

## Report on February meeting

# How Australian Gardens are changing



### **Special guest, well known Television personality, horticulturist Angus Stewart.**

With the benefit of broad and effective promotion by our publicity manager Jillian Peck, our February meeting attracted almost 90 attendees, almost half of whom were visitors. It helped of course that our guest speaker has such a high public profile.

Angus spoke with conviction, noting that when the first Europeans came to Australia to live, they brought with them plants they knew and which were familiar. These were used to replace the existing natural flora in their new gardens 'down under', and included of course food plants, but also roses camellias, perennials and of course cottagey flowers. This style of gardening predominated over the next 100 years and more, and as Angus pointed out, their garden style included the ubiquitous Hills Hoist and of course needed a Victa lawn mower to control the introduced lawn grasses.

A rise in the awareness of Australian plants began mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the belief that 'no maintenance' gardening was possible, some people beginning to introduce Callistemons, Melaleucas, Acacias and even some inappropriate Eucalypts. (I remember Grevillea rosmarinifolia and Eucalyptus nicholli adorning our home garden in the 1960's. JK) Mostly, those who grew such plants were considered odd, and the plants regarded with a cultural cringe, especially as many of these first plantings of the 'wrong' plants grew too large, became woody and straggly, and did little to impress other gardeners that Australian plants were viable. Of course, in these early days very little knowledge or information was available, and the native plant growers, pioneers of the soon to be established Australian Plants Society, undertook much trial and error planting, with more error than wins. These days however, there is much research being done on which plants will become the new Australian plant heroes, and with all the books available, and the plethora of information easily accessed on the WWW, almost anything can be found to help growers get the right plants. A quick look at <http://www.gardeningwithangus.com.au> will show just how much information is becoming available.



That said, there is still no better opportunity to increase knowledge than to be an active member of the APS, and learn from other growers just what does well, and how some plants respond to differing situations.

**So, just where is the Australian garden heading ?**

The most prominent driver is climate change, and it seems

everyone from the government to your local nurseryman has a theory on just where

*Were you there ?*



*Maybe in this one*

we are heading, and are planning appropriately. Climate change is now influencing design and plant choices.

Also, bushfire is an increasing hazard in many areas, and there is some push to find plants which are better adapted to slow fire progress, and even plants which can be defined as fire-retardant, although these are few in number, and not likely to be included commonly in most backyard landscapes.

Another factor to consider that gardens are becoming much smaller.

The traditional quarter acre block is no longer available in new suburban developments, and these gardens now feature small courtyards with few plants. Importantly, trees are no longer

grown, and even medium to large shrubs are rarely planted. Angus lamented ‘the backyard is fast becoming an endangered species’.

The focus of the talk now moved to early cultivars of Australian plants, in particular the benefit of Grevillea “Robyn Gordon”, which was enthusiastically grown by gardeners of all persuasions. The benefits of being adaptable to all but poorly drained soils, and flowering for most of the year, this proved a game changer for the appreciation of Australian plants, and was a forerunner for a number of cultivars in following years. These days there are many, many more Grevillea cultivars with large showy flowers, and everyone can be persuaded to grow these new plants without realizing that they are Australian plants.

From discussing the move to the new style of plants, the focus moved to fertilisers, and the development of specialised roots in many Australian genera. In particular, Angus noted the proteoid roots of Banksia and Grevillea, and their susceptibility to phosphorous in varied plant foods. The importance of iron, manganese and other micro-nutrients was discussed, and by the questions asked, is an area where many growers find difficulty.

Much has been done in improving the quality of potting mixes for Australian plants, and also developing particular fertiliser preparations to give plants their best chance of performing to their potential.



In conjunction with soil scientist Simon Leake, Angus has produced a formulation which he believes will suit the widest range of Australian plants. Known as “Bush Tucker”, this is a chicken manure based product which has been widely trialled by both nurseries and home gardeners, and has proven very suitable for any plants, including those in the Proteaceae family. Angus pointed to Waratahs, also in the Proteaceae family, as being very partial to a good feed, in Autumn to promote the flowering and again in late spring to push new growth after a hard prune. This advice was noted by all, and it now only awaits time to see if any member was brave enough to give it a go.

In discussing new plants coming onto the market, Angus praised the trials done over many years by growers of Kangaroo Paws, Anigosanthos spp., and how these have been accepted as garden plants by most people. Whilst there have been some disappointing results with early releases, the newer cultivars based on Anigosanthos flavidus are proving very reliable, flowering strongly for many months, and adapting to a wide range of garden conditions. Angus has for years been trialling some newer varieties, and has released a range of yellow, green, pink, lilac and mauve forms. Each of these is based on older taller forms, and are very hardy and long lived. These cultivars, he says, are guaranteed to grow well, unless sprayed with roundup.

