



Newsletter of Menai Wildflower Group

March 2021

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Report on 2020

Our monthly guest speaker program continued with such diverse topics as Science on Cook's Endeavour, edible native species to grow in our gardens, the flora of the Kimberley region, native plants for Sydney gardens, growing Isopogon/Petrophile and memories of the flora of Kangaroo Island, before the 2019-20 bushfires. We continued our support for scientific research into seed germination, and our donation of tubestock to regeneration projects has continued. We have been pleased to have some of our special efforts accepted into the planting programs of arboretums in Canberra and Mt Annan. Because our dedicated band of propagators managed to carry on their voluntary efforts even under rigid safety conditions, we managed to have enough stock to send to plant sales at Open Days at Grevillea Park and at Illawong late in the year. Such plant sales provide the funds to support our voluntary work in the local community and the regional projects we have undertaken.

The challenges in bringing together members and visitors during a pandemic were much feared, but with the help of the APS NSW team and our Sutherland Group neighbours we became reasonably competent online. Many felt that there were actual advantages in meeting online in the comfort of their homes. The online access also

allowed for reliable data collection, so this may help in future planning.

We were pleasantly surprised to realise that we had more members attending our outdoor propagation/maintenance activities as other avenues for recreation closed.

Apparently, we provided an oasis in a time of social isolation. Our usual band of senior citizens were joined by some younger people wanting to know more about gardening with natives. The fact that we had featured on an ABC -TV Gardening Australia segment earlier in the year did help.

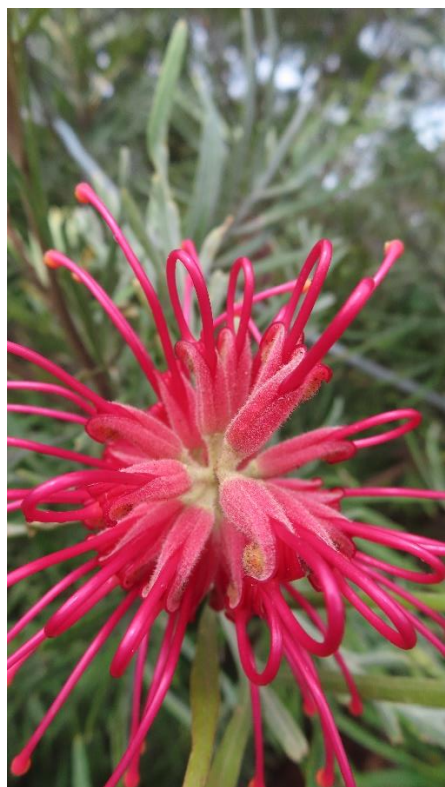
Finishing the year with a picnic in the gardens of "Silky Oaks" at Oakdale on a particularly fine day brighten our spirits as we admired the developments in the gardens and the great fernery there. We came away with renewed enthusiasm for the use of native plants in our landscape.

The award of the Order of Australia medal to our 2021 President, Peter Olde is recognition for his many years of research and discovery in the field of native flora. Menai Group is proud to bask just a little in the reflected glory of this award.

Prepared for APS NSW by Pam Pitkeathly, 2020 President.



Eucalyptus erythricorus, fire station garden. L Hedges.



Grevillea sp, flowering in fire station garden, December. P Forbes.

Vale Ron Fraser

Ron Fraser has been a well known face around Menai Wildflower Group for a number of years now. Sadly, he succumbed to mesothelioma mid-February this year after suffering this dreadful condition for many years. Ron's wife Gail had passed away last August.



Ron enjoying morning tea at the fire station last year.

The condition mesothelioma came to prominence a few years ago when a growing band of people who had worked with asbestos were discovered to have serious breathing problems. Asbestos had many uses including motor vehicle brakes and it was from here that Ron contracted the condition.

Ron had survived other life-threatening medical episodes – a heart attack many years ago and more recently a stroke. He recovered from both these

conditions and continued his life as if nothing had happened.

