

Last Meeting... report by Geoff Gosling

Photos by Jillian Peck

VISIT TO HORSE ISLAND

Pruning Grevilleas, Ray Brown, Manager Illawarra Grevillea Park

The Australian Plant Society conducted its November meeting at Horse Island, the beautiful garden home of member Christina Kennedy and her husband Trevor.

Christina is very generous with granting the APS access to the property which is really a showcase garden of NSW built on native Australian plants. Christina said 'there is only one non-native plant on the property' whilst pointing at a magnificent magnolia.

The focus of the day was a pruning demonstration by Ray Brown, long time curator of the Illawarra Grevillea Gardens at Bulli. Such is Ray's renown and Horse Island's reputation, numbers had to be limited on a first come, first served basis and 58 passionate native plant lovers turned up.

Ray, a man who says he doesn't like giving talks, started his hedge trimmer and within a few minutes had whittled a bank of grevillea into a uniformly cut hedge which he assured the audience would grow back and flower better after the experience.



Vice President Geoff introduces Ray Brown to the gathering.



He then moved to his secateurs and demonstrated how to cut out the 'pointy bits' and tidy up giving the hedge a much bushier and greener appearance. All through this demonstration, he kept up a steady flow of talk, giving hints of when to prune and how to propagate new plants from the trimmings.

For example, he discussed an appropriate time for pruning and suggested a rough rule of thumb was during or near the end of flowering.

Ray also drew an important distinction between hybrids, grafted and indigenous plants saying that hybrids will generally recover from whatever pruning they are given but the others need greater care, rather depending on what they are.

Hedge trimmer in hand, Ray demonstrates his version of 'gentle' pruning of a grevillea hedge

Ray said that some grevilleas, mostly hybrids, will reshoot if they are pruned back into hard wood but others would not. The key here was to either examine hard wood to see whether it had nodules on it that may provide a new budding point or to experiment with a small or hidden part of the plant, i.e., cut a bit off and see what happens. If it reshoots, you know that you can take more off. If it doesn't reshoot, leave it alone.

The group then moved into a different section of the garden where Ray again started the hedge trimmer and cut about 60% off the height of the bushes. He explained that even though he was getting near to the 'hard wood' of the plant, that particular variety could withstand such hard pruning and would bounce back.



Stand back, and watch what happens.

During the picnic lunch, we were able to examine the calendar produced by the Friends of Eurobodalla Regional Botanic Gardens and make a presentation to Christina, of some grafted plants which were the work of Phil Trickett, who is gaining an enviable reputation for his success in grafting a range of difficult to grow Australian plants.



Christina accepting a gift of grafted plants from Vice President Geoff, and Secretary Michele

Afterward, Ray started again. However, he discarded his hedge trimmer for a chainsaw on an extendable arm. This allowed him to reach under an overgrown grevillea (about 2 metres high and 3 metres wide) that had not been pruned for many years. He cut through the major branches and trunk so that all foliage could be dragged aside leaving just the stump.



Deciding on a plan of action



I'll just start here



There you go, Job finished



Now for the next one

He again explained that this variety of grevillea could withstand this treatment which, in fact, would extend its life for many years, provided it receives solid watering until it shoots again. He reiterated several times during the demonstration that any plant that is pruned must receive an additional ration of water until it recovers from the shock.



Assisted by Julian, a gardener at Horse Island, Ray begins the serious work of tidying up years of accumulated deadwood.

After giving three other large plants the same treatment, he moved around to the steps of the “Old House” where two magnificent ‘standard’ grevilleas were growing on either side. (these were G. ‘Royal Mantle’, normally a groundcover, grafted to G. robusta, a large tree which develops a strong trunk).

Christina explained that these plants had not received any pruning attention since she planted them 20 years ago.

Underneath a lush outer surface was 20 years of accumulated dead growth.

After tying back the lush outer surface, Ray again brought the chainsaw into play and removed several trailer loads of debris.



Christina is not so sure, and offers to help hold away the top growth, and to keep a watchful eye on what is going on 'down there'



Christina is desperately holding on to what ever living growth she can, attempting to save her precious plant which has adorned the house entrance for decades

For many of the audience who are used to more sedate pruning with clippers and secateurs, it was an eye-popping experience.

Many comments afterwards showed how educational and entertaining the day had been, mostly because our demonstrator

Ray turned out to so loquacious and witty. It's always great when an expert is able to speak well and share their great knowledge with others and Ray did it well.



You need to look hard, but Ray is under there doing a final tidy up. That's a very large pile of prunings for one plant.

"I don't know what all the fuss was about" said Ray, " look at the finished product. Ready for another 20 years at least". We must agree that the plant does look fantastic, and there is no sign of work having been done. The sign of a knowledgeable gardener.

The day finished with a stroll around the rest of the 10 hectare garden, which really is a delight.

If you wish to know more about Horse Island, there are a number of websites, and Christina's book, simply titled "Horse Island", is an impressive publication presenting her thoughts on gardening and in particular her innovative use of Australian plants. The book, published by Zabriskie Books, is still available for purchase from good book stores locally. What a terrific gift for anyone interested in gardening.