

Federation Gardens

By

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FEDERATION GARDENS

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"Now, the creating of a garden is second only in importance to the building of a house, and the two - the house as a well-balanced structure and the garden as a well laid-out frame - should find harmony the one with the other; and as the house answers through the years to the kindly mellowness of Nature's touch, so may the garden grow up in strength and beauty to minister to the household her meed of beauty and repose."

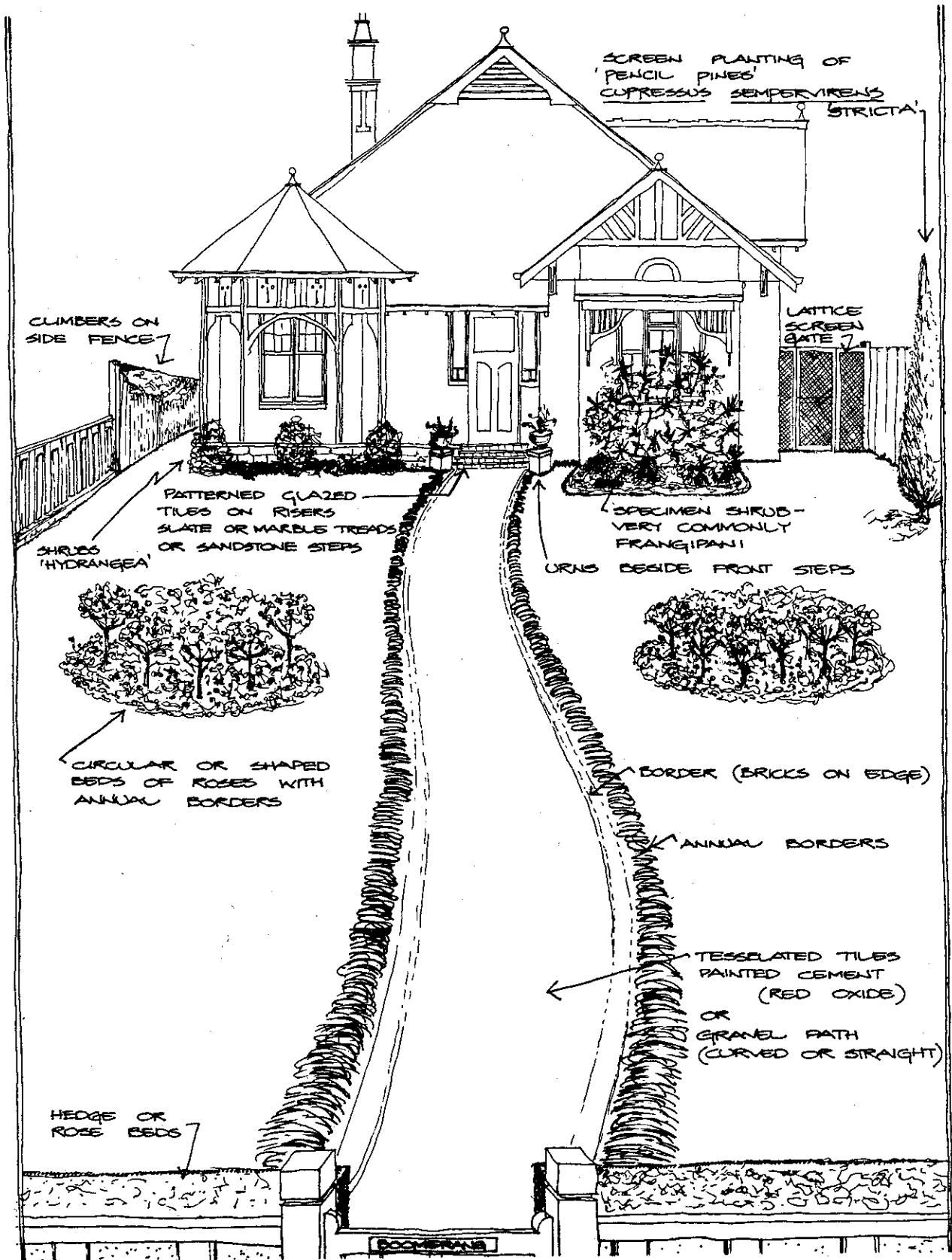
So wrote Robert Haddon in his 1908 book Australian Architecture in a chapter devoted to the design and maintenance of gardens to complement his houses of the Federation architectural style.

