

Victorian Heritage Database Report

# Maranoa Gardens And Beckett Park

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**Location:**

Cnr Kireep Road & Yarrbat Avenue, BALWYN VIC 3103 - Property No G13080

**Heritage Status / Level of Significance:**

State

**Heritage Inventory (HI) Number:**

**Listing Authority:** HI

**Statement of Significance:**

Maranoa Gardens, commenced in 1901 as a private garden composed entirely of Australasian flora by J.M. Watson, given over to public ownership on Watson's death in 1926 and maintained since then, is of State cultural significance:

- For the manner in which its development has a strong ability to demonstrate attitudes to Australian flora, especially its horticultural use; this is manifest in the early date of Watson's development of the garden (1901-26), the continuing maintenance of this theme (1926 to present), and the integral role with many pioneering figures in the history of Australian horticulture (especially Watson, French, Chapman, Lord and Swaby); and
- As one of few public gardens in Victoria devoted exclusively to Australian plants.

Beckett Park, purchased by the council for public recreation purposes in 1917 and continuously maintained in that use, is of Local cultural significance:

- As a representative example of a local park, well used by local residents throughout its history, distinguished by several structures which relate to its early planning and development (gates, tower, war memorial and drinking fountain), and remnants of the early formal layout which took advantage of the ridge line and commanding views. Beckett Park forms a vital complement to Maranoa Gardens both through its shared history and its physical linkage (permitting undisturbed parkland views from Maranoa Gardens).

[Probable natural values of the area, including the grassy woodland of Beckett Park, have not been assessed as part of this report.]

## ANALYSIS

Any analysis of Maranoa must inevitable focus on the manner in which it demonstrates an interest in creating a garden using Australian plants. Many early colonial gardens, from at least the 1830s in Tasmania and the 1850s in Victoria, retained native bushland or vegetation (with selective clearing), often interplanted with exotic species. This selective retention of native trees and plants was increasingly combined and superseded by the planting of Australian plants, including specimen trees (e.g. the Bunya Bunya Pine, *Araucaria bidwillii*), windbreaks, hedges and shrubs, as a substitute for exotics. Generally such Australian plants were chosen for their horticultural and ornamental qualities such as form, foliage or flowering, rather than any nationalistic sentiment. Australian trees, especially acacias and blue gums, were also used for their rapid growth (e.g. street tree planting in Sturt Street, Ballarat, in the 1860s) and ability to shelter valuable exotic plants (e.g. plantings of acacias as windbreaks at many of the regional botanic gardens in Victoria). [See John Foster, 'Natives in the Nineteenth Century Garden', *Australian Garden History*, 2 (4), January/February 1991, pp.3-5 and Richard

Barley, 'Plants from old nursery catalogues: availability of Australian plants in the nursery trade in Victoria during the nineteenth century', *Australian Garden History*, 2 (3), November/December 1990, pp.17-19.]

William Guilfoyle commenced the Australian Border (then known as the Australian Plantation) at the south-eastern corner of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in 1888, developed chiefly for the display of eucalypts. Whilst many Australian plants had earlier been grown in the gardens, this was their earliest large scale landscape use in the gardens. Many photographs of these trees featured in Guilfoyle's *Australian Plants Suitable for Gardens, Parks and Timber Reserves*, etc. (1911). Guilfoyle's fern gully also prominently featured Australian ferns, with the spectacular tree ferns providing a great display not only in the botanic gardens but also in private ferneries, shade houses and conservatories. [Nigel Lewis Richard Aitken Pty Ltd in association with staff of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, 'Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne: Conservation Analysis and Conservation Constraints, 1988, pp.124-126.]

Whilst there had certainly been a great interest in Australian flora during the nineteenth century and even a willingness to experiment with its horticultural use, bush gardens (in the mid to late twentieth century sense) were unknown or extremely rare. Members of field naturalist clubs were strong promoters of Australian flora and the popularity of 'wildflower gardens' increased in the early years of this century, aided by shows and exhibitions. The Field Naturalists Club of Victoria was formed in 1880 and its members include many with horticultural and botanical interests. Although field excursions were the norm, many members were receptive to the horticultural use of Australian plants (especially 'wild flowers') in their own gardens, including of course, the creator of Maranoa, John Watson, who was a member of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria. [Graeme Butler, *Camberwell Conservation Study*, 1991, vol.2, p.88.] Reservation of National Parks were another means by which an interest in native flora was demonstrated and argument was advanced by members of the field naturalists clubs. The dates of reservation of Tower Hill (1892), Mount Buffalo (1898), Wilson's Promontory (1905-08) and Mallacoota Inlet (1909) are comparable with a renewed interest in the horticultural use of Australian flora around the turn of the century. The new appreciation of the bush in the 1890s was in part encouraged and exemplified by the 'Bulletin School' of writing and the 'Heidelberg School' of painting. [See National Trust classification report for Buchan Caves for a discussion of early national parks.]

