Nature studied:

Trees, plants, gardens
Why ‘raspberry jam tree?’ Acacia acuminata. Mungart – John Kinsella

Gardening can be described as the laying out or arranging of plants using principles and techniques of cultivation that may be different to how they survive and grow in their natural environment, *The Online Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Gardens can be natural or landscaped, individual or collective, public or private, and they might be secret—or not so secret—spaces of wonder and the acquisition of knowledge. Alice, as narrated in *Through the looking glass* (1871), comes across a garden where she encounters a tiger-lily with a difference, causing her to proclaim: ‘I’ve been in many gardens before, but none of the flowers could talk’.

Plants and gardens feature in many forms of human expression. Artists throughout history have played a part in investigating, describing and representing nature. They have imagined and observed the great variety of flora and fauna, and the ever-changing cultural and natural habitats of the world around us. While looking at some examples of artworks of plants and trees for an exhibition, this essay is a response to the vision of the Friends of the Geraldton Gardens (FROGGS)—an organisation formed in 2015—to construct a showcase garden.

Geraldton is a coastal city in rural Western Australia, located on the edge of the Midwest Region, a unique biodiversity zone. Its environment is framed by the Murchison and Greenough Rivers, which start in the arid inland and flow seasonal waters down to the western coast. August has been designated a regional special month because of the diversity of wildflowers that appear around that time.

A relationship between local plant and art communities can be traced at least back to 1959 when the Victoria District Branch of the Tree Society of WA (Geraldton) held an art exhibition of forty paintings by Albert Namatjira. It was held in Birdwood House and is listed as part of the Sunshine Festival programme for that year. The artist’s paintings of country represent landscapes of his traditional land and custodial heritage: where all things—trees, plants, water, rocks, animals, people—fit into a holistic belief system. In the Sunshine Festival for 1960, it seems, the Tree Society supported a second art show, this time of work by Elizabeth Durack. A commissioned set of drawings are now held in the City of Greater Geraldton Art Collection, including for instance, Durack’s *Durlacher Street* (1960) with its landmark line of Norfolk Pines.

Victoria District was the name given by Lt. George Grey when he passed through the area in 1839 on his return to Perth after an exploratory trip of the Gascoyne failed, followed by the wreck of his boats off the coast at Gantheaume Bay (Kalbarri). On Grey’s overland walk back to Perth, he wrote journal observations of the surrounding area. Driving across the same floodplains that Grey traversed on the Greenough Flats, south of Geraldton and north of the town of Dongara, a sign gives cultural references to a tree of note. It cites a poem by Nola Gregory (2014), which incorporates the tree’s Wajarri name: ‘I am Winnda Ngadara, The Leaning Tree’.

This tree is a red river gum, and its species classification is *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*. The City of Greater Geraldton sign further alludes to how this
characteristic Midwest tree is depicted in other representations by giving a text from Randolph Stow's *The merry-go-round in the sea* (1965), where he reflects back a novelist's view of the city:

The horizon was spiked with windmills, turning and turning, their broad tails shifting, meeting the easterly. The town was a town of wind, horizons of windmills, a sky for kites, a harbour white-petalled with sails. In his grandmother's house the wind sang in the keyholes. On the windwipped flats, crippled gumtrees washed their hair. (Penguin 1968; 2008 edition, p. 51)

Like these distinctive trees bent by the natural forces of the wind, plants become iconic and thus transform into cultural reference points for memories. And, as shown by Stow when he presents botanical descriptions from the 1940s-60s that link the past to the present, they become formalised into today's social narratives.

The merry-go-round analogy so effectively used in Stow's story connects with specific trees and reminiscences of crunching underfoot 'leaves and nuts fallen from the Moreton Bay figtrees', also is fused with playground elements on the foreshore that still exist and have become fixtures (literally) in the city's history:

The merry-go-round revolved. The world turned about him. The Library, the car, the old store, the courthouse. Sunflowers. Moreton Bay figtrees, the jetty, the sea. Purple bougainvillaea against the sea.5 The Moreton Bay Figs, like the Norfolk or Cook's Pines, were transplanted into the region from the east coast and Pacific Ocean. They are evidence of generic civic plantings, which occurred all over Australia. Likewise too the well-travelled gum trees, which today can be found in California, Nepal, Lebanon, France, and so much more.

Norfolk Pines are featured in Tim Winton's *Land's edge: A coastal memoir* (2010). The author spent some summers in a beach shack retreat at the Greenough River mouth. He writes about Norfolk Pines being markers (p.100) in his own experience as a surfer looking back to land, and proposes a concept of 'land's edge' as a metaphor for an Australian lifestyle that is mainly a suburban experience with holiday excursions into country. Thus, our remembered pasts include invented notions of place, landscape, and country, even as we project ourselves into or outside the artistic creations of others.

