THE SM’S PRIDE AND JOY:  
SOME NOTES ON  
RAILWAY STATION GARDENS

Christopher Betteridge

WHEN ONE thinks of railway station gardens in Australia it is most likely Kuranda, in Queensland’s Atherton Tableland which springs to mind. Photos of Kuranda Station have graced many a tourist brochure. In fact, increasing tourist traffic on the Cairns Railway line led to reconstruction of Kuranda station in 1915. At that time the station was decorated with dozens of drums and pots of tropical plants and the walls were already festooned with staghorns.

By the 1970s it was almost impossible to see the building from the platform - such was the profusion of lush plant growth in hanging baskets and pots. Tall, graceful palms lined the platform and a hoop pine towered behind the station. Kuranda station still features strongly in the latest brochure by Queensland Rail, promoting the “Cairns-Kuranda Traveltrain”.

The decorating of railway platforms and buildings was by no means restricted to Far North Queensland. There is a long-standing tradition in many parts of Australia for enthusiastic railway employees to brighten their workplace with garden beds.

The railways were one of the more obvious expressions of the Industrial Revolution to affect the landscape of Australia. The governments of the colonies established rail networks which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had spread their tentacles far and wide across the land.

In those days of labour-intensive administration, passengers and freight handling, and track maintenance, there were always plenty of employees. Interest in horticulture was high, as evidenced by the number of amateur societies devoted to that pursuit. New station buildings were often stark, with large areas of masonry and long expanses of platform crying out for a bit of greenery.

The Queensland Railway first employed a gardener in 1876, and 174 trees and shrubs were planted in that year on the lines south and north of Brisbane.

The tradition continues today at Spring Bluff, near Toowoomba, where railway staff and local volunteers tend the gardens at the railway station. Displays of ranunculus, cornflowers and everlasting daisies in 1991 won for the station the best flowering annuals and bulbs class in the country section of the Toowoomba Chronicle Home Gardens Competition.

In important early railheads such as Goulburn, New South Wales, the station and railway were integrated into the town grid street pattern and marked with avenue planting. In some towns the railway station terminated an important street such as Smollett Street, Albury and Keppel Street, Bathurst. In these cases the street planting framed the station building. Where rail links occurred after the establishment of a town, the drive to the station was often planted with trees which contributed to the overall street planning scheme. This can be seen at Young, NSW, where a row of plane trees leads to the station, and at Bowenfels, near Lithgow, where pines have been used for the same purpose.

At Medlow Bath, in the Blue Mountains, pines (Pinus radiata) lining the highway and adjoining railway line provide a strong linear element in the landscape and emphasise the European spa resort character of the town.
Contemporary photographs and other illustrations show little evidence of station gardens prior to the 1890s in New South Wales but certainly in the last decade of the century a dramatic transformation of railway property began. At Christmas 1895 a number of stations in Sydney and on country lines were decorated with garden shrubs, ferns, flags, Chinese lanterns and wreaths, wishing travellers the joys of the season. The decorations gave rise to very favourable comments by passengers and also the general public using the stations.7

The Railway Institute already had a horticultural society for its members and attempts were being made to hold a flower show, with judges to be drawn from the St. George’s Horticultural Society, the Botanical Gardens and the New South Wales Horticultural Society. Held over two days in April 1896, the Autumn Flower Show was adjudged a great success. The Railway and Tramway Musical Society and the Railway Band provided musical entertainment and the prizes were presented by the Commissioner for Railways. Prominent among the prizewinners was Mr. J. G. Bisset, (S. M. Homebush) who took out first prizes for dahlias, bouvardias and roses.4

In order to foster the growth of horticulture, Mr. Thomas Corbett, president of one of Sydney’s horticultural societies, consented to write a series of articles for the Institute’s journal, Railway Budget, with the object of “stimulating lovers of gardens, in the railway and tramway service, who carry on their work for recreative purposes, or from the love of beautiful and not for purposes of profit - in the strictest sense amateurs.”5

In keeping with the horticultural literature of the day, the writings were full of quasi-religious philosophy and somewhat maudlin sentiments.