As John Foster has pointed out, native and exotic plants co-existed in local gardens, just as Australian nationalism and Imperial patriotism did in a far wider social sphere. But with the rise of nationalistic feeling leading up to and following Federation came a more zealous promotion of Australian plants which manifested itself in the promotion of wattles. Ornithologist Archibald Campbell (1853-1929) was a great enthusiast for wattles and founded the Victorian Wattle Club in 1899; this was later reorganised to become part of a far larger national body. The Australian Wattle Day League formed in Melbourne just before the First World War and gained momentum during the War. Its object was to encourage the display of patriotic feeling by promoting the wattle as a national floral emblem and by celebrating wattle day on 1 September. By 1911 the Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) had been incorporated in the Commonwealth Coat of Arms and during the war years the celebration of Wattle Day rose in popularity (to the detriment of indigenous stands of acacia which were often savaged to provide boughs for display). Campbell established a garden at Kilsyth in 1913, much praised for its large and varied collection of acacias. [Allan McEvey, 'Campbell, Archibald James (1853-1929)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1891-1939, vol. 7, MUP, 1979, pp.543-544.] Another wattle enthusiast was Edward E. Pescott (1872-1954), horticulturist, naturalist and author, who was principal of Burnley School of Horticulture from 1909-1916. Pescott was secretary of the Victorian branch of the Australian Wattle Day League (1910-20) and of the national organisation (1913-22). His tireless promotion was not restricted to wattles, and his book *Native Flowers of Victoria* (1914) was a pioneering general guide to local flora. [Ian McLaren, 'Pescott, Edward Edgar (1872-1954)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1891-1939, vol. 11, MUP, 1988, pp.206-208.] Spring displays of wild flowers in Melbourne Town Hall (organised under the auspices of the Field Naturalist Club of Victoria) were a further stimulus to the horticultural use of Australian flora. Increased attention to Australian plants was also paid in gardening books, not only in standard texts such as *Brunnings*, but also in the proliferation of new pamphlets and booklets, several published by oil companies to encourage motoring to distant habitats.

Apart from the Australian border at the botanic gardens, three prominent gardens in Melbourne to feature Australian plants were Warrawee, Wattle Park and Maranoa. Warrawee, the Toorak garden of Mr Rutter Clark

was developed to a design by architect Walter Butler (c.1906-10) and was praised for its combination of formal terraces with wild garden beyond incorporating extensive use of Australian plants. [See Building, 11 June 1910.] Wattle Park (then known as The Grange) was owned from 1904-15 by a Mrs Welch (of the Ball and Welch department store) and was offered to the Hawthorn Tramways Trust after her death in 1915; it was subsequently developed by the Metropolitan Tramways Board (and its successors) from 1920 and featured extensive use of Australian plants both retained and planted. [Boyle, op.cit., p.116.]

What distinguished Maranoa, apart from its early date (the land developed by Watson with Australian plants was acquired in 1901 and 1911-12), was the nature of this garden as an isolated campus, almost in the form of an experimental garden which transgressed the mores of Watson's domicilic Canterbury. Other pioneering designed landscapes outside Melbourne included Alfred Deakin's Ballara, at Point Lonsdale, developed from 1907 (which retained much indigenous vegetation) and the driveway at Titanga near Lismore, planted with Australian trees from 1918-47 by owner Patrick Lang (whose grandfather J.L. Currie had planted Australian trees extensively on the property in the late nineteenth century). Walter Burley Griffin's landscaping works, especially of Newman College, also strongly promoted the use of Australian plants. [See National Trust Classification Reports.] An important transition in the history of Maranoa was the handover from a private owner to the public ownership of the council in 1926, when a policy of exclusively Australian plantings - New Zealand plantings were apparently removed - was pursued. This can probably be linked to the zeal with which the committee and other proponents viewed this unusual garden and the chance for it to serve as an exemplar for other gardens and designed landscapes. This propaganda quality was evident in the numerous newspaper and journal articles, an example of which was the 1937 Wild Life article.