Marilyn McBriar (1980), in an unpublished thesis has provided probably the most comprehensive piece of research carried out to date on gardens of the period.

Unfortunately both Haddon and McBriar base their observations and recommendations on Victorian examples. There has been little detailed research carried out to date on Federation gardens in New South Wales and those comments which have been made in recent books and journals provide only brief summaries of the stylistic and horticultural preferences of the period.

McBriar concludes that there were two main styles of garden associated with Federation houses in Melbourne: the old-fashioned or formal style in which the garden provides a set of outdoor rooms for the house; and the natural, informal or landscape style, in which the garden imitates Nature, although not literally. This latter style was promoted by the famous English landscaper William Robinson and developed in Australia by such people as William Guilfoyle and Charles Bogue Luffman.

The relationship between the house and garden and the outside world should be private as a general rule, McBriar suggests, in a recommended marriage of the abovementioned styles for present day designers of Federation gardens. However there were exceptions to the rule as with those gardens which were in line with lower class fashion in England of openness, display and sociability at the front.



View of typical front garden for a Federation house, on a block approximately 15 metres (50 feet) x 45 metres (150 feet).

While Federation gardens in New South Wales appear to have exhibited a great variety of styles depending on their location, size, topographic diversity and the wealth and tastes of their owners many of the gardens on smaller lots in Sydney's Federation suburbs like Haberfield, Fairlight and Croydon appear to have followed a more formal style.

Garden Suburbs

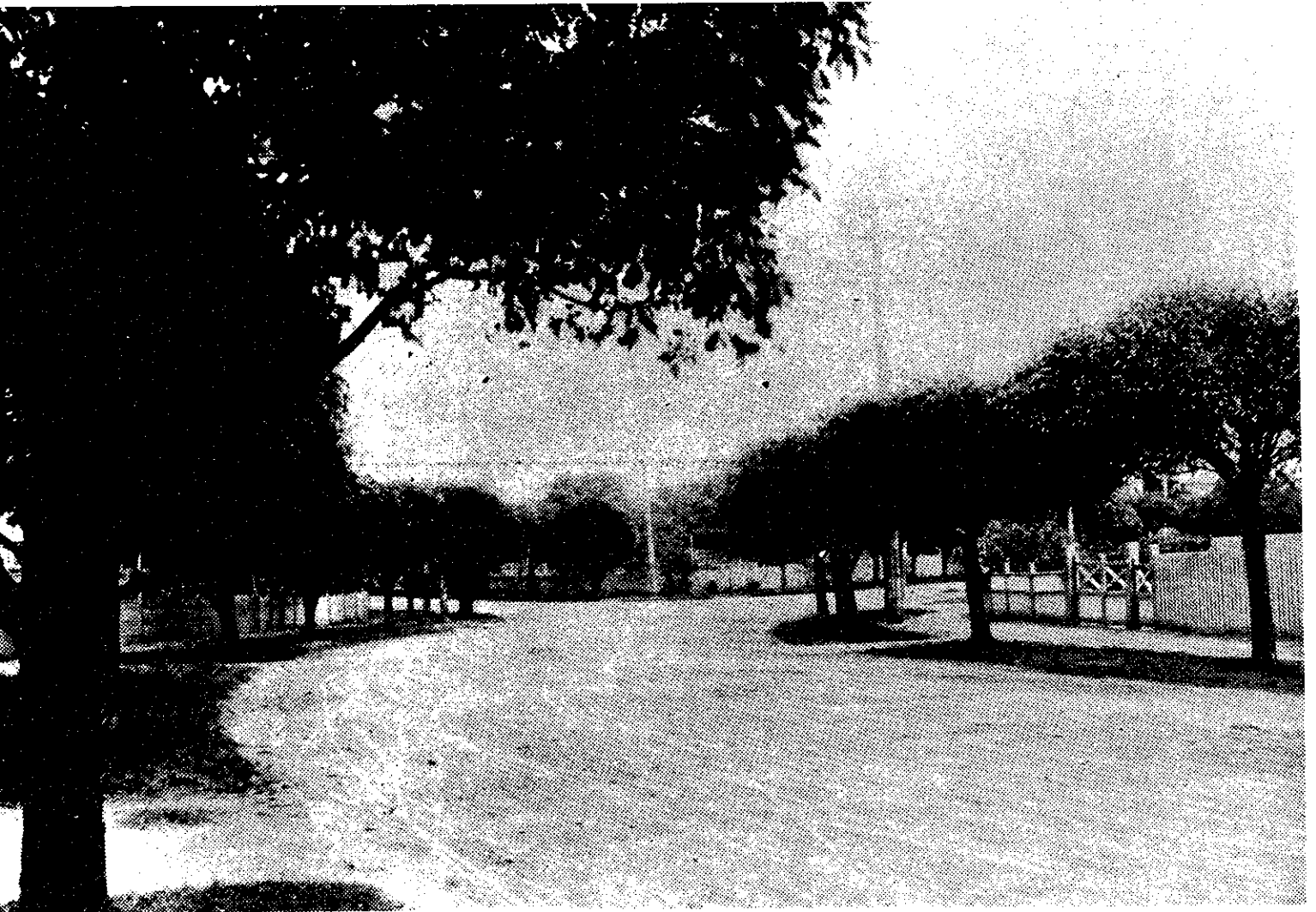
The Australian garden suburb, as exemplified by the Stanton Estates at Haberfield (1901-1905), the Sulman/Fitzgerald plan for Daceyville (1912-13) and Reade's design for Mitcham, Adelaide (1919) is derived at least to some extent from English developments such as Norman Shaw's design for Bedford Park, London (1870s) and Ebenezer Howard's Letchworth, Hertfordshire (1903).

