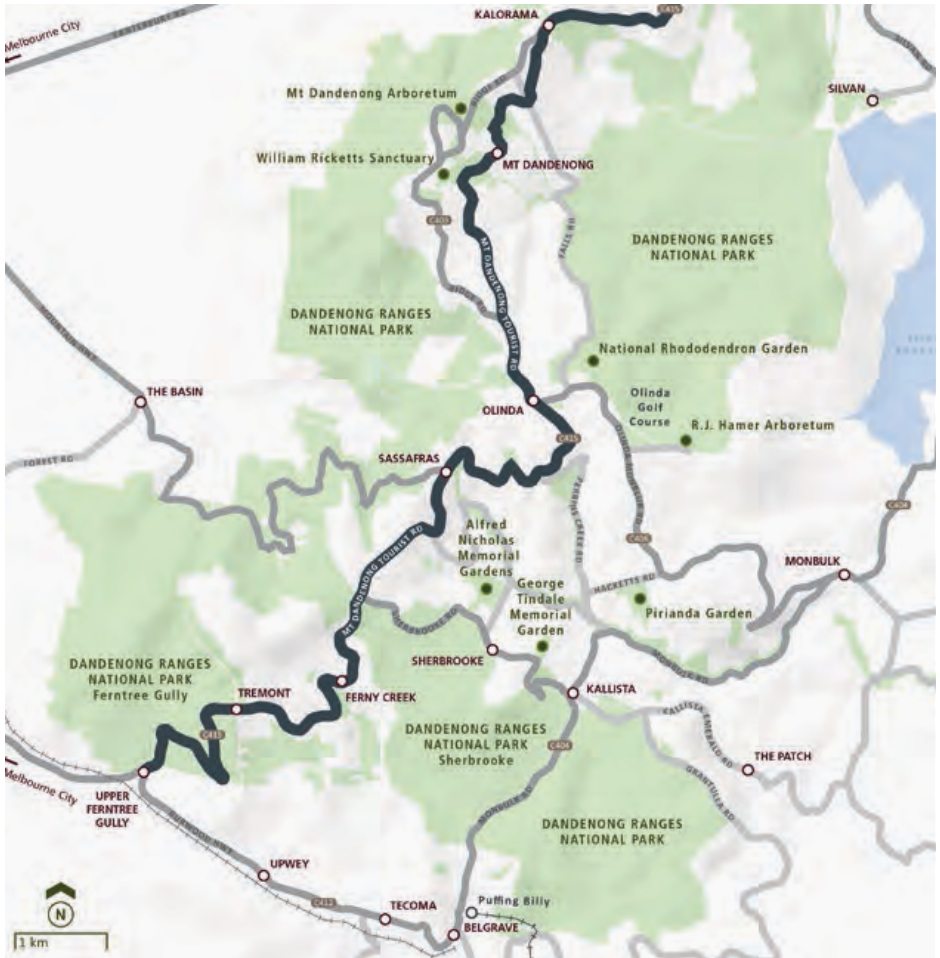
*Corhanwarrabul* and *Dandenong* are two areas within the ranges, both are derived from the Woiwurrung language of the Wurundjeri people.

European public interest in the beauty of the Dandenong Ranges was probably first generated by the famous artist Eugene von Guérard when in 1857 he exhibited his painting "Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges" to great public acclaim in

Melbourne. This well-known colonial era painting of Sherbrooke forest shows all its classic features.

Scattered majestic white trunks of mountain ash and mountain grey gum trees, slender tree ferns and the cool green understory provided a picture of peace and harmony. The painting also featured an elusive lyrebird in the foreground. The fern tree gully image of von Guérard was later reinforced by the commercial photography of Nicholas Caire and Charles Nettleton from the 1880s. Popular images of lyrebirds and tree ferns in the Victorian era were probably inspired by scenes taken from the Dandenong Ranges.

From the 1860s, tourists commenced making day trips to the Ferntree Gully popularised by von Guérard's famous painting. It was not until 1907 however that a tourist track was built to Sherbrooke Falls.