*mmmm that's a hard one*

Other plants he has been working developing include a range of smaller Callistemons and Acacias. He pointed to the advantages of these newer, smaller forms, being able to be grown in smaller gardens, and also, if a small cultivar is grown successfully, gardeners may be encouraged to grow more natives.

Some of his recently released plants include *Telopea* ‘Cranberry Gem’, which he says is much hardier than *Telopea speciosissima*, and a prolifically flowering low shrubby form of *Goodenia ovata*, which has large yellow flowers for much of the year, and maintains a compact shape. (Mark and Carolyn have some plants of this in their Moruya garden, planted over a year ago, and now about 50cm high and a metre wide, growing very happy as undershrubs, forming a bright green hedge.)

Acacias include *A. fimbriata* ‘Crimson Blush’ which has most attractive reddish new growth, *A. cognata* ‘Zest’, which adds another form to the myriad of cultivars already available, *Agonis flexuosa* ‘Copper Wave’ with as the name suggests, coppery growth, *Banksia* ‘Bush Candles’, *Callistemon* ‘Green Envy’, *C.* ‘Little Jet’, which grows with a narrow vertical habit, and *C.* ‘All Aglow’ with very red new growth which can be maintained all year with regular pruning. *Casuarina* ‘Shagpile’ which is similar to other prostrate forms of *Casuarina glauca*, which can spread quite a distance but maintain a prostrate habit. One of the nicest looking new plants is *Tristaniopsis* ‘Burgundy Blush’ with bright new growth similar to that seen on the ubiquitous *Photinea* hedges which seem to be everywhere.

Pruning is something we will have to get more used to if we are to grow these plants to their best advantage, as it is the new growth which gives them their stunning appearance.

In finishing, Angus said we must just get into our gardens and experiment.

After a quick question session, in which Angus discussed the advantages of deep stem planting, and talked more about fertilisers, the meeting adjourned for a sumptuous morning tea, provided by some members of the committee. During this time, Angus was badgered with more questions, and sold some of his latest book “The Australian Native Garden, A Practical Guide”, whilst others spent the time profitably at the plant stall.

## **Plant Sale**

Summer has been fairly kind to us this year, with some rain and not too much heat, so many were ready to plant.

Angus had brought down some of his Kangaroo Paws, in 6 different colour forms. These were very popular after he had spent some time expounding their benefits. He also brought along a red foliated form of Native Ginger, *Alpinia caerulea*.

Grafted plants from Phil Trickett were also popular, and Mark and John had some smaller plants to encourage everyone to add some different plants to their gardens.



*Bees to a honeypot, as plants go on sale*

## Raffle



*All above board, as Angus draws the first ticket*



*Sue, surprised by her luck, receives her gift from Angus*

Next, when everyone was settled, the special effort prizes were drawn.

There was quite a stir when Sue Knight, who had control of selling the tickets, won first prize, a signed copy of Angus's book, but the meeting was assured by Angus, who drew the ticket that there was nothing untoward.

Those who won the Kangaroo Paws were very happy, and altogether there were 10 winners, all going home happy. The last prize was a punnet of "Bush Tucker" fertilizer, drawn after Angus managed to give the product a good sales pitch.

## Show and Tell

To finish off, Angus and John spent quite some time talking about the many plants members had brought along for the 'Show and Tell' specimen table. All were quite impressed with the many plants members have growing in the gardens, and flowering so well this time of the



year.

It was the perfect opportunity to showcase the value of Australian plants to a wider audience, and Membership Officer Jenny reported that she gave out quite a number of membership applications, and already a new member has joined. Let's hope for more.

This meeting proved to be an inspiration to all attending, and the committee would like to see the group host one each year. Obviously a well known speaker able to attract broad interest is an advantage, and we would like to hear from any member who has a contact with such a

*Angus displays some of Catriona's out of season Waratah flowers*

high profile person.

*John shows the diversity of the many Grevillea flowers members are growing*

There is a fair amount of work in arranging such events, but this one proved to be financially beneficial for the group, with over \$100 raised from donations at the door and a similar amount from the sale of tickets for our special prize draw.

The Committee thanks Mark Noake for arranging for Angus to visit, and for him and Carolyn providing accommodation for Angus during his stay.

We thank all involved in making this day so successful. Thanks to Amanda Marsh for the photos.