

Australian Garden

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HISTORY



WA stone walls
The nation's heart
Ard Choille



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A fungal foray through Ard Choille heritage garden

Perhaps the most mythologised fungus in the world, the fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), growing in association with sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*).
photo Alison Pouliot

Gardens can be many things. For some people, they are about design and cultivation, for others they are places of relaxation and contemplation. For most, unsurprisingly, they are primarily about plants. Vascular plants. Their cryptogamic inhabitants are less often the focus. Cryptogams comprise a coterie of taxonomically unrelated organisms – fungi (including lichens), mosses, ferns, liverworts, hornworts and algae. As their name suggests, they are cryptic and inconspicuous. They don't have towering trunks or showy flowers, but rather are small and reproduce with spores instead of seeds. Yet just for a moment, pause, lean in and discover how their staggering diversity of forms delight and enchant. Who knows, you might just get hooked. Forever.

Amazing gardens exist throughout Australia's great range of climates, designed, built and nurtured by horticulturists and landscape designers, gardeners and passionate enthusiasts. Australia's Open Garden Scheme, which ran for almost three decades before ending in June 2015, paved the way for hundreds of thousands of visitors to experience and share the pleasures and knowledge of almost 20,000 of Australia's most inspiring private gardens.

Although the scheme has ended, many garden owners, especially owners of historic gardens, still open their gardens to the public today. Visitors come to admire garden design, landscapes, and the more obvious flowering and woody plants. It is these species, their habits and histories, that garden tour guides most often tell us about. Spring is the ideal time to visit gardens as they awaken and burst into bloom. However, autumn is another rewarding season, not just for the dramatic turning of deciduous trees, but also for the emergence of fungi.

Another angle for garden visits

In this article we take a tour through Ard Choille heritage garden on Mt Macedon in central Victoria, switching the focus from plants to the fungal denizens of gardens, in order to present another angle on the notion of a garden tour. The sexual expression of macrofungi – mushrooms and other visible manifestations – alerts us to their presence, enriching both our gardens and imaginations. Fungi are often maligned by gardeners, especially when microfungus spots, blasts and rusts are misunderstood as being the cause rather than symptoms of unhealthy plants. However, more people are realising that fungal networks of mycelium hidden beneath the soil provide the supportive architecture of a garden's soils and plants, aerating soils and allowing water to gently filter to deeper horizons.

Ard Choille's history

On sunny Sunday afternoons, Mt Macedon is usually bumper-to-bumper with the cars of visitors to the many open gardens. However on the north side of the mount, things are calmer. Ard Choille is tucked away down a dirt road, hidden from view. When I first peered through the ornate timber entrance gates of Ard Choille, it felt like something

from a childhood dream. An immediate sense of excitement welled up inside me.

The towering conifers and dense shrubbery, ferny gullies and camouflaged paths that trailed from the long winding driveway were bound to harbour unrevealed secrets. And fungi. When horticulturist and owner Helen Cottew chanced upon those same entrance gates three decades ago, she was captivated by what lay beyond and says that even today, the garden cloaks undiscovered secrets. Helen lives life on full throttle. Her unequivocal passion for the garden is apparent in her spirited sharing of its stories and her unfaltering stride as she bounded up its steep slopes ahead of me.

Thirty years of her dedication and vision have transformed the garden from its neglected and derelict state, returning it to the original plan as laid out by noted nurseryman and landscape designer William Sangster in the early 1890s. Ard Choille was created by William Macgregor who arrived in Australia in 1877 and refashioned the Scottish landscape of his boyhood through his vision for Ard Choille. He was said to be a direct descendant of Rob Roy Macgregor. Ard Choille (pronounced Arda Hillier) means 'height of the woods' and is still the slogan or war cry of the Clan Gregor worldwide.

Left: The entrance gates and long winding driveway of Ard Choille heritage garden.

Right top: This rare 19th century metal shadehouse, classified by the National Trust, is still in use today.

photos Alison Pouliot

Right bottom: Mount Macedon 'Ard Choille', McGregors Lane, 1982.

photo John T Collins, JT Collins Collection, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria





Left: These impressive trees in the part of Ard Choille's garden known as 'the park' are all supported by mycorrhizal fungi.

Right: The blood-red fruiting bodies of the ruby bonnet (*Cruentomyces viscidocruentus*).
photos Alison Pouliot

Wandering through Ard Choille, Helen introduced me to an impressive selection of woody inhabitants including dogwoods and viburnums, elms and oaks, rowans and lindens, planes, maples, catalpas, cedars and birches. In the understorey, rhododendrons, camellias and hydrangeas flourish. Lichen-dappled tree trunks and moss-carpeted pathways characterise the garden's cooler dells. There is an elegant 19th century shadehouse on a southeasterly facing hill in the garden, unusual in being the only example in Australia entirely constructed of metal and classified by the National Trust.

