

## Episode 4 – Southern China Collection, Long Island, the Water



**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]

**Terry Smyth:** As you walk through H Gate, you go through an archway and it's like you're entering into something special.

[00:00:17]

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** You go down a path and wow! What's here? And then you wanna go to the next bit because you can see the path keeps winding, but you don't know what's there.

**Vox pop (The squad):** It's fascinating, as each part merges into the next part. It all flows through while at the same time having these very distinct areas.

**Vox pop (The squad):** It's that feeling ...

**Vox pop (The squad):** Every morning, meeting my friends, this whole vista is before us, you couldn't get a better start to the day.

**Vox pop (The squad):** Coming here daily for almost 20 years, which is almost half our lives.

**Vox pop (The squad):** It's only a third of my life! [laughter]

**Vox pop (The squad):** And our friendship has been cemented by the fact that we have this common passion of walking, talking, and observing the ever-evolving change in nature.

[00:01:19]

**Voice Over:** 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 we pay our respects to Elders past and present. Episode 4 heads to the northern end of the Gardens: to the Southern China Collection, Long Island and the water that sustains life at Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. You'll hear stories from Garden staff, a group of friends who've been walking together through the Melbourne Gardens for 20 years [The squad], VCA Secondary School art students and visitors from regional Victoria.

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Although not essential to the listening experience, we invite you to begin this episode near Gate H, or by the edge of the water near Long island.

[00:02:12]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** The water story for the Gardens is a fascinating story because even when the Garden gets started, water was always a problem because we didn't have the water, we didn't have the capacity to water the plants, particularly through our long dry summers, you know, digging clay puddle dams in the high part of the Gardens to try and gravity feed, and to tank water down to other parts of the Gardens, but it's not until William Guilfoyle arrives, the second director of the Gardens, and he builds the volcano reservoir. And the idea of the volcano is that we will pump water up from a diesel pump down on the Yarra, and that we'll gravity feed a whole lot of hose points around the Garden.

*My name's Andrew Laidlaw and I'm the Landscape Architect for the Royal Botanic Gardens and I've worked here for 25 years.*

Once they activated the pumps, the technology was, was always challenging, so it never worked brilliantly, but basically we were able to water the Gardens right up until the 1930s when we were put on the mains water system.

[00:03:12]

**Terry Smyth:** In the drought, we had a drought for 13 years, you could almost walk to some of the islands.

*My name's Terry Smyth. I work here at the Royal Botanic Gardens and I am a Horticulturalist. So I look after the Southern Chinese Plant Collection and I've worked here for 33 years.*

We had blue- green algae blooms, and we had to almost weed the bottom of the lake, where it was exposed.

[00:03:35]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** We're facing a very similar problem to what the Gardens were facing back in the 1870s, and it's about water. We now have a system where we've redirected storm water into the lake. And so we are now getting an extra 70 Meg [ML] of water just off the roads, we're bringing it into our lakes.

[00:03:55]

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**Steven Liu:** We have a main water body, we call Ornamental Lake, and then we have also other several small lakes. We also have several constructed wetlands connected to the lakes.

*My name is Steven Liu. I've been with the Garden over 13 years and I look after all the water-related assets in the Garden, including the irrigation system and the wetlands and water features around the Garden.*

There is also volcano water reservoir. Uh, we use as, like a water treatment plant. It allows us to use constructed wetlands, floating wetlands, to treat water naturally.

[00:04:35]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** And we're pumping that water up to the volcano. Then we move it down to Nymphaea Lake. Then we run it through the Fern Gully, where it gets aerated. We've now bought back the indigenous wetland plants, we've even created artificial floating islands, and we're now pumping the water through those floating islands in the main lake, turning the entire water body over every month through that train of treatment.

[00:04:58]

**Steven Liu:** We harvest the water, we store the water, then we circulate the water and then we use that water as irrigation.

[00:05:07]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** And we're mimicking what that natural system would've done, you know, 150 years ago.

[00:05:13]

**Terry Smyth:** There's a marvellous plant called the soft stemmed bull rush, or *Schoenoplectus*. I've heard it described as the Arnold Schwarzenegger of the plant world because it can take out the phosphates and the excess nitrogen that is washed in from our storm water collection.

[00:05:30]

**Steven Liu:** It not only helps us control the nutrients in the water, but also control the blue-green algae.

[00:05:37]

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**Terry Smyth:** The people who have been creating these projects, our Landscape Planner and our Curator and the horticulturalists and the water specialists have really created a Botanic Gardens that is thinking about sustainability: trying to be the best we can with what we've got.