Howard's book 'Tomorrow: a peaceful path to real reform' published in 1898 had offered an attractive alternative town planning system of separate but interacting settlements - the garden cities.

The Australian concept of a garden city/suburb, according to Burke (Historic Environment, 1981), omitted the physical and economic independence and co-operative ownership inherent in the British garden city philosophy, but it indicated the ways in which properly planned suburban development could raise the quality of life in Australian cities. It represented a radical departure from the crowded inner suburbs of nineteenth century Sydney.

Included in the purchase price of homes in the Stanton Estates were the services of a gardener to lay out the garden, paths and flower beds. The fences and gates, usually in timber, were designed especially for spaciousness which was not destructive to privacy.

Residential and commercial uses were separated; buildings were reasonably spaced - lots averaged 50 feet x 150 feet in area; there was ample provision for parks and gardens; streets were wide and tree-lined, with 'nature strips' on footpaths.



The Appian Way, Burwood c. 1924 showing nature strips and plantings of brush box.

This compartmentalisation of the suburb was carried over to the gardens themselves where boundaries were defined by hedges or fences. A curved or straight path of tiles, bitumen or painted cement led through a neat lawn to the bayed and turreted red brick house.

The advent of the spiral-blade lawn-mower, which had been patented in England by the firm of Fellows and Bate in 1869, meant that most gardeners could now have a fine lawn without the toil of scything and rolling. Where the street garden of the small house had once largely consisted of hoed earth broken by shrubs and annuals, lawns of buffalo and couch now prevailed.

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Strategically placed trees and shrubs complemented the house's architecture. Tall, thin trees such as cypresses and palms or light trees such as jacaranda were common in front gardens, with large shrubs, particularly frangipani, poinsettia and hydrangea softening the harshness of the house.

Roses were located inside the front fence, along entrance paths, or in shaped beds on front lawns or in specific rosaries. Whilst relatively few beds or edges of annuals remain today, they were common in the Federation period. The outlines of heart-shaped or circular beds may still be seen in some gardens.

Back gardens were devoted to vegetable beds, fruit trees and further beds of flowers such as dahlias for cutting. A bushhouse contained ferns, orchids and other less hardy plants.

The more ornate Federation houses had large verandahs which served to integrate the house with its garden and provided views to the street lined with its avenue of brush box, palms or camphor laurels.

CONSERVATION AND CARE

Those aspiring to restore or recreate a Federation garden or to develop a garden appropriate for a Federation house should follow the same basic guidelines applicable to the conservation of any garden. Firstly, assess the existing nature and condition of the garden, carry out research based on the physical and documentary evidence, determine either what is important about a surviving garden or what features should be incorporated in a recreated one and then prepare plans for construction and maintenance.

The Existing Nature and Condition of the Garden

- . Examine and carefully record the present nature and condition of the garden.
- . Prepare plans and drawings of the garden and its features. This task will be made easier if available survey diagrams, sewer plans, topographic maps and aerial photographs are used.

Plans should ideally show the whole garden with contours marked. The location, height and foliage cover of trees should be accurately shown. Also include location of shrubs, hedges, flower beds, grass areas, water features, patios, paths, retaining walls, etc.

