




My Garden as a family archive

A hanging garden installation, representing Sally Gray's garden-archive, will welcome visitors to *The House of Exquisite Memory*



My Surry Hills garden is an archive of relationships and events. Beginning in 1987, shortly after I bought the house, the garden has grown from being a barren concrete square containing a fibro shed to a suite of two subtropical outdoor rooms. The garden has not been designed or planned but has evolved to reveal a deep structure in a pattern of familial relationships — both those of blood family and those of a beyond-blood family. Some plants have been with me for longer than the life of this garden; they have been carried from previous gardens because of the relationships they embody

The plants in the garden are derived from the gardens of other plant lovers. Each plant speaks of a relationship, usually with its donor. Some of these people are no longer in my life, either through death or the estrangements that take place throughout a lifetime of relationships. Some plants are memorials or mnemonics for significant cultural events, such as the dates of the deaths of David McDiarmid and Carlos Bonnici, in 1995 and 1989 respectively. When the Strelitzia flowers, it's the time of David's death; when the Arum lilies flower it's the time of Carlos' death.

I grew up in a family of garden lovers and garden creators. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother, her mother and her sisters walking each other's gardens as if they were in an art gallery, discussing each plant, its successes, failures and features; its botanical name; its origin (usually somebody else's garden) and how many years it has been in the collection.

When I left home at 15 to go to boarding school and university and, ultimately, to live in New York, London and Sydney, never to return, garden talk was the way that my mother and I retained a relationship, which, often in those years, had very little else to bind it. Gardens and plants provided an enduring language and connection over years of geographical separation and differing cultural perspectives, aesthetics and values.

As the family has come back together geographically — we all live in Australia after many years in which one or other of us was living overseas — gardens have become a binding connection again. The connection around gardens and beauty has turned out to be the most enduring one. Nearly every plant in my garden comes from a member of my family or one of the people who have been my family for the time we have shared together.

Sally Gray