[00:05:55]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** We've got lots of nesting birds, we've got an amazing amount of water plants, a really healthy thriving wetland system here which I feel is at the heart of what makes this place beautiful.

[00:06:14]

**Terry Smyth:** It's a dreamy place. Large trees, shadows. There's the beautiful backwater of Ornamental Lake, full of bird life.

[00:06:25]

**Jakobi:** This place is quite significant to Traditional Owners and even broadly to the Kulin nations and neighbouring nations that would come onto these lands for trade, marriage, ceremony.

*My name's Jakobi, I'm a Gunditjmara and Djab Wurrung man. And I'm an Aboriginal Learning Facilitator at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria. I've been here for close to four years.*

These are the traditional lands of the Bunurong People and the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung People of the Kulin Nations. I'd like to acknowledge the ancestors of this land, their Elders and also the creator, Bunjil, the spirit of this land.

[00:07:10]

**Vox pop (The squad):** If I had to imagine what the Botanic Gardens looked like before European settlement, I would've imagined vast open space...

**Vox pop (The squad):** and fertile and varied with lots of different plants and animals.

**Vox pop (The squad):** Lots of food, possibly a bit cold in winter!

**Vox pop (The squad):** Just serene, you know, like nothing to take away from nature.

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**Vox pop (The squad):** [It] makes us remember that this is a very ancient place and there's been human habitation here for a very, very, very long time.

[00:07:51]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** We know that Long Island, as we see it today was actually the southern bank of the Yarra River.

[00:07:59]

**Jakobi:** The river itself would've entered pretty close to the northwest section of A Gate, traced its way throughout the lake system...

[00:08:07]

**Steven Liu:** The lake system[is] not like what we see now. It was a part of the Yarra River. That water's coming to the Garden, into billabongs, lagoons, the shallow swamps.

[00:08:20]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** And we know that the contour of this part of the lake is the old river bed...

[00:08:24]

**Jakobi:** it sort of follows the path of Long Island...

[00:08:26]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** and it would flow in there and then it'd hit this...

[00:08:28]

**Jakobi:** limestone and push towards where its path is today...

[00:08:32]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** and then headed back out on its course to the sea. Because there was so much flooding, what ended up happening, which is natural because they basically built Melbourne on a flood plain, all of Melbourne would flood including the Botanic Gardens.

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[00:08:45]

**Steven Liu:** The government at the time tried to reduce this kind of flooding impact.

[00:08:50]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** And so that's why they decided to straighten the river, somewhere between 1890 and 1899. They felt by straightening the river and getting that water out more quickly, building up the banks, that we'd have less of a flooding issue in Melbourne.

[00:09:06]

**Jakobi:** The river was diverted from the lake systems in the Gardens to prevent seasonal flooding, but that flooding is important for this landscape, the sort of patterns and connections that these plants and animals are used to. Those flood plains are habitats for things like River Redgums that do really well.

[00:09:31]

**Steven Liu:** We have a number of islands in the middle of the lake, there are species like a Swamp Paperbark, River Redgum. They still survive.

[00:09:42]

**Jakobi:** Just to the south of Long Island there's Baker's Island. It's a section that has a lot of remnant vegetation. The island itself is never cleared. There's a lot of exotic plants that have self-seeded over there, but you still get your swampy country landscape.

[00:10:02]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** When Guilfoyle designs the lake system to be this picture's lake, the islands become really important parts of that vista and very much what sits behind. This is a little bit of pressure from the socialites of Melbourne to build a garden that is of international standard. And that represents, you know, Melbourne, which is the largest wealthiest city in the world at that time.

So Guilfoyle keeps six of the islands because while we want open water, we also want these vantage points and vistas that you can actually look at. They're also incredibly important from a habitat point of view. Very few remnant species actually continued to exist, particularly under Guilfoyle, but a small collection of *Melaleuca ericifolia*, or the swamp paperbark, existed probably by mistake on Baker Island, because like many of the islands it's very difficult to maintain.

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[00:10:56]

**Steven Liu:** So no public access to those islands.

[00:11:00]

**Terry Smyth:** They're wild places. A great place for habitat.

[00:11:14]

**Jakobi:** Long Island is a curated space created by people, but it reflects this landscape and what it was and what it continues to be as well.