In her *Wararlung bayalgu: Digging for food*, Dora Dann writes about fishing on the Murchison River, and remembers a 'main dinner' campsite near a white river gum, yarlu, (*Eucalyptus victrix*) at Meeberie Crossing (p. 32). On the book cover she stands amongst a field of uguudungu (everlastings). Cooking and eating bush potatoes, emu, and other foods such as the red kangaroo, marlu, are all part of her story.6 Marlu are also central to a Wajari creation story of the landscape, in the formation of the historic red ochre site of Thuwarri Thaa (Wilgie Mia) important for cultural activities of art and ceremony.8

Gardening, like mining, is an activity that can be related to the region prior to the emergence of Geraldton and its history as a coastal port. The indigenous cultivation of plants such as yams (*Dioscorea hastifolia*) was noted by Grey in 1839, Stokes in 1840, and Gregory in 1846, for example. Rupert Gerritsen quotes A. C. Gregory (1882, 1887) seeing the practice of digging yams and replanting the 'crown in the same hole' by the Nhanda people of the Victoria District (p.5). But with the arrival of pastoralists from mid-century, relations between Europeans and the Yami people of the area deteriorated. This is reflected by the two sets of plaques at Bootenal Spring, where the resulting conflict is described from very different viewpoints.

In a recent two-part television adaptation of Kate Grenville's 2005 novel *The secret river*, we see how a 'bloody frontier war' unfolded in a landscape where there are no 'no Aboriginal people left' (Heather Winch, cited by Natasha Robinson). The character Will Thornhill plants corn after clearing a field that once was covered with the yellow flowering yams of the Darug Aboriginal people, who seasonally lived there before they claimed the land. A young Kalbarri actor, Brian O'Dene, took part in the film production as the 'Aboriginal boy, Bunda, who befriends the young children' of the white settler, Thornhill.

Geraldton was conceived as a port town from 1849 to export minerals such as lead and later agricultural produce (like wheat and now the winter grown crops of canola, for example). In 1857 a timber jetty was built near Gregory Street. Along the city foreshore, with its different manifestations and redevelopments over time, there have been several additions of trees and shrubs. In 1900, right when the old railway station was being turned into a library (as reported in *The Express*, July 20), fifty Moreton Bay and assorted pines were planted. More recently a line of casuarina, or she-oak have been placed down the pathway of a newly landscaped area beside the wharf.

*She-oak* is the title and concept behind a Bangarra Dance Theatre's indigenous ensemble in 2015; and, naming of all things including trees like she-oaks and banksia along with the need to perform a dance are woven into the Noongar writer, Kim Scott's narrative for the novel, *That deadman dance* (2010).

Modern scientific names for plant species follow a taxonomic system established in the mid-eighteenth century by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. According to the French theorist Michel Foucault, this system viewed the world 'through a grid of knowledge constituted by natural history'. Littered through the history of scientific naming, however, are some notable confusions. When the explorer William Dampier visited north-west Australia in 1688, he observed a tree that yielded 'a gum like dragon's blood'. Quite separately, Linnaeus designated the name *Draecana draco* for a pandanus-like plant found in the Canary Islands which ooze red gum that was said to be like dragon's blood. It was assumed by scholars that Dampier had observed in Australia a pandanus-like plant similar to the Canary Islands *Draeana draconis*. But then in 1770 Joseph Banks, botanist on the *Endeavour* during Captain Cook's exploration of Botany Bay, found a red gum resin that he called *Sanguis draconis* ('dragon blood') oozing from a tree which subsequently was classified as *Eucalyptus* ('dragon blood') oozing from a tree which subsequently was classified as *Eucalyptus* (in storybooks, poems and songs, and in leisure and science books. Boab trees (baobabs) appear as rogues in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The little prince* (1931), where 'there were on the little prince’s planet, as on every planet, good plants and bad plants’. One of the wishes written by a child for a Wish Tree event in Geraldton (1 June 2015) was for 'boab trees'. Her father explained that they had just seen the boabs in Kings Park, Perth. Boab trees (*Adansonia gregorii*) arrived autonomously in northwest Australia from Madagascar, whereas the poinciana, a popular choice for gardeners, also comes from Madagascar but was imported by human hands.

Likewise, the hibiscus is a plant that comes in many forms, including both local variations native to the region and introduced varieties. The latter include the *Hibiscus tiliaceus* (cotton wood) that has become a common sight around Geraldton. Hibiscus goes by several names, including China Rose in its Asian manifestation, or Mahoe in its Hawaiian form; it is found along the Queensland coast and throughout the Pacific, where it has many uses. In her book *Wajari wisdom*, Estelle Leyland lists a local Chinese Lantern as a hibiscus.

