

Episode 3 – Herb Garden, Fern Gully & Sensory Garden

A note on the transcript for this episode – the voices of visitors have been captured as deidentified ‘Vox pops’ (the opinions of people recorded talking informally) or in a group style interview.

[00:00:00]

Erica Tandori: What really gets me here in this spot is the wind. The massive trees, the canopy, the greenery. And that breeze! Feel that swishing, whooshing, caressing ... as you walk through and the sounds of the water and the birds just take over again. It's a relief to the senses!

[00:00:42]

Introduction: You're listening to Sonica Botanica, stories and sounds from the Gardens, created by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which this episode was created and on which the Gardens are sited, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

Episode 3 shares stories and sensory responses to three collections located near each other at Melbourne Gardens. And although not essential to the listening experience, we invite you to explore these collections in the sequence they'll appear in this episode: Herb Garden, Fern Gully and the Sensory Garden.

[00:01:28]

Renee Wierzbicki: *My name is Renee Wierzbicki. I'm a horticulturalist here at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria at the Melbourne site.*

I'd just like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of this land. In particular, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung the Bunurong and Boonwurrung of the Kulin Nation. They hold the customs and the traditions of this land and the Herb and Medicinal Collection here at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria is deeply connected to traditional custodians of land across the globe. I feel a deep connection to all these different cultures through their uses of plants. And I want to acknowledge those custodians of the land that we're on today, their Elders past, present and emerging.

[00:02:16]

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Chris Cole: *My name is Chris Cole. I'm the Executive Director at Melbourne Gardens.*

The Sensory Garden, the Fern Gully, and the Herb Garden are all located near the middle of the Gardens.

[00:02:27]

Renee Wierzbicki: It's easy to go from one to the other, starting at the high point of the Herb and Medicinal Collection, and then weaving your way down through the Fern Gully to the Sensory Garden.

[00:02:37]

Chris Cole: The design naturally leads from one to the other. The Fern gully is one of the most unusual and intact areas of the Gardens. It's a natural creek bed and dates back to the mid-eighteen-hundreds.

[00:02:50]

Renee Wierzbicki: I curate the Herb and Medicinal Collection, affectionately referred to as the Herb Garden. William Guilfoyle, the Director of the Gardens that really gave us the curving paths, the vistas: he had an interest in economic botany, it was a very 19th Century thing. Guilfoyle was interested in medicinal plants, so he builds all these beautiful vistas, but he also established a medicinal garden in this area. Then in the 1980s, they put together this paved red brick area based on an Elizabethan knot garden and established the Herb Garden on the site of the original medicinal garden.

[00:03:32]

Chris Cole: The new Sensory Garden aims to awaken the senses of touch, sight, smell, sound, and taste. It is a place to let your senses take over and bathe in nature and the wonderful attributes of these plants.

[00:03:49]

Renee Wierzbicki: I think the three areas also give you that deep sensory experience, not just the sights and the smells, but that physical change from hot sunny spaces to cool shade.

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[00:04:03]

Chris Cole: The design encourages visitors to meander and become absorbed in this wonderful collection.

[00:04:16]

Erica Tandori: It's an incredible spring day, it's morning. I can hear the city sounds on the perimeters of the Garden. It's beautiful to hear the traffic receding and the birds coming into the foreground of your consciousness. And the sun is sort of gently oozing through this high-level cloud. I see some purple flowers, but I can't read the labels, even if I bend over and try to read them!

My name is Erica Tandoori. I am the Artist in Residence at the Ross John Lab at the Biomedicine Discovery Institute at Monash University, exploring science and relating research to people who are blind or have low vision.

I think it's time to disclose that I actually have vision loss, that I'm an artist working, you know, studying and stuff. But hey guys, I actually can't see what I'm doing!

With vision loss, moving through a new environment, you've got to be really conscious where you don't trip, where you don't fall into things where you don't bump into people.