His interest in native plants became one of his great passions and he joined the Menai Wildflower Group to improve his knowledge of native plants – their propagation and growth. This is where Ron really found his niche working alongside Lloyd and his band of merry helpers as they worked to provide seedlings for many local and other projects.

His interest also ran to his own street where he decided to make improvements adjacent to his home and other areas in his local vicinity. He became well known at Bushcare where he was assisted with advice on what to plant where, and mulch to support his new plantings, some of which came from his own home-grown seedlings.

Ron will be best remembered for his willingness to become involved, his love of the members of MWG and his always pleasant demeanour.

Ron was honoured with a beautiful sheaf of mainly native flowers, created by Helen Patience and Margaret Olde on behalf of MWG, that sat proudly near Ron in the chapel. He is survived by his daughter Ros and son Greg.

Graeme Davies

Coming events

- 10 Mar** Last Wednesday evening meeting for summer. From 7pm Peter Olde will introduce some of the new native hybrids we can enjoy.
- 10 Apr** First Saturday meeting of 2021 starts at 1pm. Bruce Howell will explore the deep history of Illawong and tell us a little of the indigenous uses of plants.
- 8 May** Saturday, 1pm. Justin Collette will talk on germinating difficult Australian native plants, focusing on the interactions between season and fire.

With changing Covid19 restrictions, things can change quickly but the committee is planning to hold meetings at the Fire Station. There will be some changes to accommodate the Covid-19 safe protocol – increased hygiene and larger spacing of seats. Please confirm details before all events.

Editor

Reports from Meetings

Christmas Social 2020

Covid restrictions reduced our activities and participants but not our spirit. A small group turned up for the usual night of food, friendship and festive spirit. The BBQ got a workout and people were well fed. The gardens at least showed what a good year it had been for them.

Pam F. was double booked and technical difficulties meant that she had to phone in her Trivia Quiz from Young to be relayed by Lloyd. It was clumsy but perhaps added some humour to the proceedings and the fiendishly difficult (but enjoyable) quiz. (Sorry - difficult questions for a difficult year. I promise to make the next one easier. Pam F.)



Christmas Bells (*Blandfordia grandiflora*) flowering well near Lucas Height playing fields. P Forbes.

Retiring President Pam Pitkeathly had a big surprise when she was presented with a large blueberry ash in a magnificent pot, designed to live on her balcony overlooking the river. The story of how it was researched, considered, debated and finally acquired, repotted and hidden till the presentation moment was more entertaining than any thriller could be.

Pam P says ““Elli” is doing well in her new abode. Thank you, friends”.

All in all, a very pleasant evening, and a suitable finale to a weird year.

Mary Hedges

Illawong's Castle

Covid 19 has not disappeared but with no serious restrictions (what an interesting description of the situation compared to 12 months ago!) the committee decided to brave a face-to-face format for our first meeting of the new year in February. Having assessed the allowable audience, spread out our seating and put a few extra precautions in place, it was great to see the good turnout and have the chance for a chat and to purchase from Lloyd and the team's efforts at the nurseries.

Greg kindly stepped up to get us started with a talk on a folly at Illawong. Greg has a diverse background with interests in archaeology and local history which he combined to tell us about John Mystery's Castle, aka Adventure Castle, at Illawong Point. Greg admitted he didn't include much about plants, but it was nevertheless interesting to hear this quirky story from our local area. The highlight was when Joan admitted that, as a child, she had written away to receive some of John Mystery's Magic Beans (according to Greg these were hand-painted by John's wife). Joan's failed to grow as big as the fairy story but that's magic for you. Joan obviously developed her horticultural interests at an early age.

John Mystery was indeed a man of mystery with a series of name changes, range of talents and varied careers. By the time he built the castle at Illawong, he was using the name Lester Sinclair. He had both written patriotic songs in WW2 (another highlight was Greg playing a competing version of “We're going to hang out the washing on the Ziegfried line”) and was a successful author of over 300 children's books, under the name of John Mystery. Lester's wife Ellen Sinclair was also a successful author of cooking books and the cooking editor for the Australian Women's Weekly for over 20 years.