Competitions for railway station gardens were also held in England, where the directors of the Midland Railway Company offered prizes to the value of two hundred pounds for the best-kept and most attractive platform gardens at their various stations. In 1896 the first prize was carried off for the second time by the Station Master at Matlock Bath.6

The first mention of the New South Wales Railways Commissioners sponsoring a railway station garden competition appears in the Railway Budget of 21 August, 1899. Categories included bona fide station gardens in the Sydney Metropolitan Area, the station garden showing the greatest improvement in the preceding months, and for a bouquet of flowers from station gardens outside the Metropolitan Area.

Maximum prizes were somewhat more modest than those offered in England - first prize was two pounds. Mr. Oliver, then Chief Railway Commissioner, speaking at the opening of the Railway Institute Spring Flower Show, said that “the Commissioners had always been anxious to improve the appearance and surroundings of our railway stations.”7

The winning stations on that occasion have tended to feature very strongly in competitions over the years. Honours went to Granville, Croydon and Lewisham, with Beecroft winning the most improved prize.

The judges found “considerable evidence that the prizes offered by the Commissioners had stimulated several stations in the formation of gardens and encouraged others to keep in good order those already formed....”8

Plant species recommended by the judges for consideration by staff included agaves, the Gymea Lily (Doryanthes excelsa), cabbage tree palms, pampas grass, cannas and geraniums.

For country stations, staff were encouraged to grow local native species of decorative appearance, although the so-called “native” trailing plants recommended for shaley banks and rubble walls i.e. ivy-leaved geranium, climbing fig and ivy, are hardly indigenous to this country.
In 1900, Wahroonga, on Sydney’s North Shore Line, rated special mention for its garden which was developed by railway staff and volunteers from the local community. This tradition continues to the present day and has been expanded to include sponsorship of station gardens by local business houses under the “Life. Be In It.” program. Epping won this category in 1991, with St. Marys and Richmond equal second and St. Leonards and Hornsby equal third.

Topiary was once a feature of many railway gardens. In 1903 readers of the Railway Budget were informed on the best method of growing hedges and topiary forms using the saltbush, Rhagodia hastata. As well as its ability to grow in dry areas, this species was considered useful for catching dust on its leaves, thereby “saving the curtains and the house.”

The author remembers well the wonderful topiary forms, including coats of arms and koalas in trees, which were a feature of the Flemington Car Sheds in Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s. Sadly, the New South Wales State Rail Authority Archives do not appear to have any photographs of these works of art which delighted so many train travellers on their way to and from work.

The 1903 Railway Stations Gardens Competitions saw the rise of the Blue Mountains stations as a force to be reckoned with. Even today, most of the stations from Penrith to Mount Victoria on the Western Line retain well-tended gardens. Glenbrook has always performed strongly in competitions, and in the 1970s its platforms sported lavish displays, water features and signposts. Today, its garden beds are bordered with red-painted rocks to match the new corporate colours for signage, lamp-posts and station furniture.

The recent trend towards more use of native plant species has seen many Blue Mountains stations planted with wattles, weeping bottlebrushes, banksias and grevillea cultivars.

Many different types of containers have been used as receptacles for plants on station platforms, some with less than aesthetic results. Tubs, pipes, old tyres, wheelbarrows and pieces of welded iron from railway rolling stock have all been used at various times. The recent trend towards use of treated pine planter boxes is understandable for its practicality, but such receptacles are often out of sympathy with station buildings of heritage significance.

The negative side of station flower beds was recognised in 1904. In the Budget’s anonymously authored “Gardening Notes” railway staff are warned that such beds, whilst undoubtedly attractive, could be found to be a serious nuisance in the handling of passengers’ luggage. Doubt was expressed at the likelihood of garden beds at the Blue Mountains stations surviving the summer tourist season.

Station gardeners were warned in no uncertain terms about the dangers of paying too little attention to their choice of colours for platform plantings.