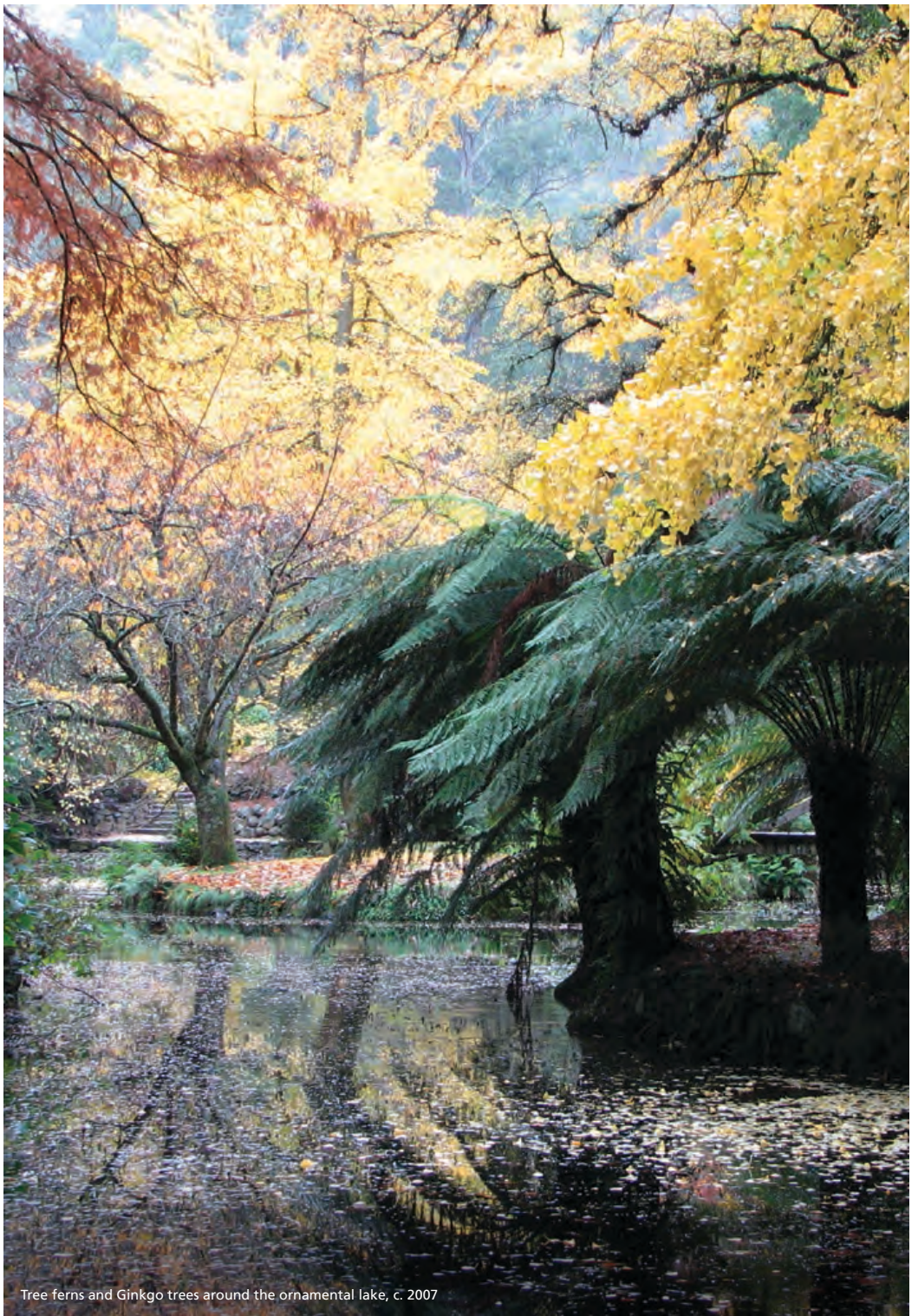


Gardens located in the Dandenong Ranges

Many exotic trees and shrubs including Japanese maples, flowering cherries, rhododendrons and exotic conifers grow to their full potential in the Dandenongs.

Experience from garden development shows these exotic varieties are easily integrated with the plants of the open forest such as eucalypts and understory tree ferns.

Gardening enthusiasts from all over the world are drawn year round to experience the splendour of both private and public gardens in the region.



Tree ferns and Ginkgo trees around the ornamental lake, c. 2007



## Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden

Most are aware of the pharmaceutical business headed by members of the Nicholas family. It was established in Australia to manufacture, market and sell the painkiller known as Aspro, and later expanded to the United Kingdom. Wealth created, combined with Nicholas' initiative and inspiration were the drivers that provided the resources necessary for the design and construction of the Memorial Garden.

The German company Bayer owned the patent for aspirin prior to the First World War. It first synthesised aspirin (salicylic acid) in 1897 and decided to protect this by a worldwide patent in 1899. Salicylic acid was the active ingredient for pain relief and also helped to cure hangovers. These therapeutic properties proved to be a gold mine. But international availability was seriously restricted following the outbreak of World War I.

The Nicholas family became involved because Alfred's brother George was a pharmacist. In 1915, George with Harry Shmith, also a pharmacist, demonstrated the process for synthesis and packaging of salicylic acid.

Alfred Nicholas also became involved. His astute business skills saw the potential that stimulated the move to patent Aspro. This proved visionary.

As a consequence of war reparations in 1919, Bayer lost the rights to its patent. Billy Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia was involved in international negotiations, one of which was the Bayer patent. Hughes experienced events first hand because federal parliament was based in Melbourne until 1927. International authorities decided to award the patent to the Nicholas family business operating out of Melbourne.

Nicholas established his home in a suburb of Melbourne known as Auburn. But from 1934 to the outbreak of World War II the residence and gardens at Sherbrooke in the Dandenong Ranges became a place of permanent occupation. The family had an idyllic country lifestyle; tennis, croquet, horse riding and swimming were on their doorstep. In addition, they had their own healthy fresh farm produce and were surrounded by a horticultural and bush land paradise.

Establishment of alternative residences in the Dandenong Ranges became fashionable. Among the rich and famous who did this was Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who owned property in Sassafras from 1917. Also the Griffith brothers of the well-known tea empire established property in the Dandenongs from the late 1890s.

The Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden is one of Australia's premier cool climate gardens. Its terraced rockery, blend of natural forest, rare exotic plants and the tranquil ornamental lake make it an essential horticultural experience.

Design and planning began in the late 1920s. Feature articles on Burnham Beeches and the Nicholas Sherbrooke estate were published in the March 1934 and 1935 editions of *Australian Home Beautiful*. These, together with one on Maurice Nicholas' neighbouring home Strathalbyn

in December 1938, provide an excellent record of the original design of the house, surrounding gardens and the estate. They illustrate the close links between the house and gardens.

The area of the present day Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden was originally opened up as selectors blocks in 1893 to give poor people access to land following the Great Depression of the early 1890s. Like many government land settlement schemes they were uneconomic due to their small area (10 acres), the steepness of the land and maintenance problems caused by constant regeneration of weeds and native plants.

After 1900, some blocks were consolidated into larger holdings. In 1929, the Nicholas family company, Carnbrea Investments, bought 30 acres from James Storrie, who owned Kelway, one of the early guesthouses in the Dandenongs.



The newly constructed lake and islands, c. 1939.



Portion of the sunken garden in which grow 40 varieties of water lilies, Alpine plants and grasses, Japanese iris, weeping birch, pyracanthas and weeping willow. The setting of this sunken garden is a grove of native gums (Mountain Ash), some of which tower up to 170 feet. Inset is the group of Crane with young modelled and cast in bronze by Webb Gilbert for the late Dr. Springthorpe.

By 1934, Carnbrea's portfolio had increased to 16 crown allotments comprising 130 acres, more than enough for a country retreat and a permanent place of residence.

The Nicholas estate had only a little remnant vegetation following the clearing by the original settlers and owners from the late 1890s. There were some mountain grey gums, mountain ash, soft tree ferns, blackwood and silver wattles. Alfred Nicholas decided to preserve most of it.

In the late 1920s, Alfred hired Hugh Linaker as a gardener/designer to work on his Auburn property. Linaker had designed The Shrine parklands in St Kilda Road and was skilled at bold, large scale landscaping. He also assisted in the design of Nicholas' country estate and recognised its potential as an arboretum.