[00:05:18]

Sam May: You can't just stroll through the bush in straight lines. You've got to read it, you gotta to feel it. I'm using a lot of sight, a lot of touch, a lot of smell. But I'm also doing a lot of hearing as well, you know, are of birds still chirping? Are we near a water source?

Hey I'm Sam May and I'm an Aboriginal Learning Facilitator here at the Royal Botanic Gardens. But I'm not from here I'm from Perth and I'm a Whadjuk Ballardong Nyoongar man of Perth, but I'm also Gija and Yamatji on my father's side.

As an Aboriginal man, first and foremost, it's my task to sorta, leave things easier for the next generation. I feel so valued in being able to share a bit about my culture, but also the Boon Wurrung culture and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung culture here in Melbourne. To share their stories as well, I feel very honoured.

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Walking through to Herb Garden now and it just immediately reminded me of my first day in a commercial kitchen with the National Indigenous Culinary Institute. My first introduction with herbs was quite literally being blindfolded and given 10 to 12 different herbs to taste and feel.

[00:06:27]

Vox pop (Visitor): Instantly you pick up the aroma of the herbs.

Vox pop (Visitor): Your sense of smell is just darting all over the place.

Vox pop (Visitor): Quite overpowering and (you) feel this sort of dreamy sensation.

[00:06:38]

Sam May: So being blindfolded, you've got to learn about these herbs and growing up, you know, the only herb I knew was pretty much salt and pepper. Feeling these herbs and tasting them and getting that difference - it's really quite amazing.

[00:06:49]

Erica Tandori: What is this. Can you hear that? Is this rhubarb?.

[00:06:56]

Sam May: As soon as I started working at the Gardens, I got a different insight to what these herbs are. I used to just see the labour involved and what they can give. But to see them in the earth, in the ground, being delicately arranged like your nana's backyard ...

[00:07:08]

Renee Wierzbicki: We encourage you to smell with your fingers, rub the plants and then smell your fingers and you'll get that beautiful fragrance.

[00:07:16]

Sam May: Kids you know, I'll just let them run around the garden and just enjoy the space. And if they want to touch a plant, touch it. Go ahead. It's all about learning

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[00:07:23]

Vox Pop (Melbourne High School student): I can smell like herbs. Herbs that you would use in medicine and like, tea. And it makes me think that such a simple leaf can turn into something so useful.

Vox pop (Visitor): There's aromas everywhere in nature, but you often don't have 50 different smells packed into one tiny space.

Vox pop (Visitor): I'm fascinated by the size of these flowers and the height. Love the crinkling. It feels great, but I don't know what it is. Smells beautiful. Some sort of salvia.

[00:07:54]

Sam May: Learning about these herbs were really important to me, you know, learning to pick them, learning to treat them with respect. I am taking that plant's life, but it has a purpose on the plate.

[00:08:07]

Renee Wierzbicki: The Western tradition of botanic gardens has its roots in the study of medicinal plants, back to the medieval universities in Europe. They needed gardens where the students could study. And they plant these beautiful medicinal gardens and study those plants, and then some of those people became more interested in the plants than the medicine. And that's where the science of botany evolved.

[00:08:31]

Sam May: As we look at these herbs, I'm constantly reminded of my own people growing up. Medicinally, nutritionally, you know, lots of zinc, lots of calcium in these native herbs, like native thyme, pepper berry, mountain pepper, lemon myrtle. Different leaves that we can incorporate into our own cooking.

[00:08:48]

Renee Wierzbicki: Common names and botanical names are equally important here. People can relate to common names. They call it flat leaf parsley, they don't call it *Petroselinum crispum variety neapolitanum*!

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[00:09:00]

Sam May: We're constantly hearing about dry country, not enough rain. But if you plant these native plants like Warragul greens for instance, or old man saltbush in your garden, you don't even have to look at them, they'll just grow in their own natural rainfall.

[00:09:13]

Renee Wierzbicki: So in Melbourne, we often diss the climate here and how changeable it is, but the climate allows us to grow an extraordinarily broad range of plants.