[00:11:25]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** One of the major plant types that we didn't have represented in this garden was the indigenous plants. Long Island became the obvious place because of the remnant Yarra bank. We felt this was where the story could be told about what would've once been our plant communities that existed on this site.

[00:11:43]

**Steven Liu:** It makes you feel you [are] walking in the Australian landscape. That sort of natural environment.

[00:11:53]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** There's the wetland community, then we have two riparian plant communities, riparian refers to the river vegetation. And then we've got our woodland grassland here. Now that would never have existed this close to the water, it would've been up around the Observatory, but we chose to put it here as part of that representation. And there was a fifth one, which was called the rocky outcrop community, and it's a small community of plants that exists along the Yarra River here, and we've represented that out on one of the points.

[00:12:26]

**Jakobi:** I spend a lot of time in this space, I come down here not only to work but also to sort of contemplate, to connect and disconnect in ways.

[00:12:35]

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**Andrew Laidlaw:** The really exciting thing about Long Island is we worked with the Traditional Owners as part of understanding what's important to them and their values.

[00:12:43]

**Jakobi:** It has interpretation in the footpath that tells a story of the people of this land. It shows men and a young boy hunting these lands, and also the women[']s footprint with a digging stick that come from the east. And we see those footprints that are a part of that interpretation, that story in the path.

[00:13:09]

**Vox pop [The squad]:** When there were more overseas tourists in the Gardens, we would often notice visitors taking great interest in plants that we might have taken for granted, but when we walked through Long Island, it's Australia.

**Vox pop [Regional visitor]:** Bellbirds yeah! [From] where I was brought up in Gippsland, there was bellbirds. Every time you went out to the river.

**Vox pop [The squad]:** Well, I like this area because it's really calm. No noise, no traffic. My husband actually meditates on the chairs over here!

**Vox pop [Regional visitor]:** I love the smell of the eucalypts after it rains.

**Vox pop [The squad]:** It's just to experience that scent and I could stay there all day!

**Vox pop [The squad]:** I guess they've also planted plants that indigenous culture used in their own medicinal and daily use. So when we go through, it's an education.

[00:13:57]

**Jakobi:** First Nations people throughout the world and botanic gardens, you know, we share the same sort of purpose, to communicate. You know, share knowledge with people.

[Chinese background music plays]

[00:14:41]

**Terry Smyth:** There's a path that takes you along the northern side of the Gardens, which is on the fence line and just across from the Yarra River, but a bit further along, you'll find the Southern China Plant Collection. And it's really lovely to get off the main path and to walk



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amongst the plants. There are great trees, so you walk into shade and then the views open out across the lake... water is very important in traditional Chinese gardens and garden design. It's the yin element or the female, refreshing, calming element of a landscape.

[Chinese background music plays]

The Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne [has] probably grown plants from China for nearly as long as it's existed. But, in the early 1980s, a collection area was set aside and planted up and some of the plants came from seed lists that are produced by botanic gardens around the world. The seed is swapped between botanic gardens, so many of the plants came from those lists as well as from interesting plant collectors who'd had a relationship with people in China.

[00:16:10]

**Steven Liu:** One of the reasons I work here because [of the] Southern China Collection. Because [it's] really attached to my background, and I'm almost familiar with the every species in this collection.

[Chinese background music plays]

[00:16:24]

**Terry Smyth:** In the 1990s, I went on four collecting trips. We were lucky enough to be able to collect seed and plant material from Yunan Province and Sichuan Province in southwest China. It was fantastic to work with Chinese botanists to connect with those people and to still be friends today from all those years ago, and how we've helped each other out and visited each other over the years.

[00:16:50]

**Steven Liu:** A lot of Chinese group[s] come here, they have some attachment to certain species we have in the Garden here. Not only China but also Malaysia or Indonesia, Philippine or, Singapore.

[00:17:01]

**Vox pop (VCA Secondary student):** I feel like really familiar because my cultural background is Chinese I was really surprised!

[00:17:07]

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**Steven Liu:** Regularly I have people approach me [and] say "well, you working here?" So they thought I'm the person [who] looks after Southern China collection, actually, I'm not!

[Chinese background music plays]

[00:17:19]

**Terry Smyth:** When you visit this collection, you'll find things like daphne and camelias and viburnums: plants that people associate with British gardens, but in fact, many of them have actually come from China or Southeast Asia

[00:17:34]

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** Spider lily, golden Spider lily.