In 1929, Alfred went to the Chelsea Flower Show and was introduced to Percy Trevaskis,

from the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. This proved to be a lasting relationship because Trevaskis was employed from 1929 to 1936 to design the Nicholas Garden. He suggested the name 'Burnham Beeches', which was an ancient forest near the Aspro factory at Slough in the United Kingdom. Beech trees later became a dominant part of the Nicholas Garden. Trevaskis researched rockery designs and searched for sources of plants for the proposed Nicholas Garden before his departure for Australia.

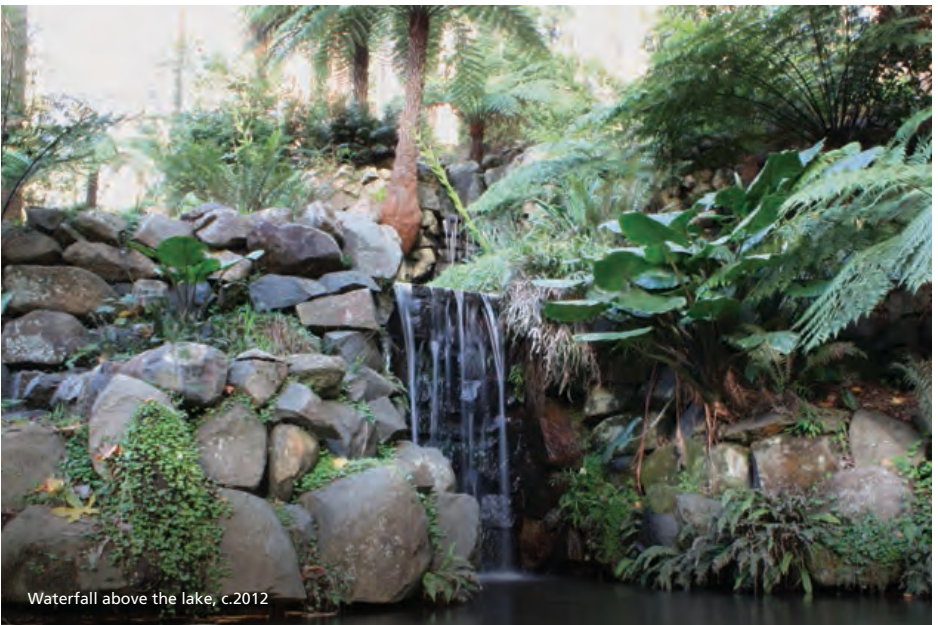
Alfred Nicholas had employed two high level garden designers that ensured his country estate was carefully planned. He also purchased the Nobelius Nursery to ensure access to high quality planting stock. Work began in 1930 and involved construction of roads and a riding track, which followed a survey by Charles Kernot from the State Electricity Commission.



Burnham Beeches Mansion, c.1974



Rock walls on the lower drive, c. 2012.



Waterfall above the lake, c. 2012



View from the ornamental lake looking up towards Burnham Beeches mansion, circa 1939.

Since Roman times, well-manicured gardens were an essential part of country estates. The Nicholas family clearly had this vision for their home in the hills; and the grand design required employment of 80 workers at different stages of development of the garden. Construction provided many jobs for the unemployed during the aftermath of the Great Depression. Alfred was present on most days to oversee work. He had a vision for the basic concepts for the landscape at Burnham Beeches and, presumably, allowed Trevaskis and Linaker to plan the finer detail. In later life Percy Trevaskis recalled receipt of weekly letters from Alfred Nicholas concerning rockery design, alpine plant selection and other garden features. Clearly Alfred was very involved.

Percy Trevaskis lived in a cottage built west of the Burnham Beeches mansion. He was the senior landscape gardener with responsibility

for the planning and construction of the gardens. There was considerable interaction with Linaker over landscape design. Nicholas also engaged Trevaskis and Linaker in meetings to refine use of stone and slate in construction of rockeries and steps.

Garden construction and maintenance was labour intensive. Ted English did landscaping and rockeries, Mr. Holmes was the stonemason and Albert Sexton specialised in orchid production in the glasshouses that were built near the house. Mr. C. Rafil and four garden apprentices supervised tree and shrub planting; and a fencer also assisted in establishing the garden.

In 1933, 150 trees were imported from the United Kingdom, 76 from the estate of Lord Aldenham in Hertfordshire. Green and copper beech trees planted in the grounds and along driveways were significant features.

Advanced plants were also sourced from all over Melbourne including a 35ft Canadian maple that was transported by a large truck.

Reticulated water supplied the whole area from a 240,000 litre concrete tank located on the highest point of the property near Sassafras Road. The top fence rail also served as a water pipe with taps every 30 meters.

The impressive cast iron entrance gates suspended from Sunbury stone pillars and decorated with bronze leaping deer introduce visitors to the opulence of the Alfred Nicholas Garden and the Burnham Beeches house. The ornamental lights on top of the pillars were operated from the main house. The gates were restored in 1989-90.

The main drive was asphalted soon after its construction circa 1934 and must have been one of the first private sealed roadways in

Victoria. The original design showed that Alfred Nicholas never intended dominance of the tall native trees. Mountain ash and mountain grey gums were restricted to the southern and eastern slopes towards Sassafras Creek that were well away from the house. Views of these open spaces are now seriously restricted by natural regeneration especially the mountain ash and mountain grey gums.

The upper pools in the Nicholas Garden were originally filled with a diverse collection of water lilies and surrounded by alpine plants and grasses, Japanese irises, weeping birches and a weeping willow.

At the end of the lawn area, a huge terraced wall five metres high and 200 metres long enclosed a large garden bed. At its base a paved pathway curves downhill via a horseshoe bend to the ornamental lake.



Burnham Beeches front gates, c.1964



Boathouse at the lake, c.2012



Terraces that line the paths down to the lake display world-class rock gardens. Extensive use of basalt stone in their construction was largely sourced from site excavations. Additional supplies of rock were obtained from many sources in the Dandenongs and slate was brought from Castlemaine.

The high quality of stonemasonry is a feature of the gardens. The walls have remained stable for 80 years despite the intrusion of tree ferns that became established in rock crevasses.