And everywhere one stumbles upon surprises — an ancient elder, a secret path, a quirky sculpture, a splendid view, a ferny glade. As I walked through the garden with Helen, she beckoned me over, 'Come, in here!', taking me in among the multiple trunks of an ancient Japanese cedar, cherished by her family as the children's fairy tree. We walked with our eyes to the ground, pausing to admire myriad fungi and other cryptogams, then scanning the canopy to marvel at lichens overhead. Ard Choille is not just a gracious 19th century European garden, but also a fungal haven, a cryptogamic sanctuary. It offers a diversity of plants, habitats and microclimates, all favourable to fungi and their kin.

Discovering Ard Choille's fungi

I was delighted when Helen suggested we run a fungal foray in the garden. I'd been running forays in forests for many years, but the idea of holding one at Ard Choille for a new audience of gardeners and horticulturists seemed like a tremendous opportunity to explore new terrains and spread the fungal word.

The day we chose was cool and drizzly. There were mists in the tops of the conifers — perfect weather for a fungus foray. Participants came from all walks of life; many were gardeners, some were mushroom foragers, others were simply curious to explore the garden through a different lens.

Our day began on the croquet lawn with tables full of fungi collected in the preceding days. As we worked our way among the eccentric forms and myriad colours, participants were encouraged to closely examine, touch and smell the fungi. Known colloquially as the 'Forgotten Kingdom', fungi have been misunderstood and misappropriated, their ecological worth overlooked in favour of superstitions that still undermine their significance today. My aim was to put fungi firmly in the spotlight as captivating and ecologically vital organisms. As the fungi were stroked and poked and sniffed, we marvelled at their rich histories, scents and forms, discussed their edibility and toxicity, and importance in garden environments.

Heading off on our garden foray, the whoops of discovery began within moments. Bodies dropped to the ground. Cameras clicked madly. Beneath the sweet chestnuts, the white-speckled red caps of fly agarics (*Amanita muscaria*) adorned the lawn. These fungi form mutually beneficial symbioses known as mycorrhizas with various conifers and broadleaved trees, improving the trees' ability to access water and nutrients by enlarging the surface-absorbing area of their roots. Some mycorrhizal fungi protect tree roots from soil pathogens and nematodes, as well as increasing their drought tolerance. Returning the favour, the trees treat the fungi to a feed of sugars produced through photosynthesis.



Fungi as composers

With every footstep, more fungi revealed themselves. A galaxy of delicate earthstars nestled among the pine needles. Twisted fingers of the wrinkled coral fungus (*Clavulina rugosa*) poked up among them. On a fallen trunk, the tiny blood-red fruiting bodies of the ruby bonnet (*Cruentomyces viscidocruenta*) caught our eyes. Pear-shaped puffballs (*Lycoperdon pyriforme*) huddled below. Tiny yellow-stemmed mycenae (*Mycena epipterygia*) joined the party. Beneath the trunk's surface, the mycelia of these fungi had penetrated the log, secreting enzymes to break down lignin, cellulose and other structural components.

To think of fungi as decomposers is only half the story, for they are also composers – of soils, habitats, relationships and gardens. A diverse and healthy garden begins in the subterranean. What we see aboveground as we wander about on a garden tour, is determined by its unseen inhabitants, below ground. Fungi don't just grow in gardens, they create them.

Beneath the closed canopy of a secret trail, Helen led us to see the artist's conk (*Ganoderma applanatum*) protruding as broad flat arcs from the trunk of a kapuka (*Griselinia littoralis*), a New Zealand tree. She delighted in telling us stories of how artists use these fungi as canvases for etching, but how her grandchildren risked her wrath, dare they try. Further along, majestic parasol mushrooms (*Macrolepiota clelandii*) spread their chamois-soft umbrellas. Once one develops an eye for spotting fungi, their diverse and ubiquitous presence becomes startlingly apparent. Yet even after several hours foraging, we'd discovered only a tiny selection of what the garden had to offer. Slowly one begins to get

an impression of just how fundamental they are in holding gardens together and keeping them healthy.

A pioneering cryptogamic garden

In 1992, in William Macgregor's Scottish homeland, a cryptogamic garden was created at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. It is the first public garden of its kind where cryptogams take centre stage. In this garden organic matter is not tidied up. Rather, it is allowed to accumulate to encourage colonisation by fungi (including lichens), mosses, ferns and other cryptogams and to showcase their importance in gardens. After all, cryptogams constitute most of the diversity in a healthy garden.

Open gardens that incorporate fungal forays provide an opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate fungi – to understand their influence on the wellbeing and resilience of a garden's plants. Nothing in a garden operates in isolation. Fungi and plants are intimately intertwined in a dance of reciprocal benefit. It is time to undo centuries of damage through misunderstanding fungi. To nurture fungi is to maximise a garden's full potential. Indeed it is time to think more fungally!

Acknowledgement

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Left: Tiny fruiting bodies of the yellow-stemmed mycena (*Mycena epipterygia*) poke through the moss on this stump.

Right: Twisted fingers of the wrinkled coral fungus (*Clavulina rugosa*).
photos Alison Pouliot