[00:09:24]

Erica Tandori: The leaf I'm holding now, is bigger than the size of a dinner plate. And it's next to this delicate ferny thing. Is this fennel?

[00:09:34]

Renee Wierzbicki: There's nothing more fantastic than someone coming in here and seeing a plant from their youth. And they start talking to you about it and how they used to use it.

[00:09:43]

Vox pop (Visitor): Castor oil in winter, take spoonful of castor oil it'll do you good!

Vox Pop (Melbourne High School student): We were smelling the tea tree. It brought me back to whenever I had a headache or a stomach ache, my mum would use this herbal oil that was green. And she'd just like, rub it over my stomach or my head. I don't know if it was the placebo effect, but it just made me feel much better.

[00:10:08]

Erica Tandori: So the sun is falling through all these leaves. Look at the beautiful light colours, the light greens and you'll think, well, hang on a minute, the woman's legally blind, what colours is she seeing? Across the way up St Kilda Road is where I went to the Victorian College of the Arts. And when I'd just started, I also got diagnosed with impending blindness. In my family there lurks a genetic disorder called Stargardt's disease and it causes progressive vision-loss, not total blindness, it's central vision-loss.

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This is how I see the world. It's a Monet painting, really blurry, soft-focused, no sharp edges. Everything is so super impressionistic. There's a lot of movement, almost like vigorous brush strokes, that you see in the different colours as you're sort of moving through ...and the things that you can't see because you've got central vision loss, are being filled in with a thing called cortical completion. Your mind is interacting and compensating and painting a beautiful picture of this greenery around you.

[00:11:24]

Stuart Favilla: How that happens is really fascinating. I mean, the eye, and all the remarkable things. Where do you see and optical illusions, scale, perception of colour, luminance, and different things.

My name is Stu Favilla. I'm an interaction designer and musician working at Swinburne University of Technology. And I work in a range of areas from the arts, defence, med-tech, and dementia care.

You can close your eyes and you can see something that you remembered; change the brightness; you can cast it in another light; you can practice all of these other things in your brain

[00:12:00]

Erica Tandori: Does one really live through one's retinas? And the answer is no. You live through your thoughts, your feelings, your memories, your anticipations.

[00:12:10]

Vox pop (Visitor): The part of your brain that deals with memories is very close to the part of your brain that deals with the sense of smell. And I find there's smells in the Garden that takes me back to my childhood.

[00:12:20]

Sam May: With the senses, they trigger some of the most happiest memories in your life. And that's why I've pretty much gone into cooking. I used to be in a kitchen for up to 12 hours a day, sweating, and then just have a little spark of joy, just from a green leaf. Some of these flavours, they'll just trigger a little memory. I just miss home straight away.

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[00:12:38]

Vox Pop (Melbourne High School student): Just the whole aroma of all the trees and the vegetation just makes me think of camping. I love going camping with the family.

[00:12:45]

Millie Wee: I like lemon trees cause I used to prune the lemons with my parents. That was our bond, my father and I. That's something we did before he passed away. So, I just like cutting lemon trees 'cause it's that memory.

[00:12:59]

Chris Cole: Whenever I smell winter sweet, it reminds me of many things: my first day at the Gardens in July 2010; my time as a student at Kew Gardens in the late Nineties; my days as an apprentice in my local parks department. It was almost like revisiting an old friend.

[00:13:14]

Stuart Favilla: Who can forget the rainy days in October (and) November in the classrooms at primary schools and the dreaded wattle seed stink bomb, where someone would crush this seed and get some water on it, and oh, just that smell! And those things are really embedded in my memory and they always flashback to really vivid moments.

[00:13:43]

Sam May: When I first walk into Fern Gully, the first thing I notice is just how quiet it is. And if you close your eyes and just listen. You honestly wouldn't think you're in the middle of Melbourne.

[00:13:53]

Misha Chute: There's a sense of being enclosed in this greenery. The delicate ferns and the fern fronds and the light streaming through. The shade and light and the sound of the creek, the sound of the birds, the sound of the leaves and the wind.