Low growing alpine shrubs and herbs dominated the planting of rockeries in the 1930s. These were considered to be better suited to the mountain climate of the Dandenongs.

Alfred Nicholas had a vision that his garden was a parkland of exotic and native trees. This is readily seen in the terraced woodland, which forms a broad sweep in the slope down to the lake. He enthusiastically sourced and imported trees from the United Kingdom, Melbourne and also used local plants. The focus was on deciduous trees including beeches, ginkgo, maples, catalpa, pittosporum and poplars. Some conifers are scattered throughout the garden including redwood and cypress.

There is no reference to the lake and blackfish pond in the original plans for the gardens. These were not built until 1937-39. Alfred Nicholas passed away in February 1937 and would thus not have seen much of the construction. The lake is a key feature of the gardens in a tranquil valley setting. It is framed by a pathway, stone walls and is fed by a constructed waterfall. Two stone walled islands in the lake are accessed via wooden bridges. Surrounds are landscaped with some beautiful deciduous trees, notably ginkgo and liquidambar that provide a kaleidoscope of foliage colour in autumn.

In 1985, the main bridge was renewed and has since been rebuilt.

The blackfish pond, located 50 metres north of the main lake is fed by a small stream and thought to have been originally stocked with fish.



Front Lawn at George Tindale Memorial Garden, Spring 2010.

## George Tindale Memorial Garden

Land now known as the George Tindale Memorial Garden was originally identified in 1892 as the Crown Grant and occupied by Captain Joseph Pallant, a merchant navy officer. For many years the property was known as Pallant's Hill. A paling slab hut was constructed on the block that survived until around 1918.

In 1915, the 10 acre allotment was sold to Mr. Herbert R. Harper, an English engineer who pioneered the extraction and use of brown coal from mines in the La Trobe Valley. He was an unsung hero who recognised the significance of electricity generation for the development of the Victorian economy. Herbert Harper became Chief Engineer for the State Electricity Commission and oversaw the extension of the grid to rural Victoria, and the development of hydroelectricity from the Rubicon Valley.

The property near Sassafras was bought as a summer retreat, cleared of bracken fern and planted with scarlet oak, liquid amber, cryptomerias, azaleas, sycamores, lombardy poplars (now gone) and Japanese maples. Correspondence from one of Herbert's daughters shows that areas below the entrance drive were planted with hollies,

double flowering cherries, hawthorns, camellias, raspberries, magnolias, rhododendrons, rowans and lilacs.

In a letter from one of Mr. Harper's daughters, Mrs. Kirkhope, it was reported that the Harpers caught Billy Hughes' chauffeur measuring the rooms of the house presumably for Hughes' new house, Ty-Coed. The two houses are remarkably similar. Prime Minister Hughes, who was a Sydney-based parliamentarian, had to live in Melbourne as the federal parliament sat in Melbourne's parliamentary building until 1927. He sold the property in 1941.

The garden's archives hold a letter from Chloe Kirkhope, which indicates that the existing house and garden were constructed in 1918, and that the property soon became a mecca for visitors. These included Prime Minister Billy Hughes and his guests, the Prince of Wales (later, briefly, King Edward VIII) and Lord Mountbatten. In 1920, the prince stayed for a week with the Prime Minister at his home in Clarkmont Road. Overleaf is one of the photographs showing the prince with the officers and sailors from his ship in Sassafras.

Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts from the Heidelberg school of art were regular visitors who painted in the garden and added to its collection of plants. Sir John Monash, outstanding general during World War I and later Chairman of the SEC, also visited for leisure and professional interaction with Mr. Harper.

In 1939 the property was sold to Allen Potter, an industrial chemist. It was used as a weekend retreat and further developed under the direction of architect Norman Seabrook. Additions included a fishpond, slate entrance steps and water tanks.

In 1958, George Tindale, a scientist from the Scoresby Research Station, bought the property assisted by colleague Rod Cantrill, current President of the friends group. Reports indicate this may have involved a nocturnal inspection.

Acquisition of the garden by George Tindale introduced a scientific and educational focus that reflected his interest in extending knowledge of horticulture. Correspondence from the Department of Environment and Primary Industries shows that in 1944, George was an initiator of planning for a horticultural research institute at Scoresby. This became reality and was officially opened in 1948. It earned international recognition for its contributions to horticultural science and industry.

George's research program on innovative methods for cool storage is an example. Controlled atmosphere cool storage is a major reason why we have a year round supply of quality apples and pears. Many of the functions of the institute have been incorporated into the Biosciences Research Centre at Latrobe University that was opened in 2013.



Prince of Wales in Sassafra, c. 1920.  
Source: <https://sites.google.com/site/sassafravictoria/>



*Hydrangea macrophylla* at George Tindale Memorial Garden.



Tindale House. Photo taken by Bill Tindale, 1976.



Tindale Garden, October 1976

The garden has internationally recognised collections of different varieties of camellias, hydrangeas, magnolias, Kurume azaleas and several unique orchids.

Ruth Tindale's meticulous planning ensured that plants can be found flowering in the garden virtually every day of the year. She planted large numbers of fuchsias because they are easy to grow and have long flowering periods.

In spring dwarf *Narcissus cyclamineus*, *N. bulbocodium* and taller flowering daffodils, American trout lilies (*Erythronium* spp.) tulips, fritillarias, scillas (bluebells) and alpine plants such as the brilliant blue *Gentiana acaulis* are a feature of the Rock Garden near the Braeside Lawn.

Bulbs and other tuberiferous plants from the Himalayas and South Africa bloom in summer.

In autumn, colchicums are commonly in flower making attractive mauve and white displays.

In winter, patches of pink flowered *Cyclamen coum* can be found scattered throughout the garden. Later, hundreds of hellaboros and the delicate bluish-mauve blooms of *Crocus tommasinianus* are special features.

Mr Bob Harper, Chief of Horticulture with the Department of Agriculture recorded that George was an unassuming, modest and kind person. He was 58 at the time of his marriage, in 1961, to (Margaret) Ruth Adams, who was 42. Both were avid plant collectors and gardeners. Their life together is one of gardening's many unwritten love stories.