Adventure Castle 1950s, Picture Sutherland.

The large castle he built on the point of Illawong only lasted for a brief period during the 1940s and

early 50s. It served as a home, a base for a publishing empire and an amusement park. There was a number of fantasy sculptures carved into the sandstone, a steam train and crenelated wall. It was accessed from Oatley Park by his own ferry. Despite Sinclair's best efforts the amusement park was not a success and in 1953 the castle closed and it was demolished in the 1960s.

Today a section of crenelated wall and some reused, cut stone blocks are all that is left to remind us of this once large and ambitious structure.

P. Forbes.

Flannel Flower flowering in mountains

This year has seen a brilliant display of Pink Flannel Flowers in the Blue Mountains after the devastating fires of 2019-20.



Bank of dainty pink flowers. P Forbes.

A group of MWG members visited Narrow Neck, near Katoomba to see what was happening. We were amazed at the size and density of the flowering; an absolutely stunning display. There were quite a few people enjoying the spectacle.



Enjoying the spectacle. J Prats.

We continued up to Lithgow to another area where we found another beautiful display. If you are tempted to check them out, Narrow Neck is a short drive from Katoomba on a good dirt road. You will see the flowers beside the road; just find a parking

spot, hop out and enjoy! More photos are available on Facebook.



Lloyd checking out *A. forsythii* near Lithgow. P Forbes.

A wonderful week in the Snowy Mountains

Our biennial trek to (and in) the Snowy Mountains was well attended and much enjoyed by members. John Arney from Sutherland APS (with additional help from Lloyd and Mary) kindly organised a week at Charlottes Pass in Pygmy Possum Lodge and generously invited MWG to join in. The lodge had been reconfigured and operated slightly differently to ensure Covid 19 compliance, but it was a great social and botanical event as usual.





Leaving Sydney on a hot summer Sunday, we all appreciated the cooler climate in the Snowys, although Monday was still very warm. As the week progressed, we did get some rain and cold days but it was easy to entertain ourselves in our comfortable accommodation. We also took the opportunity to sample the delights of the Wild Brumby Distillery near Jindabyne which serves a range of German inspired meals as well as distilling Schnapps in many flavours.



Misty morning from Mt Stilwell. P Forbes,



Paper daisies on Mt Kosciuszko. P Forbes,



The walks were familiar to us (Porcupine Rocks, Sawpit Creek, Mount Stilwell and Kosciuszko summit) as John selects the best walks to showcase the scenery and plants. Weather dictates the timing and intensity of flowering so each visit reveals something new and refreshes us with clean mountain air and magnificent views. We were also all much fitter at the end of the week!

More great photographers, including Sharon and Jason (now happily settled on the South Coast), John P. and Pam F., have uploaded a selection of photographs to enjoy on our Facebook page and there is also a video by Liz Aitken on the NSW APS You Tube channel.

Pam Forbes

Our Actinotus forsythii at the Australian National Botanic Gardens

On the return from the APS Snowy trip, Mary and I stopped off in Canberra. We visited the ANBG on the Monday to look for the Pink Flannel Flowers MWG donated. We were pleased to be greeted by four of them in tubs in full flower at the entrance to the reception area.

There were several more in the gardens between the reception centre and the Café and more again amongst the Sydney sandstone vegetation.

One of the horticulturists we spoke to said they had not lost any of the plants we donated. A very respectable effort for such a touchy plant in Sydney. The ANBG has the advantage of the lower humidity levels of Canberra but also has to contend with lower rainfall. Their horticulturists have done well.



My tummy is much more interesting than Pink Flannel Flowers. Lloyd and Mary with bored visitor. M Hedges.