A grid superimposed on the garden plan is a useful aid for the location of plants and other garden elements, and also serves to simplify conservation proposals. A simple system as used in street directories (e.g. A1, G9 as co-ordinates) is best.

- . **Services:** Try to show on the plan all utility services such as electricity lines, gas pipes, water pipes, telephone lines, septic tanks, sewer lines, etc. The last two are of particular importance where plants are concerned.
- . **Details:** Some parts of the garden such as elaborate garden beds may require the preparation of separate, more detailed plans at a larger scale than the overall garden plan.
- . **Plant List:** A plant list keyed to the plans and giving both common and scientific names should be included.
- . **Measured drawings:** Measured drawings or scaled photographs of architectural features such as trellises, pergolas, gazebos, dovecots, fences, walls and gates should be made noting details such as original paint colours and hardware.

- Photographs: Take photographs of garden views and details. The present condition and any later change can be recorded in this way. Colour prints are relatively cheap and several can be joined together to make a panorama if you have a large garden.
- Aerial photographs: Aerial photographs can be of great assistance particularly for large gardens, the assessment of existing condition and in historical research. Vertical air photos (as used for map preparation) are available for all parts of New South Wales, although date, scale and quality of coverage vary greatly. The earliest air photos available for Sydney date from the late 1920s to early 1940s.

Many owners of rural properties order enlargements of vertical air photos or aerial views as an aid to farm management. Such photos can provide an overall view of the garden and place it in the context of its surrounding landscape. Sophisticated oblique aerial photography has been used in recent years overseas to reveal the location of long lost features such as parterres or orchards. The visual impact of proposed developments may be assessed by the use of overlays on photographs.

The accurate recording of the existing nature and condition of the garden cannot be over-emphasised. The resulting architectural plans, elevations and perspectives, or simple sketches, should be the best that available finances and expertise will allow.

Urgent action

You may find that there is an urgent need for stabilisation or remedial action to simply maintain the status quo. Before detailed site analysis has been carried out, such urgent action should be limited to clearance of litter and attention to the existing plant material and structures of the garden.

Hasten slowly for the first year, to monitor the seasonal changes in the garden, for example the location of dormant bulbs. Small species of perennial or ground-cover may be hidden by overgrowth and could be lost if the clean up programme is too ruthless.

Urgent tree surgery and removal of weeds threatening garden plants should be carried out at this stage. You may be required to remove certain noxious weeds and plants by council ordinance. This will apply particularly to privet in many areas even though it may have been a dominant feature of your garden. In rural areas urgent action may be needed to keep grazing animals away from precious garden remnants.

Plants posing a threat to important structures may need to be cut back and in extreme cases removed. Hopefully, these will usually be unimportant self-sown plants. Privet, olive, jacaranda and fig seedlings are common culprits.

Research

(i) Physical Aspects

The geography and aspect of the garden should already have been determined in the assessment of nature and condition. Other physical site attributes such as soil type, structure, nutrient availability and soil pH should be ascertained.

Simple kits are available for the determination of soil pH (a measure of its acidity or alkalinity) but detailed analysis of soil nutrients is better left to experts.

Apart from soil, and light, the other major factor determining plant growth, is climate. An assessment of both the regional climate (affecting the whole site) and the micro-climate (imposed by proximity to other plants, buildings, aspect, etc.) should be made. If you have lived in an area for some time you will no doubt be familiar with the climate, but newcomers will need to check on these matters. Weather records of rainfall, temperature, frost and wind are usually available though the range of information varies from place to place.

Other climatic data which may be important for garden planning include frequency and severity of hail, snow and flooding, all of which can cause serious damage to plants and garden structures.

(ii) Historical research

Research at State and local libraries and archives will very often yield valuable clues to the history and use of your garden. Old photographs of your house and its setting may be available.

Gardens associated with major buildings and/or important families are more likely to have documentary material relating to them in the form of old plans, letters, receipts for items purchased or services rendered, paintings, sketches and photographs. Check the Mitchell Library, your local library, historical society, garden club and heritage conservation bodies for this information. Carry out an oral history programme by interviewing people who knew the garden. Notes or a tape recording should be made and dated. Old photographs may help to jog their memory, as may a visit to the garden itself if this is feasible. Above all, patience is required - several conversations may be necessary before a topic is exhausted. The Society of Australian Genealogists may be able to assist with material on your own family and/or those families associated with your house and garden.