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** Begonias.

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** Yeah begonias!

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** Is that a magnolia? And there's static!

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** Yeah, no, I think that is a...

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** I presume it'd be azaleas, camellias?

**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** Yeah, they all would be!

[00:17:49]

**STEVEN LIU:** The most important one I'm attached to is *Michelia alba*, because it is very aromatic, the flower, gives you [an] unforgettable perfume. And the reason for me, I'm so attached to it [is] because my mom worked in [a] tea plantation. She makes teas, out of that. I knew the plant, this one, this species since I was little.

[00:18:21]

**Vox pop (The squad):** Along the pathway near where the forget-me-nots are...

we'd walk along and we'd get this strong whiff of something that smells like somebody would be boiling up some medicinal soup.

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Yes!

**Vox pop (The squad):** Or concoction

**Vox pop (The squad):** And it smells to us like, Chinese medicine.

**Vox pop (The squad):** My mother would make Chinese soup every single day when she was alive and we would have to drink it. And it actually smelled like the soup that I didn't like to drink when I was growing up.

[00:18:54]

**Terry Smyth:** We have people studying traditional medicine come and have a look. They get interested in thinking, ah, that's huo xiang! Is that what it looks like? And they smell it and they can feel it cause they're used to the dried version. That's been lovely, and plants like Red sage.

[00:19:11]

**Steven Liu:** I can find [that] easily, a list of species we collect where Chinese people use them as the Chinese herb.

[00:19:23]

**Terry Smyth:** All across the Gardens you will find connections with the Southern China Collection: within the Herb Garden, within the perennial border, in the Camelia Collection especially. You can think of *ginko* and *keteleerias* and *taiwanias*.

Looking from one collection to another, there is a relationship. When you can see the ethnobotanical uses of the plants in Long Island, you know, the beautiful *Mentha australis*, the mint. And plants that are used for fibre, or for festivals; edible plants.

[00:20:00]

**Vox pop (The squad):** You see all the different plant families and you see all the different regional varieties.

**Vox pop (The squad):** It's like a botany lesson in real life!

**Vox pop (The squad):** And it does make for great interest when we're walking through the Gardens, we'll sometimes say, "oh, where will we walk today"? We'll go to the Fern Gully, or

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we'll go to a different part of the Gardens that we maybe haven't been to for a few days, and you do, you feel like you're moving, it's almost from room-to-room.

[00:20:29]

**Jakobi:** I think, all the plants here do have a connection. For many cultures they're the exact same sort of plants that we have used for medicines, as tools or material to make things.

[00:20:41]

**Steven Liu:** When I had [some] mosquito bites, I grabbed some native plants, I used that juice to smooth the bite. The Aboriginal people [have] been using that for [thousands of] years.

That's really helpful!

[00:20:53]

**Jakobi:** And we have muyn, the silver wattle. And that's one that we harvest the leaves and we use that in our program as well. We've got a really mature one that produces a lot of sap, and that sap has a lot of uses. So it's, it's quite rich in sugar. So traditionally it's diluted into water with nectar, from a banksia, a warrak. And created a sweet drink that can be consumed medicinally as well to help with stomach aches.

[00:21:20]

**Terry Smyth:** That really strongly connects with the Southern China Collection and also our Herb and Medicinal Garden. And you can find the moxibustion plant [in the,] in the Herb Garden as well as rhubarb as well as interesting *crysanthemums* that were originally from China.

[00:21:40]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** Before we built Long Island, this was just covered in exotic plants, [and] including big trees, lots of shrubs. We get rid of all the exotic plants but we don't get rid of the magnificent trees. We always leave the large trees, because they're so important from an environmental point of view, and we actually refer to them as the magnificent misfits. We have four or five of these incredibly beautiful taxodiums. These come from the Everglades, they grow down near the water and they're a beautiful tree suited to our environment. We also left a number of palms. We've got *Livistona australis* here, which is actually a native exotic palm, so it comes from the east coast of Australia, it grows all the way down to Mallacoota, but it wouldn't have existed here as an indigenous plant.

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We left a number of the *livistonas*, because they tell an interesting story and again they look wonderful in the landscape. We also have a number of *Phoenix canariensis*, which is the Canary Island palms. And these are magnificent palms that exist right around the Gardens. And there's a couple of those as you enter the Long Island garden, and they are very significant trees so of course we wouldn't remove those. They can kind of sit within the landscape, and they become quite seamless in a way because we are [in a,] in a garden full of beautiful large trees.