“Often a woman or girl going down the street strikes one as being "loud". She perhaps has on tan shoes with dark stockings, or vise (sic) versa, a red dress and blue hat or blue ribbons in it, and perhaps a green or some other coloured parasol. Such a sight grates on the eye—there is a want of harmony and uniformity. This is precisely the effect produced if the colours (sic) in the garden are not blended in a tasteful manner.”

They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and certainly tastes, in gardens and everything else, change with time. It is interesting to speculate on what the writer of the quote above might have made of the present day fashions, male and female, in Sydney’s Oxford Street.

Popular plants of the first decade of the twentieth century included the following trees: Brugmansia (Angel’s Trumpet), Catalpa, Tecoma, Prunus (ornamental plums, cherries, etc.), Pittosporum, Camphor Laurel and Pepper Trees.
Favourite ornamental and flowering shrubs included roses, camations, bouvardias, cannas, dahlias (cactus types), chrysanthemums, camellias, azaleas, deutzia and fuchsias.

Annuals, biennials, and perennials recommended to railway staff included balsams, coreopsis, cockscob, cosmos, dianthus, heliotrope, gaillardia, larkspur, marigolds, mignonette, pansies, sweet peas, phlox, poppies, scabiosa, sunflowers, stocks, verbenas and zinnias.¹⁷

Staking of plants was encouraged for the purpose of supporting the stems and holding the blooms up from the ground to prevent them from being splashed with and spoiled by the “first shower of rain that comes.”¹⁸ Many gardens shown in photographs of this period have the appearance of a sea of stakes.

Of course, none of these railway gardens would grow without a little help from nature’s fertilisers. From about 1900 until the 1970s, stationmasters throughout New South Wales could write to the Station Master, Flemington Salesyards, requisitioning an ‘S’ wagon of manure to be sent to them.¹⁹

Gardens were not restricted to station platforms. Tramway depots, signal boxes, fettlers’ huts and railway workshops were planted with trees, shrubs, climbers, ferns and bedding plants as staff competed with one another for the quarterly prizes.

Civic pride was embodied in ceremonies such as Arbor Day tree plantings. In 1925 one hundred and twenty-one employees of the Cowra Locomotive Depot each planted a tree made available by the Sydney Botanic Gardens.

“Each tree was given the name of its sponsor, who, of course, will be expected to bestow upon it the attention necessary to its successful growth, and in years to come the descendants of the present loco, employees will be able to identify the arborial (sic) efforts of their ancestors.”²⁰

Many railway and tramway employees were camera enthusiasts and their own journal, The Staff solicited photographs of station gardens for its pages. These images demonstrate the enormous scope of railway plantings in the first quarter of this century.

From the cream Maman Cochet rose growing over the signal box at Brewongle²¹ to the lavish plantings of palms, shrubs and geometric beds at the Tempe Tramway Depot,²² railway station gardening was big business. Some of the gardens were more than just ornamental plantings. The fettlers of Gang No. 131 who cared for the garden and trolley shed at Brogan’s Creek on the Mudgee line grew a giant grape wine which produced about half a ton of fruit in 1927.²³

Modern day conservationists and national park managers would be aghast at the account of one rail traveller of the day who extolled the virtues of trains as means of reaching rainforest gulleys where staghorns, birds’ nest ferns and other plants could be obtained.

A photograph in the The Staff of 23 June 1927 shows two intrepid climbers scaling a lofty ironbark in the Illawarra district for a clump of staghorns large enough to fill a lorry. An interesting sidelight to this particular expedition was the capture of an “Australian flying squirrel.” The officials at Taronga Zoo were much impressed with this specimen - probably a Greater Glider, which, at that time, had been seldom collected.