Old family snapshots may show glimpses of the garden in the background, just as old photos of streetscapes may show your house and garden in the background, even though it may be half-observed by a tram.

If you are starting out to rehabilitate or recreate a Federation garden you may wish to join the Australian Garden History Society, established to promote interest in and research of all aspects of historic gardens. Membership information is provided in Appendix B - Useful Addresses.

Old seed and nursery catalogues and gardening books are very useful sources of material on plant varieties and garden styles. Recent research (Polya, 1981) identifies sources of old nursery catalogues in south-east Australia.

University theses or heritage registers may refer to your particular garden or to a particular style of garden. Some newspapers and radio stations provide an historic information service, e.g. Sydney Morning Herald RSVP column and Nick Vine-Hall on ABC Radio's The Margaret Thorosby Show (2BL, Sydney).

(iii) Detailed on site research

Anyone who investigates an old garden is likely to carry out at least some basic archaeology. Interpretation of material evidence and features such as path edging tiles, fence lines, earth mounds and depressions, and vegetative evidence (e.g. persistent bulb plants or fruit trees) involves no digging. Such fieldwork, combined with documentary research, has been termed landscape archaeology.

Archaeological excavation may, in some cases, be necessary to add surviving sub-surface evidence to meagre documentary or above-ground material. If excavation is considered, the following points should be borne in mind.

If the garden is known to be of major heritage significance, recognised by authoritative bodies like the National Trust of Australia or the Australian Heritage Commission, then archaeological investigation should only be conducted as part of a comprehensive professional documentation programme aimed at the preparation of a plan of management for the site. In New South Wales an excavation permit issued by the Heritage Council of New South Wales is required for disturbance of sites likely to contain relics of non-Aboriginal settlement prior to 1 January, 1900.

Assessment of heritage significance

Having conducted the research you should then be in a position to know what it is about your garden that gives it some significance. Is it the overall layout, or only a special tree? Is it the mature planting, or the pattern of hedging? Was the garden associated with an important building, person or event? Is it an intact survivor of a particular type of design.

Prepare a brief but concise statement of significance as a basis for further planning and development. Those who think their garden might be an important heritage item should consider nominating it for inclusion on a heritage register, such as the National Trust Register or the Register of the National Estate.

Conservation constraints and philosophy

Once the statement of significance has been prepared, a policy for the conservation of the garden can be developed. This policy should summarise the conservation processes to be applied to the garden and should remain reasonably fixed.

(i) Constraints

There will be a number of constraints on the conservation of an historic garden, by virtue of its significance, the cost of restoring it, or of proposals or encumbrances affecting it.

The primary constraint often will be financial. For gardens of State significance limited assistance may be available from the Heritage Conservation Fund administered by the Heritage Council of New South Wales. Owners of properties which are permanently protected under the Heritage Act may also be eligible for municipal rate relief and/or reduction in land tax through a reduced 'heritage' valuation.

Other constraints include proposals such as roadwidening, power transmission lines, sewer lines and unsympathetic adjoining development.

(ii) Philosophy

It must be appreciated that gardens are organic creations, constantly changing as plants grow and die. The relationships between plants and buildings, between plants and other plants and their setting, patterns of shade and light, the garden microclimate, and vistas to and from the garden, all change gradually with the years. These changes are often almost imperceptible and it is only when one returns to a familiar garden after many years absence that one realises the magnitude of the changes which accompany growth and decay.

In addressing the problem of determining objectives in garden restoration Peter Spooner asserts that "the concept of restoring a building is acceptable because the designer's vision was fully expressed in the newly completed structure." With a garden, however, it may well take 50 years before the garden reaches the mature state envisaged by the designer and during that time all sorts of changes will have occurred to adulterate and modify the original vision.

Trees will have grown to fulfill their landscape role, vistas will have been formed and often, through subsequent overgrowth and neglect, obscured, and in most Federation gardens, flowerbeds will have long since disappeared, thereby imparting a sombre character to a formerly bright garden.

Spoooner compares the restoration of historic gardens to the science fiction idea of bringing people back to life. "At what stage of their life were they most characteristic of themselves?", he asks. "Certainly not at birth". Spooner

concludes that what one should seek in the restoration of a garden is not necessarily an accurate reconstruction at any one point in time but rather a distillation of its most characteristic qualities.