To contribute to the sustainability of a city's community and its region, it is important to look to the past as well as to the future of the natural and cultural environment. The ongoing creation of parks and gardens is crucial to this. Part of this *Nature studied* project is a Wish Tree. As an art installation (based on artwork by Yoko Ono), it invites you to interact by writing down your wishes. It provides you an opportunity to voice your dreams and contribute to the future. In this way, as a member of the public, you can become involved with thinking about the planting and planning of garden spaces.

The first Botanic Garden Wish Tree installation was part of a city Harmony Day event in Maitland Park (21 March 2015), and acknowledged the history and importance of existing green belts. The council has now planted it in the park. As an event the FROGGS' Wish Tree enacted the recognition of all the peoples living in Geraldton and their diverse ideas of horticulture. It is inclusive of, for instance, the mallee, quondong, sandalwood, and eucalypt; of part of our memories, our fantasies, and can be found in our fridges, cupboards, and lunch boxes, as well as in storybooks, poems and songs, and in leisure and science books. Boab trees (baobabs) appear as rogues in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The little prince* (1931), where 'there were on the little prince’s planet, as on every planet, good plants and bad plants'. One of the wishes written by a child for a Wish Tree event in Geraldton (1 June 2015) was for 'boab trees'. Her father explained that they had just seen the boabs in Kings Park, Perth. Boab trees (*Adansonia gregorii*) arrived autonomously in northwest Australia from Madagascar, whereas the poinciana, a popular choice for gardeners, also comes from Madagascar but was imported by human hands.

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Moreton Bay Figs, olive trees (considered a weed due to its colonising tendency), hibiscus tiliaceus, New Zealand / Aotearoa pohutukawa (Metrosideros excelsa), and its smaller Kermadec Islands’ relative; and of roses, tomatoes, cucumbers, and so many more plants representative of the great assortment now grown in the city and wider farming / market garden areas.

Plants, like people, travel to-and-fro and impact where ever they go. The planting of some trees has had major dominating influences on the region in terms of culture and economics, but also as forms of ecological colonisation. Meantime, the unique biodiversity of the Midwest region needs urgent recognition and protection. This is the focus of the FROGGS project. Its aim is to encapsulate discussion about both indigenous and introduced vegetation and gardening practices, so that memory, harmony, and commemoration, along with scientific and economic dimensions of plants, can all be appreciated. This may not be realised in an overtly conscious way by an exhibition or the installation of a Wish Tree, but it might be subliminally put into practice by these art events, in the performative act of personally writing a message.

Tree and garden initiatives in Geraldton, like the Million Tree project, have links to the future: sustainable environments, the effects of climate change, and the socio-economic wellbeing of our wider community. Reinforcing open dialogue and the exchange of ideas about gardening can be a holistic way of absorbing and acknowledging cultural diversity in the Greater City of Geraldton, in its public spaces, and in our individual homes and gardens. At the same time, it hopefully will encourage increased respect for native plants and their environments.

Dr Deborah Cain, 15 August 2015
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Renata Buziak (2015) Centella asiatica… anti-inflammatory… Archival pigment on paper. 66.7 x 95cm © With permission of the artist.

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8 Mary Callaghan, (2012), Mining in the Mid West: Mid West heritage series. Geraldton, WA.: Geraldton Regional Library, p.1
13 Natasha Robinson, (2015, June 13-14), Historic river inn still not about to give up its secret Aboriginal history. The Australian, p.9
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The opinions expressed in this essay as written are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Geraldton Regional Gallery or the Friends of the Geraldton Gardens. Deborah Cain is an independent writer and researcher. She has a doctorate in art history from The University of Auckland, New Zealand, and has published on a wide range of cultural topics, including in Third Text, Sites, Reading Room, and other journals and artists’ catalogues.

Acknowledgements:
I would like to express a special thank you to the staff at the Geraldton Regional Art Gallery for their support of the project. Thank you to all the artists who have given permission for their work to be included in the exhibition.

And for bringing their art work in from the upper reaches of the Murchison, Mount Magnet, thank you to Brendan Penzer, and the Wirnda Barra Artists for their contribution.

This essay would not have emerged without the friendly and professional assistance of all the staff at the Geraldton Regional Library. In particular those in Heritage Services: Trudi Cornish, Lee-Ann Neill, and Tracy Fraser.


FROGGS are a group of volunteers who want to see ‘Geraldton as a city of gardens and trees … (and) a place that people will come to’
– Stan Maley

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