

BRONTE HOUSE GARDENS

STORY: LOUISE MCDAID MAILDM MHMA



ABOVE
Bronte House at the
opening in March 2018.

What goes into managing the garden of one of Sydney's foremost historic houses? I asked AILD member Nicola

Cameron of Pepo Botanic Design who took over the garden management in early 2017. Maintaining the garden at Bronte House is a collaborative effort. Nicola says they have been lucky to not only be supported by Council but also by Wes and Anna van der Gardner who are the current tenants. Anna is an interior designer and a big plant fanatic who is continuing to develop this garden with a collection of rare and unusual plants.

Q: What are the key aspects to managing the Bronte House Gardens?

A: Being a heritage garden it is important to understand the historical significance and the

BELOW

Telopea speciosissima 'Shady Lady White' has been planted in the hillside garden on the eastern terrace. The original owner, Georgiana Lowe, cultivated waratahs at Bronte House and Anna, the current tenant, was keen to reintroduce them. Pic Anna van der Gardner

future vision for the garden. Communications and our relationship with Waverley Council (owners of the house and garden) and Anna, who is very hands on and interested in the garden, are also essential.

Having a plan is vital. It's important not to lose sight of the scale of the property, you can easily get 'lost' in it and focus on just one area rather than the overall picture. The team needs to be on the same page and a plan is critical to achieve this. At ground level, sustainability is also a significant aspect – managing the green waste on site and repairing the irrigation.

Q: What was the most challenging part of taking on a project like this?

A: There were a few challenges; the scale of the garden, the amount of work that was required, and the fact it is opened at certain →





times to visitors. We know how loved it is by the community and that was a new type of challenge for us. We took over the garden management in the week of its 2017 Autumn Open Day, so it became very real very quickly. Our head horticulturist, Gian, says his biggest challenge is only having 20 hours per week to work on it!

Q: Where did you start, and what needed immediate attention?

A: As part of the tender we needed an outline

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Nicola of Pepo Botanic Design discussing the garden with Myles Baldwin; *Quisqualis indica* 'Rangoon creeper'; One of the many garden scenes at Bronte House that will easily "transport" visitors.

of the work we were planning to do over the first 12 months so before we started on site we had a clear picture of our priorities. We started with researching the garden's history and identifying as many of the plants as we could. There are many rare plants and many that have significant historical value - we needed to know what plants we had to prioritise.

The compost bins had not been functioning for a while and we saw that reviving these was a priority. A chipper would be indispensable

for this, so we were very happy to find out that one could be bought with money raised from Bronte House Open Days. Green waste is such a valuable resource, removing it from site was not an option for us. After researching and buying a chipper that we could feed canna lilies and ginger through, we tidied up the compost area and got the bays working. This meant all green waste could be utilised and we are able to spread compost around the garden.

Our physical work started with moving around to different sections of the garden, from the most to the least visited, to get on top of the weeds and to prune specific plants. There were so many weeds in the carriageway beds that

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Bronte House opening in March 2018 with Wigandia in the border (right) and Rangoon creeper over the arbour; Lawn maintenance by Joao Galiardi Silva of Pepo Botanic Design, Photo Natalie Hunfalvay; Plant stall at Bronte House Open Day.

once they were cleared it all looked a bit bare. The lawn areas were looking sad, so we fertilised and weeded them and started mowing them regularly. We also worked through the irrigation as much as possible, there were many repairs to be done.

Q: After the initial works, what unfolded next?

A: The contract comprises of time allocated specifically to winter pruning and soil improvement so we knew we could work up to this. Arborists were arranged by Council to prune the *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Exmouth' that Leo Schofield had planted as five-year-old →





specimens hoping they would continue to be pruned into a conical shape as he envisioned (Leo was a high profile previous tenant of Bronte House credited with much of the original restoration works in the garden). The Arborist also pruned the lilly pilly hedge that screens the house from the street.

The Michael McCoy inspired hill of “random, frenetic assortment of colours and clumps of cannas” needed to be cut down to the ground as the rust had started to set in and we wanted to avoid it spreading. The hill also comprised *Ricinus communis* 'Red Giant' which we decided was best removed because of its highly toxic nature and invasive qualities. We did this reluctantly as its form looked fantastic!

The *Bambusa balcooa* (Giant Bamboo) was planted by Georgiana Lowe (the original owner of the house) in the 1840's. It is now huge! We use a chainsaw to cut off culms as they start to lean out of the clump, but I don't feel like we have even touched the surface. The bamboo needs days of work to tidy it and get it under control. I

LEFT TO RIGHT
Gianmarco Vetrugno, head horticulturist at Pepo Botanic Design, hands on with the garden management at Bronte House. Photos Natalie Hunfalvay.

doubt when she planted it that Georgiana would have ever considered gardeners standing under her Giant Bamboo some 178 years later not knowing where to start pruning it!

Q: Since taking on the job, what are you proud of and what has made the most difference to the garden?

A: The garden now looks lighter and healthier than when we started. You can now see and appreciate the form and the definition of the garden beds and plants in them. Gian likes the pruning and implementing correct horticultural techniques to the rarer plants.

The lawn areas have come back beautifully which makes a huge difference to the overall look of the garden. They were full of weeds so we needed to be confident that if we did a selective herbicide program the lawns would recover, and they did!

One of the things we really love is having the home-made compost. While it does take a bit of time to chip everything up, it's well worth it.

Bronte House gardens have been described as "a small scale botanic gardens showing rare and beautiful plants". It's been said that when asked why he invested so much into the garden, Leo Schofield replied, "when I walk into this garden I want to breathe it in and be transported". Being one of Sydney's significant historical gardens, Nicola wants to help develop the garden to educate visitors and inspire them to also breathe it in and be "transported". As she says, "it is a really exciting time to be involved in the garden as it moves from being known as Leo Schofield's dream into a new era where it is Anna and Wes's family home, with a vibrant evolving garden". **LO**

INFORMATION

- Pepo Botanic Design @pepo_botanic_design
- Open days at Bronte House are planned for Saturday, 20 and Sunday, 21 October 2018 .
- For further details visit waverley.nsw.gov.au.

RIGHT
Bronte House Gardens' frangipani. Anna (@thedesignbarn) has been documenting the frangipanis as they flower, a vestige from Leo Schofield who collected *Plumeria* for the garden.



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