*Fulcrum*, sculpture by Maudie Ingleton (2000) at George Tindale Memorial Garden



*Involution*, sculpture by Ruth Tindale (1961) at George Tindale Memorial Garden





Ruth Tindale (foreground) with friends, September 1977

Ruth's aim was to create a garden where there was something of horticultural interest every day of the year. This was achieved by using selected bulb, tuber and corm producing plants. George's vision was to develop garden beds and shrubbery under the dappled light of the tall mountain ash trees. He noted that their small leaves hung vertically and allowed plenty of light through to the understorey and the ground.

In recent years, the garden has become a focus for educational and community programs, regularly hosting a range of activities including field classes for horticultural tertiary students, botanic art classes, and a nature kinder.



Tasmanian Cedar and gazebo at Pirianda Garden, May 2014.

## Pirianda Garden

Pirianda was the name chosen by Harvey and Gillian Ansell who began its design and establishment in 1959 as a low maintenance woodland garden with emphasis on autumn colour. Many of the trees are botanically significant or rarely cultivated in Australia. The name Pirianda, which may have a Koori origin, is thought to mean sufficient or enough.

Harvey Ansell and his brother Lloyd ran the highly successful rubber company started by Eric Ansell in 1905. Eric Ansell had bought condom making machinery from his employer Dunlop Pneumatic Tyre Company of Australasia, a subsidiary of the British firm Dunlop UK. By 1925, the Ansell Rubber Company produced rubber gloves and other rubber products as well as condoms. In 1934, Eric Ansell changed the company name from E. N. Ansell & Sons to The Ansell Rubber Co. Pty. Ltd. The company expanded its production into medical and industrial gloves and in 1969, the Ansell Rubber Co. Pty. Ltd. was acquired by Dunlop Australia Limited (previously the Dunlop Rubber Co. of Australia Ltd). The group continued under the name Ansell Rubber Company.

In the 1960s, Harvey Ansell developed the world's first disposable, sterilised medical gloves and by 1991, Ansell was the world's

largest provider of medical, household and industrial gloves. Just as the Nicholas Aspro fortune allowed Alfred Nicholas to develop an extravagant mountain residence and garden, the Ansell family had significant resources to produce a horticultural masterpiece within the 20 acre property that they bought at Olinda in 1959.

The original subdivision of the land now occupied by Pirianda resulted from 10 acre land grants authorised under The Land Act 1890. The original settlers who rented the land were William Pollard and Sydney Snow. Mr. Pollard bought the two cleared allotments from the Government in June 1900. These were maintained as cleared except for some ancient tree ferns located in the gullies. He planted orchards and berry crops and built a slab house and barn on the east side of the property. These buildings still existed when the Ansell's bought the property.

In 1911, Pollard sold the 20 acre property to the successful grocery chain owner Thomas Crook, who kept sheep and cattle. Also he planted a number of ornamental trees including 11 copper beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica riversii*), tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), larch (*Larix decidua*), weeping spruce (*Picea smithiana*) and rhododendrons including *R. broughtii*.



From 1920 to 1940, the property was a riding school and used for horse agistment. Mr. Crook's son Jack owned an adjacent allotment and farmed potatoes, maize and gooseberries; he also kept fowls. Three acres of this property at the top of the hill are also now part of Pirianda. Thomas Crook died in 1943 and two years later the property was bought by the Monbulk merchant John Anderson and his wife. In 1948, they sold it to James and Lily MacFarlane who may have used the land for potato and carrot growing.

By the time the Ansell family bought the 11 hectare property in December 1959, it was rundown and badly infested with blackberries and bracken ferns. The original cottage built by Pollard has been retained as a storage shed and the barn was moved to the site of the Schwerkolt Cottage in the City of Nunawading.

Gillian Ansell, in discussing the aim for Pirianda, explained that the plans were for

a landscape that resembled an uncontrived natural garden where native trees and shrubs blended with introduced exotic plants. Plantations of annuals, including flowering plants, were avoided to reduce maintenance.

Pirianda is similar to the Tindale Garden in that exotic trees and shrubs blend harmoniously with ferns, native blackwood and mountain ash trees providing a shady over-storey. From 1960 to the late 1970s, Harvey Ansell and George Tindale developed a friendly rivalry by sharing plants, ideas and designs as they built their gardens on opposite sides of the Sassafras Creek valley. Pirianda is terraced and there is a natural fern gully at the lower part of the property. It differs from the Tindale Garden by having more open, grassed areas interspersed with specimen trees and formal garden beds. Pirianda is much larger than the tightly planted Tindale Garden but the lower parts of the garden do have occasional dense



*Forsythia sp.*, Pirianda Garden, Spring 2008

plantings. These two contrasting gardens form a close pair where plants were chosen for suitability to the cool climate and rich soils of the Dandenong Ranges.

Harvey began by overseeing the clearing of weeds and planting trees.

During 1960, the first trees and shrubs were planted and included maples, dogwoods, stewartias, sorbus, nyssas, a ginkgo and a davidia. Plants were supplied from many sources including Bert Chandler's Como Nursery, Boulter's Nursery and Woolrich's Rangeview Nursery. Plants were also imported from the United Kingdom, chiefly from H G Hillier's Winchester Nursery.

In 1961, a flat site was prepared halfway down the hill on the eastern side and construction of a house commenced. The house was completed the following year. It is built of local stone which has blue, grey and

brown colouring and has extensive external and internal mountain ash wood panelling. The house design shows American influence, which contrasts with the southern English style of the surrounding woodland garden.

In 1963, the Ansell's employed Les Rollings as a gardener. Les was responsible for much of the site improvement and planting before he retired in 1981.

His most significant legacy is the 1.6 km of dry stone walls and terracing below the house and up the steep slopes in the southeast corner of the property. Like the Alfred Nicholas Garden, much local basalt stone was excavated and used in stone walls, while some larger pieces remained as the basis for a rock garden designed by Gillian. This area features many alpine plants like those planted at the Nicholas and Tindale gardens. The walls have a mortared cap for stability.

Stone was collected from the site with large pieces being broken up by heating with a blowtorch and splitting. Other stone was obtained from surrounding properties. In the last-completed area in the southeast corner, some bluestone pitchers were used.