My name is Misha Chute. I'm Curator of Fern Gully at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. I've been here 18 years.

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Fern gully is a collection of ferns from Australasia as well as many other bold foliage plants. To create a lush rain forest feel.

[00:14:26]

Chris Cole: The Fern Gully does remind me of my time when I was Curator at the Townsville Botanic Gardens. It is so green, and things seem to grow so well. The collection provides a perfect microclimate for showcasing native and exotic ferns and their allies.

[00:14:44]

Misha Chute: Guilfoyle brought in a lot of tree ferns from around Queensland and New South Wales.

[00:14:51]

Vox pop (Visitor): The closeness and the variety of plants that are growing in a little mini rainforest, when it's really hot, you go into to the Fern Gully, and it's often five or six degrees cooler, just by the nature of the environment that you're going into.

[00:15:03]

Erica Tandori: And you feel this cool, moist air and hear the most stunning sounds of birds and water. And for someone with my eye condition, where there's so much stress, the coolest and greenness is beautiful.

[00:15:20]

Vox pop (Visitor): I quite liked the fact that it was cool, 'cause that carries fragrances differently. Everything gets heightened.

Vox pop (Visitor): And it's also the smell. Because it's a moist environment it's sort of really active underfoot. Soil, decomposition and all that sort of stuff.

Vox pop (Visitor): I also really like the way things are left to rot. I love the way that you can actually see things going back into the ground.

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Yeah, it was a pungent smell. And then around the corner, there was a really nice earthy smell. Some of these species have been around since the dinosaurs, and you think, wow! We're nothing!

[00:15:54]

Erica Tandori: Look at the limbs of this tree. My God what is that? It's Jurassic Park!

[00:16:02]

Vox pop (Visitor): They've got the bark, which is really rough and kind of scaly. And so you run your hand over it, it might crackle a little bit, cause it's dry. When you get to one of those new shoots that are just unfolding, kind of like bursting forward with life. And it becomes a lot softer and almost furry at the tip.

[00:16:22]

Sam May: With these ferns and the new growth, they grow into a shape of a question mark. If anybody's ever been stung by a bull ant, and I'll tell you now I've been bitten by a bull ant more times in my life than I can remember. But if I was in Fern Gully, I would have looked straight away for the shape of this new growth of fern. I would immediately run to this fern, grab this question mark, rip it off and just press that nice, soft little growth into that bite and it will numb and neutralize the pain.

[00:16:49]

Vox Pop (Melbourne High student): When we walk through a normal bushland, we don't really appreciate the meanings behind everything around us. And I think being here it's really widened our sight to everything that we've seen.

Vox Pop (Melbourne High student): My senses here are activated so differently. My ears are picking up the sounds of the leaves rustling and some animals chirping, just subtle noises. When I'm at home, I turned on sleep sounds. And it's the exact same as what I'm listening to right now.

[00:17:20]

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Erica Tandori: So I'm standing amongst these amazing stalks and it's like this room that you've come into. It's like a pantry, a pantry of bamboo. And you just stretch your neck all the way back and look up. You can hear the wind and the bamboo and you're kind of just captured! It's an orchestra, playing, of wind and reeds.

[00:18:00]

Chris Cole: The Sensory Garden was designed to provide a space to excite the senses and allow visitors to get up close and personal to many of the plants on display.

[00:18:10]

Vox Pop (Melbourne High student): Being here and listening to the sounds of the wind gets me thinking about my breathing.

[00:18:15]

Millie Wee: I have found that people go there to do yoga or meditate, or they bring their kids and the kids just love it, they can touch all the different flowers, and I think it sets their imagination and they just really love it.

I'm Millie Wee. I'm the Curator of various collections, but I do the Sensory Garden as well as Princess Lawn area.

That's what it's brought to stimulate people to senses. So like, for example, you have the bamboo and that's just for the rustling of the bamboo; and then you have oregano and some of the flowers and then the salvias for the smell. And you have different textural plants, some will be pubescent or rough so that's so that's for the touch.