The Mt Annan Botanic Gardens have also had success with their *Actinotus forsythii*. Armed with Lloyd's tips and their own seeds, both organisations hope to propagate further displays.

While at the ANBG, we had a look at the recently completed Banksia Garden which caught our attention last time we were there. It has come along, with most banksias growing well but also with a few losses. Some were already in full flower. It is not often you get to see the WA banksias in flower in the east and it's especially impressive as this garden is only 200m from the ANBG's rainforest display! These blokes know what they are doing.

Miniature Crowea

This is my Crowea miniature, originally from Brian Roach, I think, competing with non-natives in a partly shaded garden. Has more flowers than ever this season.



Pam Pitkeathly

Of interest

Deadline for contributions to the Winter newsletter is Sunday 30 May.

Items may be sent to the Editor (Email mwfeditor@gmail.com) **before** the deadline. Preferred format is **unformatted** text in a **Word** file and separate photographs as .jpg. If you are writing a report on a meeting, early submission is appreciated.

Subject to Covid-19 restrictions, our face-to-face activities will continue in 2021 but please do not feel an obligation to return until you are comfortable and of course, **do not come if you feeling unwell. Please confirm that events are on before attending.**

A combined propagation day and garden working bee is held at Illawong Rural Fire Station every **Tuesday morning from 9am**, and is a great opportunity to be involved in interesting projects and learn new skills. Members can assist in MWG ventures or propagate species for themselves or they can join the maintenance team weeding, planting and tinkering in the garden and compound.

We also propagate at the **Tip nursery on Monday** morning and extra volunteers are always welcome.

Please contact Lloyd (95431216) for more details on these opportunities.

Keep up to date with our [Facebook](#) page or [website](#).

Meetings look like they may be at the fire station rather than online. Don't forget though that you can catch up on past meetings and events via the APS NSW Facebook channel. See [APS NSW You Tube channel](#)

The APS NSW website www.austplant.com.au/ has details of the many online opportunities which you can enjoy and what other districts are doing, particularly our neighbours East Hills and Sutherland:

<http://easthills.austplants.com.au/>

<http://sutherland.austplants.com.au/> .

Editor

Nursery notes

At the Compound nursery Anne and Jan are keeping up a supply of cuttings for members and sales. New recruit Cameron is also picking up the trade quickly.

The gardens are getting much more regular attention than they used to thanks to Pam F. and Marian P., Rudi, Greg and Tony.

We have never had it so good.

We would like to add to our native bee habitat with a home for Blue Banded Bees. They are solitary bees which nest in tunnels they build in clay. We have plans for an attractive home for them but we

need a few buckets of fine clay. If you have any in your garden that you could donate please drop it off at the fire station on one of our working days or meetings.

The Tip Nursery has been heavily involved with growing sheoaks for NP's Glossies in the Mist scheme. Marion W. and Pam F. have so far produced about 5000 for this year's planting but with some mass plantings in the pipeline this may increase to 9000. We continue to produce our Pink Flannel Flowers too for those who like a challenge and can take disappointment!



Team with newly constructed tadpole pool. Note woman working and men standing nearby with tools. P Forbes.



Pat and Lauren picking up a few thousand tubed sheoaks for a planting in the Southern Highlands. L Hedges.



Froggy friend. P Forbes.

The maintenance of the nursery by Greg and helpers has consumed much time as well but the nursery is now almost back to where it should be.

John has continued tidying the benches and Greg's latest project is drainage improvements. The nursery site has become quite waterlogged and Greg and Lloyd have been working on some drainage lines to reduce the bog in the greenhouse. As work resumed in the second week we saw that the half-finished drain had been colonised by tadpoles. Some strident Greenies halted work till an alternate home for the tadpoles was constructed.

The final result should hopefully suit humans and frogs.

It was a froggy day elsewhere in the nursery where three adults were found enjoying the warmth and shelter of the hot house in the changeable weather. Drainage is now pretty close to finished and we are looking forward to reduced mud.

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