In 1967 and 1970, Harvey and Gillian travelled to the United Kingdom to source plants and design ideas for Pirianda. Gardens which influenced the design of Pirianda included Knightshayes Court at Tiverton, Bodnant at Llandudno and Leonardslea at Lower Beeding.

Importing plants proved difficult and losses were common. Plant management while in quarantine proved important and a dedicated facility was established at Bert Chandler's nursery, which was inspected by quarantine staff.

Harvey became involved in the development of the garden, especially after retiring from the business in 1971.

Les Rollings, Harvey and Gillian tackled development of the south east corner of the garden that was the steepest part of the property. Accessibility depended on terracing that was bordered by stone walls. All material was moved by wheelbarrows. Terraces were planted in 1972-1973 and beneath the blackwood canopy various deciduous trees, shrubs, bulbs and ground cover plants were established. It is now the most intensively planted area of the garden and an area of great beauty.

In spring, the highlights are the rhododendrons, azaleas, magnolias, camellias, dogwoods, the dove tree and spring bulbs.



Rock garden below Ansell House, c.1975.



Rock walls and paths in Pirianda Garden, c.2012



*Hydrangea paniculata* at Pirianda Garden

In summer, mock orange, eucryphia, clethra, hydrangeas and New South Wales christmas bush are in flower.

Pirianda is probably the best garden in the Dandenongs to view autumn colour and it lasts for more than six weeks. Spectacular autumn foliage colours are displayed from a wide variety of exotic trees and shrubs, including the unusual sight of *Franklinia alata* which flowers on leafless branches. It begins in early April when some of the birches develop fall colour and usually ends with liquidambars and South American southern beeches. The very best time is around the third week of April.

In winter, luculia, witch hazel, camellias and early rhododendrons flower.

John Curtis, gardener from 1982, who lived in the cottage that was built in 1977, ensured the estate was properly maintained after it had been handed over to the state.

Pirianda Garden features such delights as 27 different types of maples and 13 birch varieties. There are collections of magnolias, eucryphias, rhododendrons, clethra, styrax, pieris, viburnums and many conifers.

Three specimens of the unusual and haunting *Davidia involucreta* (dove or handkerchief tree) are located here. They flower in early November with large white bracts up to 12cm long, which look like handkerchiefs. Other unusual plants include attractive members of the theaceae plant family, *Franklinia* spp. (*Gordonia* spp) and *Stewartia* spp. Both are related to camellias with delicate and beautiful flowers.





*Magnolia* sp., Pirianda Garden, August 2009

*Franklinia alatamaha*, originally from Georgia in the USA, has not been found in the wild since 1790. It flowers in autumn and creamy flowers in April can be seen at the same time as its orange-red autumn colour.

Pirianda has specimens of other rare plants including *Alniphyllum fortune*, *Nothofagus oblique*, *Drimys winteri* and *Acer oblongum*.

There are 27 species of maples, along with many cultivars. Seven species of *Nothofagus*, nine species of *Betula* (birches) and many cultivars of *Fagus* (beeches) can be found. There is a row of nine *Fagus sylvatica* 'Riversii' just below the Ansell house planted around 1910 by William Pollard.

These beautiful specimens have shiny copper coloured leaves in spring. As the season progresses their leaves turn green and in autumn they turn again a brown colour.

The Ansell's were very interested in growing rhododendrons, hence the large number in the garden. They used to enter them at horticultural society shows in the hills, and began to hybridise them in the early days. *Rhododendron* cv. Pirianda Pink has been the most popular hybrid and it may be found in some local nurseries.

The cultural significance of the garden is now firmly established and recognised internationally. Noted horticulturist John Patrick interviewed the Ansell's in 1983 and subsequently reviewed the garden in his book *The Australian Garden*.

He regards the collection as significant, with great quality and diversity. Future strategies for Pirianda Garden revolve around increasing visitor access and community awareness of this hidden botanic treasure.

Improving walking tracks and interpretive signage throughout the garden are just some of the methods currently underway.

Using the two houses on this site for community, educational and commercial ventures is another way of bringing people to this magnificent property.

The former gardener's cottage now provides accommodation to local researchers and international horticultural students from colleges around the world including France, Canada and Singapore.

In recent years the main house has been utilised as a conference centre and special function venue for commercial hire.



Autumn colour from a maple at Pirianda Garden, April 2010.



Ansell Walk, Pirianda Garden



Kurume bowl at the National Rhododendron Garden, Spring 2011

## National Rhododendron Garden

The rich well-drained acidic soils and cool temperate climate of the Dandenong Ranges are optimal for the growth of rhododendron species and other cool climate companion plants. It is considered one of the best places to grow this large and varied genus of spectacular flowering plants. The National Rhododendron Garden in Olinda holds the largest collection of rhododendrons in the southern hemisphere and, with over 400 species, is broadly representative of the variability of the genus.

Each year there are approximately 120,000 visitors to the garden, particularly when the rhododendrons are in full bloom. Parks Victoria expects visitation to this garden as well as to other gardens to continually increase.

The garden is located near Olinda in state forest on the eastern ridge of Mount Dandenong. The land had previously been used as a rifle range, market garden and sawmill.

Parks Victoria manages the garden with support from volunteers of the Australian Rhododendron Society, which evolved from a study group within the Ferny Creek Horticultural Society in 1958. In 1960, the

Society sought approval from the Premier of Victoria, Sir Henry Bolte to lease 100 acres of the Olinda State Forest for the establishment of a horticultural display garden. The focus was a representative collection of species and varieties of rhododendron.

This was granted, and in 1961 landscape planning and associated plantings began. The Rhododendron group became as large as the Ferny Creek Horticultural Society as a whole. The upshot was the establishment of the Australian Rhododendron Society which complemented the Ferny Creek Horticultural Society.

Clearing of the bush and associated undergrowth was assisted when a large bushfire severely burnt the area in January 1962. The fire cleared large areas and enabled landscaping and new plantings to begin earlier than planned. Unfortunately the fire also destroyed some of the original paintings that recorded early images of the site.

The original 20 hectare site was extended to 40 hectares (104 acres) in 1975. This resulted in an elongated garden that follows the valley. At its far end the land rises to an elevated spot known as Serenity Point where there are wonderful scenic views of the Yarra Valley and distant mountains of the Great Dividing Range.