[00:18:55]

Vox pop (Visitor): There's a lot of the smells as you're walking around the little path, but you're also able to do a lot more tactile touching the different plants.

[00:19:02]

Sam May: How can you walk through the Sensory Garden and not touch a geranium? Or, just touch the bamboo and feel the smoothness, or give it a knock and see if it's hollow?

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[00:19:10]

Vox Pop (Melbourne High student): You look around and you see all the colours and you smell all the scents coming off the trees. It doesn't feel like you're in the city. All the hustle and the bustle is eliminated.

[00:19:19]

Sam May: I love taking groups through here, 'cause it just breaks up [that] me doing the talking all the time and I'm just gonna let the plants do it for a few moments.

[00:19:38]

Erica Tandori: If I think about making a work, my heart and my mind, and my inner vision goes straight to the paintings of the Australian impressionists. I think about those artists and how they responded to the landscape and their place in it. And yeah, some of it was chocolate box or whatever, but sometimes they really captured the essence of being alive in a moment.

[00:20:00]

Sam May: I actually just like to stare into the trees, and just stare through it. And just have a look, maybe there's something in there, maybe there's a kangaroo? Maybe there's an owl, a tawny frogmouth.

[00:20:09]

Vox pop (Visitor): I like to be in it, rather than looking at it. Feeling it, feeling the environment around me and responding to it.

Vox pop (Visitor): That's the key. Give yourself the time to actually enjoy it. Just observing and letting nature unfold around you. Just notice everything.

[00:20:26]

Erica Tandori: When you think about the senses, you think: sound, smell, lardy, dardy dah, our five senses, but I always include another sense in there and that was a vibe, or an

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instinct. There are so many things. Is hope a sense? Are emotions senses? Is memory a sense? There's just so many aspects to being alive!

[00:20:50]

Vox pop (Visitor): I was supposed to have cataract surgery and I can't take glare. And I did a couple of walks and I discovered that my sight was really important to my walking. I wasn't seeing what I normally see when I walk. I couldn't really appreciate the visual side of the bush.

[00:21:08]

Renee Wierzbicki: One day, I came in here, many years ago, to find a man lying all over the plants! It's when the bed was mostly thyme, and he was rolling around on them. And you look at that and you go "what is he doing?" And then he gets up, and then we started a conversation. "Oh, you're enjoying the thyme". And then it turns out that he'd lost his eyesight. He had a degenerative eye disease. He could see a bit, but not much. And for him being able to roll on the thyme, it was such a sensory experience. And the joy that it gave him was just astounding and it really made me look at it in a different way, because you could easily walk in going, "oi, what are you doing?" But it was just absolutely marvellous.

[00:21:56]

Erica Tandori: I think part of the lesson of being perceived to have a disability or having some cross to bear, I think we've all got one. And I think just being human is fragile. No matter what state you're in or what you've got or what senses you have or don't have. It doesn't bloody matter!

[00:22:24]

Vox Pop (Melbourne High student): This is pretty natural, but to me it seems really unnatural 'cause I'm really used to the city. But you know, walking around in the bush, it's really peaceful and it's just an experience that everyone should have in their lives.

[00:22:57]

Credits: You've been listening to Herb Garden, Fern Gully and the Sensory Garden, Episode Three of Sonica Botanica, created by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria.

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Sincere thanks to Renee Wierzbicki, Chris Cole, Erica Tandori, Sam May, Stu Favela, Misha Chute and Millie Wee. Special thanks to Tim Uebergang, David Plant, Chris Andrews, In My Nature forest therapy guides David and Emma, and participants in Forest Therapy at Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, teachers Anna Berlin and Penny Latham and the students of 9H, Melbourne High School and the visitors who shared their stories, impressions and observations for this episode.

Sonica Botanica is created and produced by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria. All interviews were recorded onsite at Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. Music, audio editing, and sound designed by Patrick Cronin.

Thanks for listening.

[End of Transcript]