While those few with the money and time to accurately recreate a Federation garden from scratch are welcome to try, it is suggested that the best conservation philosophy for most owners to adopt is one which accepts the changes which have occurred with time, but which emphasises the major period of development.

It should also be remembered that whilst the function of a garden may not have changed in the last eighty years, the amount of leisure time which the owner has to spend in the garden has increased considerably and labour-saving maintenance devices are more readily available.

Proposals and plans

The completed plans and drawings of the existing condition of the garden and the related research should provide a clear picture of what the site was like and how the grounds were used at various times. It is useful to prepare a base plan with a series of overlays showing the evolution of the garden from its inception to the present day.

Planning decisions should be based on reliable historical evidence or on that which may be reasonably assumed; for example, that two surviving ends of a pathway were once joined.

If the plant material is in good condition and reflects the character and pattern of the landscape it should be retained. Each decision, however, should be made on an individual basis, with constant reference to the statement of significance.

The development of the plans and proposals must make allowances for the location of services and of proposals such as house additions, garages, garden sheds, greenhouses. Particular attention should be paid to the protection of plant material during building demolition and construction works. Protect plants from paint spray in the same way you would protect a carpet indoors.

Planning for new water supply facilities for both garden maintenance and fire control should take into account all site features, including tree root systems.

The same consideration should be made for power supply lines, whether above or below ground. Allow an adequate supply for garden maintenance equipment and lighting. Will plant growth affect overhead power lines, necessitating regular pruning?

Prepare a planting scheme along with the garden layout. Commence with the ideal situation but be prepared to look for appropriate substitute plants if certain ones are unobtainable.

Begin a programme of research and acquisition of plant material.

Seeds, roots and cuttings may be obtained with permission from old private gardens, graveyards and cemeteries. Plant exchange between gardeners is an old established tradition and may lead to the discovery of a hard-to-find plant. A column for this purpose is featured in the Australian Garden Journal. An increasing number of nurseries cater to the needs of garden restorers, and there are now specialist societies such as Heritage Roses in Australia.

Early in the conservation project, while research is under way, establishment of an in-house nursery is recommended. This need not occupy a large area, but should be well-organised with all the material labelled. This will make the receipt, propagation and maintenance of plant material much easier.

Gardens open for public inspection will require visitors' control measures and possibly the installation of facilities such as toilets, parking spaces, and signposting. It may be important to exclude visitors from certain sensitive areas of the site. The need for public liability insurance cover and/or indemnification of owners against compensation claims must be considered.

Implementation of the plan

On the completion of garden proposals and cost estimates, working drawings can be prepared. From these the actual landscape construction will be carried out. Large, ambitious projects may require supervision by a landscape architect, although most gardens were created by and can be restored by enthusiastic amateurs.

If funds or labour are limited, establish a staged programme in which construction takes place over several years and the costs are spread out. In phasing landscape work, major tree planting should take priority so that trees become established as work proceeds. Certain trees and shrubs may need to be planted at particular times to take advantage of favourable climatic conditions.

Tree surgery is another important issue during implementation of the plan. If an historic garden has languished without care for some time, this may be a major component of the conservation programme. For difficult tree surgery tasks, engage a qualified operator with a reliable reputation. A good job, followed by appropriate maintenance, should last for a considerable time, without the need for frequent and costly return visits by the tree surgeon.

Maintenance

As much as anything, gardening is maintenance. Federation gardens often demand high levels of maintenance - it must be remembered that our forebears often had more access to hired help

and had fewer leisure-time distractions. Your plan can take this into account by deleting beds of annuals or perhaps replacing them with lower maintenance ground covers and perennials.

Prepare a maintenance calendar, particularly for planting times, pest control, pruning, weeding, painting of garden structures, lawn mowing. The Encyclopaedia of Australian Gardening and Shirley Stackhouse's Gardening Year are useful guides.

Restoration of the original garden concepts may require careful pruning and tree surgery. Removal of unhealthy or poorly located plants may be necessary.

If you want to keep fit and be historically accurate, try using a push-type mower for grass cutting, rather than a noisy power mower.

Certain items of equipment, such as drip irrigation systems or a ride on mower for larger lawns, while initially expensive, may reduce the long-term maintenance costs.

Review

Any good plan of conservation and management should include provision for review. Re-assess the plan after a reasonable period of one, two or five years, depending on the size and scope of the project, and, if necessary, amend it within the established constraints.