Azaleas at the National Rhododendron Garden

During early development, plants were donated by members of the Australian Rhododendron Society and also sourced from other national and international collections and societies.

The Australian Society sponsored collecting trips to New Guinea, India and Nepal and some species can still be seen in the garden. Members shared plants sampled during personal collecting trips with the garden. Unfortunately good records have not been kept so provenance is only associated by the plants donated by that person.

Species composition of the natural forest at Olinda is similar in composition to the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden near Olinda. Mountain ash trees dominate with blackwood, silver wattle and a tree fern understory. Most of these magnificent trees grew since the fires in 1962. Mountain ash trees are the world's tallest flowering plants.

Only Californian redwoods are taller but these are gymnosperms and not classified as flowering plants.

Mountain ash trees ring the gardens, but unlike the Nicholas Garden, they are not a feature of the internal landscape which has a sparse over-storey dominated by conifers and deciduous trees.

Sometimes on cool mornings there is a surreal atmosphere as the towering mountain ash trees disappear into white mists that appear suspended over large areas of the garden.

The garden was a recipient of a number of grants from the Victorian government as well as from private individuals to facilitate landscape development. Certainly much of the companion planting was donated by local nurseries in the area, accounting for the rich diversity of the conifer, maple and other trees in the garden.



*Rhododendron grande*

Australian Rhododendron Society members on the whole concentrated on collecting and growing rhododendrons. Government grants have not been recorded, but small grants have always been a large part of developments within the garden, especially those revolving around the ongoing maintenance.

The Rhododendron Garden is designed to fit in a narrow valley and consists of massive group plantings, open lawns, multiple levels, diverse textures and forms, and the use of colourful plants. Running through the valley is the spring-fed Lyre Bird Creek, a tributary of Olinda Creek. This provides significant water features including the tranquil lake near the entrance.

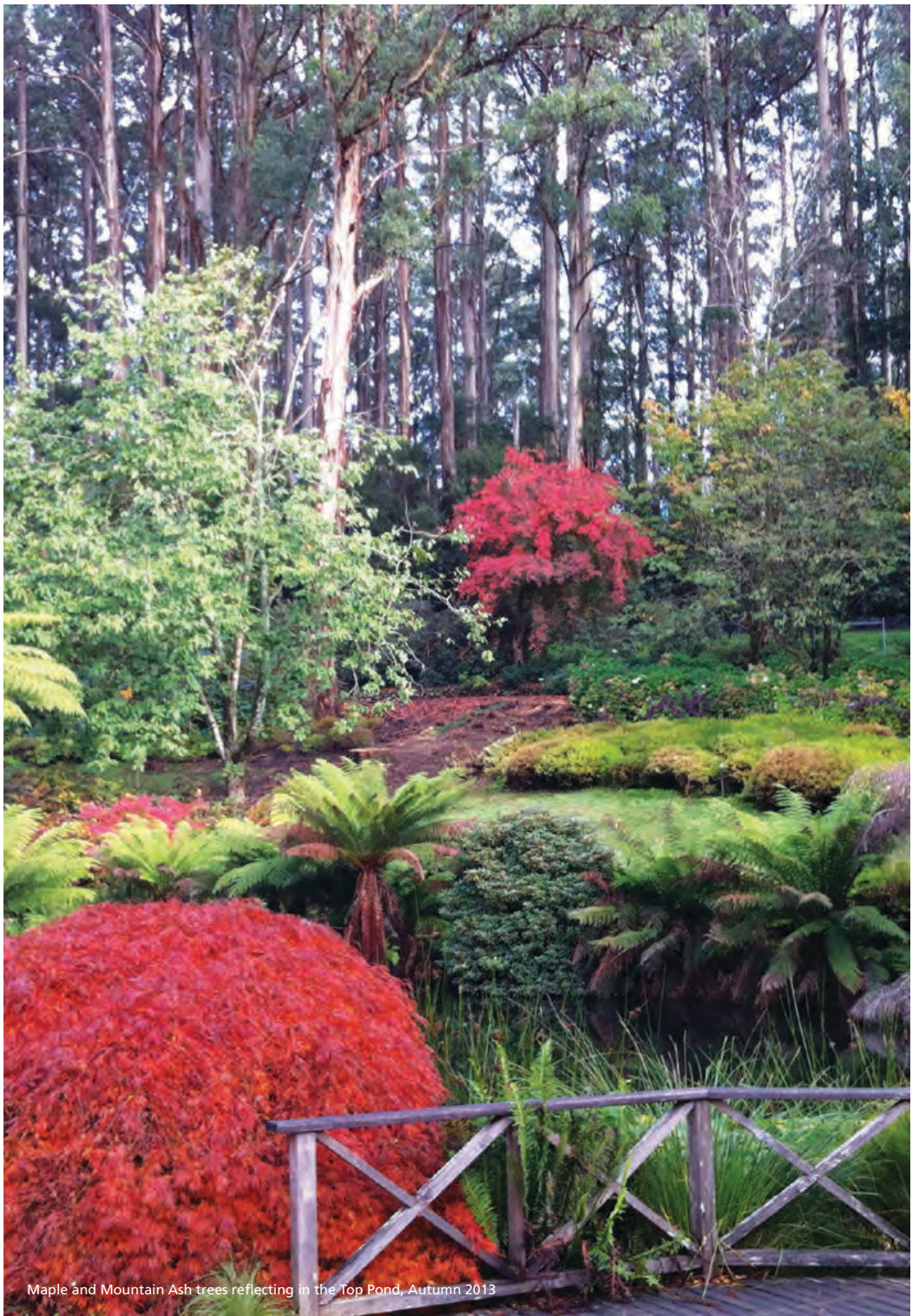
Plantings display rhododendrons with related and associated plants chosen for their growth habit and compatibility. There is a variety

of landscape types ranging from sloping treed walkways to exposed areas with panoramic views. Also represented are sensory gardens, deep fern gullies and a moorland of heath plants.

Five kilometres of tracks wind through the garden allowing close examination of rare and interesting species. At its far end, land rises to Serenity Point with wonderful scenic views.

Worldwide there are approximately 1157 rhododendron species divided into eight subgenera.