Stations on the North Coast line particularly were adorned with staghorns and other lush foliage, as evidenced by a photograph of the Station Master and the Goods Clerk at Murwillumbah standing proudly on their platform in 1929.²⁴ In 1930 the first prize in the metropolitan area of Sydney was won by Hurstville with a marvellous display of palms, rose bushes, climbers and flower beds. Today, the station is topped by a shopping arcade and the platforms are adorned with philodendrons and other indoor plants growing under artificial light.
From 1923 the New South Wales Government Railways operated a plant nursery just to the north of Homebush and 4,000 Botanic Gardens in its first year of operation the nursery distributed 37,000 seedlings and 4,000 trees and shrubs. Such was the demand for plant material that by 1929 the nursery sent out to railway stations 179,822 seedlings and 8,308 trees and shrubs. A further 12,000 shrubs and trees were obtained from the Botanic Gardens to be grown on railways premises.

At a time when the railways had supremacy over other forms of transport the railway station was regarded as the “front door” of the town. Railway station gardens exemplified “a fraternity which exists among garden lovers and those who wish to make their own and their workmates” surroundings pleasant and uplifting.

In New South Wales, at least, the spirit of competition and the desire by railway employees to beautify their places or work survives into the 1990s. Some stations retain elements of former plantings but mostly only hardy shrubs and small trees. A forlorn Phoenix palm rustles in the breeze on the platform at Croydon. Waiting rooms and toilets are locked, and a skeleton staff remains only in the booking office. Recent reductions in the number of employees, increasing vandalism and changing attitudes and priorities have seen the demise of many station gardens.

It is to be hoped that recent initiatives by the State Rail Authority in conjunction with local community groups and the corporate sector will ensure the survival of station gardens as an important part of our railway heritage - the Station Masters’s Pride and Joy.

Note - The author is conducting further research into railway gardens and would appreciate any information, including photographs, relating to the subject in Australia and overseas. Material should be sent to Mr. Chris Betteridge, 15 William Street, Randwick, NSW 2031. Chris may be contacted by phone on (02) 314 6642

Acknowledgments
The author wishes to thank the following individuals for their kind assistance in the preparation of this paper:
Joe Davis and Eric Walkley, Australian Railway Historical Society; Victor Poljanski, Senior Archivist, State Rail Authority of New South Wales; Graham Truelove, Corporate Relations, SRA; Eddie Wilkinson, City Rail Northwest, SRA; Vince O’Rourke, Chief Executive, Queensland Rail; and Trevor Grieves and Trish Kamisky, Corporate Development Section, QR.

References
1. Christopher Betteridge grew up at Parramatta beside the main Western Line out of Sydney. He fondly remembers waving to the crews of “Lazy Lizzies” (D57 & D58 class locomotives) as their goods trains rumbled past his home. His interest in railways was further sparked by his grandfather, the late Rev. R. B. Reynolds who gave him a copy of the centenary history of New South Wales Government Railways in 1955. Chris’ uncle the late Arthur Renwick was Secretary of the Australian Railway Historical Society, and he and Arthur both enjoyed collecting ‘O’ Gauge railway models.

Chris was an early member of the New South Wales Rail Transport Museum and spent many weekends chasing trains around the State in the twilight days of steam. One of the highlights of his rail travels was a train journey from Sydney to Perth and back in early 1964 when he and a friend made a point to travelling on as many different trains as possible in those pre-standard gauge, pre-
Avon diversion days.

After training as a botanist Chris worked in a variety of New South Wales Government agencies, including ten years as environmental adviser to the Heritage Council. More recently he was an Assistant Director of Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens. Chris’ company Musecape Pty Ltd specialises in heritage conservation and museum planning projects including provision of a range of services to The Earth Exchange, formerly the Geological and Mining Museum.

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8. Ibid., 19 May 1896, p. 212

9. Ibid., 22 April 1897, pp. 174 - 175

10. Ibid., 20 May 1897, p. 190

11. Ibid., 20 November 1899, pp. 55 - 56

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid, 20 November 1899, p. 59


17. Ibid. 1 July 1904, p. 257

18. Ibid. 1 August 1904, p. 289


22. Ibid., 22 February 1926, p. 121

23. Ibid., “A Miniature Vineyard”, 23 May 1927

24. *The Staff* 21 June 1929, p. 373


26. Ibid., “Our Good Example”, 24 November 1930, p. 696