Wattle Day was soon superseded by Anzac Day as the day of national celebration but interest in the horticultural use Australian plants continued to grow steadily during the twentieth century. The centenary of European settlement of Victoria (1934) gave Australian plants a boost, especially in public gardens, and the formation of the Society for Growing Australian Plants (founded in Melbourne in 1957) gave considerable impetus to the movement. At Maranoa Gardens, Watson's vision was continued by like-minded enthusiasts, including Frederick Chapman, Ernest Lord, Alf Swaby and Charles French.

Beckett Park forms a vital complement to Maranoa Gardens although each is a self-contained site. The open space of Beckett Park is vital to protect vistas from Maranoa Gardens and conversely, Maranoa gardens forms a thickly planted western backdrop to Beckett Park. The history of the two sites is interlinked, both in their early contiguity and also in their later intertwining (1962 and 1986 extensions to Maranoa Gardens). Beckett Park also contains several representative inter-war structures, which capture the spirit of its early development, and their formal placing marks a remnant of the early layout, so much in contrast to the informal nature of Maranoa Gardens.

Classified: 17/11/1997

NOTE: Maranoa Gardens has classification of State, and Beckett Park has classification of Local

## **Description**

### **DESCRIPTION**

Maranoa Gardens comprises approximately 7 acres (17 ha) and is situated in a locality of predominantly Edwardian and inter-war housing of suburban Balwyn. The site slopes gently up from north-west to south-east, with the crest of One Tree Hill being on the adjoining Beckett Park. The perimeter of the garden is protected by a high Cyclone wire fence and the garden is locked in the evening.

The original (or western) section of the garden is approached from Kireep Road through memorial gates commemorating the work of Frederick Chapman, honorary curator of the garden in its early years of public ownership. A major circuit path encircles a large lawn and joins with a vehicular drive serving the gardens depot. The large open lawn contains specimen trees, and mixed tree and shrub borders. The principal trees

include a large *Agathis robusta* (Queensland Kauri), *Archontophoenix cunninghamia* (Bangalow Palm) planted in 1928 (according to its plaque) on the site of Watson's garden shed, a large *Ficus* sp. and mature large eucalypts. This lawn backs onto a small section of cool temperate, wet sclerophyll and rainforest plantings, re-developed in 1988 and protected from northerly winds by a shade cloth screen. Some species in this area were sourced from a logging coupe on the Errinundra Plateau in East Gippsland. The north-west corner of the original garden is now occupied by plantings representing a dry sclerophyll forest, characterised by trees to 30m with an understorey of shrubs, herbs, grasses and lilies. Dry leaf and bark litter provides a strong contrast to the more manicured section open lawn. The south-west corner of the garden contains service buildings. The garden also contains several memorial trees, planted by distinguished Victorians.

The lawn extends into the 1962 extension and is bordered at the north-eastern corner by a rockery. The volcanic rocks of the 1962 construction were replaced by granite in 1987-88, and crushed quartz is used to top the soil. This section also contains plants of dry and arid regions and waterholes permit display of aquatic and semi-aquatic plants. A section of Beckett park was added to Maranoa Gardens in 1986 and this eastern extension is used to grow plants representing temperate woodland/heathland. The plants selected for this area were mainly low-growing and prostrate; these include prostrate forms of *Acacia*, *Damperia*, *Correa*, *Banksia* and *Grevillea* spp.

The entrance between Maranoa Gardens and Beckett park is marked by a specimen of *Lophostemon conferta* 'Variegata' (Variegated Brush Box) planted on 20 October 1962 by the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Edmund Herring to mark the extension of the gardens. Beckett Park is largely comprised of open sloping lawns on the ridge of One Tree Hill with scattered specimen trees (both Australian and exotic) and banks of planting largely confined to the perimeter. Trees of note include a *Leptospermum laevigatum* (Coastal Ti-tree) and a *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots Pine), both on the National Trust's Register of Significant Trees, and *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, *Acacia pycnantha*, *Araucaria bidwillii*, *Cupressus macrocarpa* and *Cupressus sempervirens*. The highest point is topped by a masonry lookout tower (1937) with panoramic views over Maranoa Gardens and Melbourne's eastern suburbs. On axis with the lookout (and along the western ridge of the hill) are the Gilpin drinking fountain (1937), of granite with characteristic art deco decoration and cubic forms, and a war memorial of stone with inset panels recording those who saw active service (WW2).

Heritage Study / Consultant	
Construction Date Range	
Architect / Designer	
Municipality	BOROONDARA CITY
Other names	
Hermes number	70197
Property number	G13080

*This place/object may also be State heritage listed. Check the Victorian Heritage Database. For further details, contact the local Council or go to Planning Schemes Online*