Approximately half of the specimens in the garden are species and half are hybrids.



Maple and Mountain Ash trees reflecting in the Top Pond, Autumn 2013



The garden has 15,000 rhododendrons, 12,000 azaleas, 3,000 camellias and 25,000 daffodils and jonquils (*Narcissus* spp). The garden also features other collections of cool temperate genera including *Acer japonica* (Japanese maples), *Cornus* (dogwoods) and *Magnolia* species.

In addition to providing outstanding visitor experiences, the garden provides unique opportunities for research and development to improve understanding of ecological and botanical relationships in an Australian bushland setting.

There is an urgent need for conservation. Botanic Gardens Conservation International reports that one quarter of the world's wild rhododendrons species are threatened. The Australian Network for Plant Conservation

reports that fifty of the world's rare and endangered rhododendron species are held in the garden at Olinda.

The garden also has a notable collection of *Vireya* rhododendrons. *Vireya* species are not a generally well-known member of the genus rhododendron. There are approximately 300 known species and most come from cool mountainous areas in the tropics. *Vireya* species are native to southeast Asia, Malaysia, Indonesia, New Guinea and Cape York in Australia. The garden collection has over 140 species grown outdoors and in the glasshouse, probably the second biggest collection held. The collection is an ongoing partnership with Parks Victoria, the Australian Rhododendron Society and private collectors. There are about 3000 hybrids to be found in the garden.



Dawn view from Serenity Point to the nearby Yarra Ranges, c.2008.



Vireya Rhododendron

In addition there are wonderful collections of camellias, flowering cherries (*Prunus subhirtella*), dogwoods, northern hemisphere conifers and magnolias. Deciduous trees from the genera *Betula* (birches), *Fagus* (beeches) and *Paulownia* provide an over-storey in parts of the gardens. Members of the proteaceae family including the genera *Protea*, *Serruria*, *Leucadendron*, *Leucospermum* and some Australian dwarf banksias are also featured.

A Wollemi pine is planted in the garden. This rare plant from New South Wales is a living fossil from the age of the dinosaurs. The genus was previously only known from leaf, cone and pollen grain fossils up to 200 million years of age!

The vista of the garden continuously changes throughout the year. In early spring, a highlight is the golden mile of daffodils. Pink, white, red, orange and mauve floral displays

of rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias and magnolias are best seen during sun showers.

By mid spring, the Cherry Grove is in full flower and is a spectacular sight. This time is also the peak flowering season for the azaleas and rhododendrons. It is such a pleasure to wander through the sprays of extravagant colour.

Summer is a great time to walk the nature trail in the cool rainforest atmosphere or picnic in the cool shade on the Cherry Lawn and wander through the collection of conifers. The brilliant blue and white hydrangeas can be seen in full flower with many large banks of them planted around the garden. In summer, the air is filled with bush, garden and forest scents.

Autumn is ablaze with colour as the deciduous trees and shrubs turn every shade of yellow, red and orange. Cold nights



Cherry blossoms, Spring 2012.

bring on leaf fall and the autumn colours of the deciduous trees. The views by the lake are spectacular, as many of the hydrangeas and maples take on rustic colours and are reflected in the cool calm waters. Cyclamen add splashes of colour at ground level.

Winter is a season of contrast. Mists and fog swirl around the tops of the mountain ash trees and the air is always fresh and cool. Bare tree trunks and branches reflect in the mountain lake and in late winter, hellebore flowers carpet the ground.

The garden provides a local corridor for wildlife in the gully and a food source for native birds. Resident birds such as kookaburras, crimson rosellas, sulphur-crested cockatoos, wood ducks, pacific black ducks, magpies, currawongs, honey eaters and finches are in the garden all year. Lyrebirds, wallabies and echidnas can also be found

but are more elusive. Common froglets make their cheery calls from the pond areas throughout most of the year.

The bridges, water features, Japanese maples, Kurume azaleas and flowering cherry trees all contribute to give various parts of the garden a Japanese ambience. The Hanami or flower viewing festival in Japan focuses on sakura or cherry blossoms. With the Rhododendron Garden boasting one of the largest known public plantings of Autumn Cherry (*Prunus subhirtella*), the garden's Cherry Tree Grove has become a popular spring destination annually for expats and many other flower lovers seeking a local taste of Japanese Hanami culture.

Near the entrance is a spectacular natural amphitheatre, which shows off the beautiful Kurume azaleas. Kurume hybrids are based on the species *Rhododendron kaempferi* and *R. kiusianum*.

Natural hybrids of these two species occur in several places in Japan, where the habitat of these two species overlaps. *R.sataense* is a name used for a certain type of natural hybrid that developed into a homogeneous population. There are a great many intermediate forms of these two species across Japan. Some well-known spots are Kirishima Mountain, Takakuma Mountain and Sakurajima Mountain.

The breeding programs that created the Kurume azalea probably go back 200 years or more. It is thought that most breeding occurred around Kurume city, giving the hybrid around its name. In present day Japan,

most of the research on azaleas is still done at the Horticultural Research Station located in Kurume city.

Over the years since its inception, the garden has evolved into Melbourne's premier cool-climate botanic garden, with collections and variety of species growing to one of national significance.

Looking to the future, through partnerships with other botanic gardens, the National Rhododendron Garden is uniquely positioned as a cooler climate habitat to play an important role in the ex-situ conservation of these species threatened by climate change.



Top Pond at the National Rhododendron Garden, Winter 2007

## Conclusion

The gardens as a collective are unique in the Australian landscape and a rare example of exotic botanical collections in a cool climate. With botanic and heritage values of state and national significance, they play a significant role in the broader tourism offer of the Dandenong Ranges and the Yarra Valley.

Today and into the future, these wonderful gardens have three important functions – conservation of rare and threatened species

through ex-situ preservation, providing a range of visitor experiences as natural and cultural destinations, and educating the public about the impacts of climate change on plant diversity and how to use plants wisely in their home gardens.

For more information about the great gardens of the Dandenong Ranges, visit [www.parks.vic.gov.au](http://www.parks.vic.gov.au)



Kurume azaleas at the National Rhododendron Garden, Spring 2011



Rhododendron hybrid and view to the Yarra Ranges

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