[00:23:00]

**Terry Smyth:** You see in the distance, all that mix of exotic and native Australian plants, as well as indigenous. And [the,] just the myriad of form and shapes and it all seems to work together. So it's incredibly, beautifully woven together.

[00:23:19]

**Jakobi:** I don't see much of a distinction personally between these plants, because I think they're all part of the land. When I was younger I had a real, you know like a tribalism sort of point of view of what was native and what was exotic and what was good and what was bad. But I think I've come to see that there's a balance that is achieved and that is always strived for in nature.

[00:23:43]

**Vox pop (The squad):** The Botanic Gardens represents what you would call multicultural Australia. So even though there are different...

**Vox pop (The squad):** plants in the species, we are all considered as one, a multicultural nation and in the Gardens...

**Vox pop (The squad):** maybe it is a shrine to diversity? There's just like everything, and everyone is represented here and there's something for everyone to identify with.

**Vox pop (The squad):** There's the California Collection, Southern Asia Collection...

**Vox pop (The squad):** the New Caledonia Collection...

**Vox pop (The squad):** Or the African Collection.

[00:24:12]

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**Jakobi:** We all as humans have a connection. Botanic gardens you know they're a place to explore identity and landscapes. Even though my people come from, you know, lands close to here, this isn't my land or my Country, this isn't a place that I have any right to speak on behalf of. But this is my home. These lands are lands that give my body nutrients, you know, my lungs air that enable my existence.

[00:24:45]

**Terry Smyth:** I loved having my feet on the Earth, not on the footpaths, but on the earth.

[00:24:51]

**Steven Liu:** A special spot is in the middle of the lake! Like on the floating islands. And you['] be able to enjoy working with the natural environment and the water birds around you. Sometimes even the eels. So that's the best you can get!

[00:25:14]

**Andrew Laidlaw:** The Yarra has been incredibly important in my life and I have lived on it all my life. And for us to be able to express a bit of that in the Botanic Gardens has been really quite thrilling.

[00:25:25]

**Terry Smyth:** I do my own Vox pop. And I say, "what is it that you love about this place? Why do you come here?" And people say "it's my cathedral." Other people say, "I come for the peace". It's the tranquility. Nature teaches you so much if you are looking and observing and being in it.

[00:25:49]

**Jakobi:** I remember the first meeting I had with Aunty [Atweet] Caroline. She spoke about people who come on our walks here in the Gardens, who aren't from these lands, but their story, their journey is a part of this land, because they're here, they're on these lands.

[00:26:03]

**Vox pop (VCA Secondary student):** I feel lucky that we live now, hopefully being able to care for the land as much as we've disrespected it

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**Vox pop (Regional visitor):** I work in a kindergarten and I say to the kids "hug the tree". Because that tree is grounded to the dirt, and then provides us with this beautiful shelter and shade. Like, give it a hug!

**Vox pop (VCA Secondary student):** I think for each and every individual person, being able to feel like a land is safe is a really big deal. We all generally are trying to find somewhere to live, somewhere to feel the most comfortable that we can. Those places are safe and they're 'home'.

**Vox pop (VCA Secondary student):** Sometimes I think about how did this place come to be and who has walked around here and who sat here and what did it kind of look like? But more I find myself thinking like, "what is it gonna look like in the future"?

[00:27:02]

**Jakobi:** Anything that takes care of, you know, your habitat, your home. It's an understanding that each and every one of us is reliant on the land, the plants, the animals, and the Earth itself. Without the land, we can't exist. We have to take care of it, so that it can take care of us.

[00:27:38]

**Voice Over:** You've been listening to Episode 4 of Sonica Botanica, created by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria. Sincere thanks to Terry Smyth, Andrew Laidlaw, Jakobi and Steven Liu; and to Yim, Su-Lin, Shanti and Asil; and the landscape painting students of VCA Secondary School and their teacher, Sean Peoples. And to the visitors to the Gardens who shared their stories, impressions, and observations for this episode. A very special thanks Claire Hart, Terese Turner, Emily Barrow, Ben Liu, Émer Harrington, Chris Andrews, and Velen and Barbara McPhee. Sonica Botanica is created and produced by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria. All interviews were recorded on site near Long Island and the Southern China Collection, and by the water at Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. Music, audio editing and sound design by Patrick Cronin.

Thanks for listening!