

HORTULANUS

Official Publication of Ku-ring-gai Horticultural Society Inc.

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DECEMBER 2022

COMING EVENTS

Dec. 6 **KHS Christmas Meeting - Speaker: George Hoad plus the Christmas Supper**

2023

Feb. 7 **KHS February Meeting - Speaker:**



A Christmas message from our President

I love Christmas. I loved it as a child, and I love it still. I can remember the excitement every Christmas Eve...going to bed and trying to stay awake to see Santa and his reindeers. No matter how early my younger brother and I woke up. Santa had always been. Of course, we were not allowed to open any presents until Mum and Dad and our sleepy-headed older brother and sister were up and about but we made so much noise that it didn't take long for their day to start as well. I can still remember the best present ever...it was a toy piano which would play the Blue Danube every time I opened the lid. I played with it so much that one day it eventually stopped playing (I think the mechanism wore out). But I kept it as a memento for years...just because I loved it.

Presents become less important over the intervening years and it is the company and love of family and friendships that makes Christmas so meaningful today. There is the anticipation of seeing friends and family members whom I haven't seen in months or possibly since the same time last year. There are of course presents and delectable treats to broaden the waistline! But more than that there is the love and laughter and pure joy of being with people whom I love and who mean so much to me.

That is what I wish for you all - a joyous Christmas Season filled with the company of those you love and who love you in return.

The past two years have prevented many families and loved one's meeting at Christmas. We relied on memories of years gone by, on Zoom, emails, texts and phone calls to fill the gap of face-to-face Christmas gatherings. So let this Christmas Season be filled with laughter, love and friendship.

To kick start your Christmas celebrations I urge you to come to our Christmas meeting on Tuesday 6th December and share with your gardening friends, buddies and our wonderful band of volunteers a joyous evening. Where would we be without the dedication of our volunteers?

On behalf of the KHS Committee comprising Christine, Ted, Nancy, Helen, Robyn, Jenny, and myself, we want to wish you peace, goodwill and good health and a very happy time with your loved ones and of course your gardens over the Christmas period.

Evelyn Mason



MEMBER NEWS

Our Christmas meeting will start with our guest speaker, George Hoad, whom many of you will remember from the previous time he visited as a very entertaining speaker. This will be followed by our Christmas supper and members are invited to bring a plate of something delicious, either savoury or sweet. The Society will provide soft drinks and tea/coffee.

Our President, Evelyn, has written a very interesting account about an event she attended recently on behalf of KHS. Read on and all will be revealed!

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Don't forget to have a look at our [Facebook](#) page which continues to have some interesting postings. We now have 52 contributors and it has proved very useful in answering questions such as finding out plant names and helping members with problems with their gardens. Remember that this is a private group and can only be accessed by members of our Society so nothing of what you post is distributed to the public at large. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2273344029640713>. Julie Iyengar, the administrator of our site, has kindly offered to help anyone who would like to know more and join up. Please let the Secretary, Christine Rethers, know if you are interested.

OUTINGS

Planning has started for 2023. The Society tries to have at least two outings each year with one of them being for one or two nights. We have had to put longer outings on hold during the Covid crisis but hope to be able to recommence them if the Covid situation allows. Please send an email to khs.secretary@gmail.com with your thoughts.

SHOW BENCH

There is only the December meeting to go before the Show Bench competition closes for this year with the winners to be announced in the February Hortulanus and the prizes given out at the February meeting. The new Show Bench competition will start at that meeting. The highlights of the November Show Bench included some wonderful roses, fuchsias, a great selection of natives, lovely hippeastrums, great rhubarb and spinach and some great entries in the Decorative classes—the Krazy Kritters were most amusing.

RAFFLE

The November raffle included a very nice Bromeliad, a pink and a white Brachyscome, a book on Roses and a book on medicinal plants. Thank you to all the anonymous donors; your donations are always gratefully received.

GARDEN TABLE

The Garden Table will **not** be operating at the December meeting so the next one will be when we return from the Christmas break at the beginning of February. Let's all get propagating!

MAIN SPEAKER NOVEMBER



The main speaker was Kerry Marston, President of the Gloucester Garden Club. Kerry showed us some lovely gardens in Ireland that she has become familiar with while visiting members of her family who are currently living there. The gardens were all quite different, often with historic homes set in their grounds and surrounded by glorious countryside. This was a close-up glimpse of Ireland that many of us who have travelled there have not had a chance to see. It was delightful to see Kerry's family enjoying their visits to these lovely gardens.

Main speaker February: Our main speaker in February will be Robyn Kennedy who is a botanical artist, and she will be demonstrating the techniques she uses for adhering the textiles and photographic pieces in a collage. She will be bringing some of her framed and unframed wall art and vessels for sale.

MEMBER SPEAKER OCTOBER: Christine Erratt's presentation on a trip through the Dolomite region of Italy was given by Sue Ballinger in Christine's absence. Christine first showed us some of the famous and quite beautiful gardens on islands in the lakes of northern Italy. The Dolomite mountains lie to the east of the lakes area but are in fairly close proximity. They are a continuation of the Alps that form the main mountain chain of Switzerland and eastern France. The scenery here is spectacular with alpine meadows full of wonderful wild flowers that are native to the high mountainous areas. We were treated to some wonderful photography of these scenic areas and enjoyed our visit, albeit second-hand.

Member speaker February: will be talking about and demonstrating propagation methods.

IN THE VEGIE PATCH IN DECEMBER/JANUARY by Christine Rethers

The summer months can be quite tough for the vegetable garden with the extra heat and sometimes less natural rainfall to contend with. It is a good idea to protect your vegetables with some light shade cloth. Even the light white netting that we recommend for protection from insect attack will provide some shading for tender plants like lettuce. The other protection is to apply good amounts of mulch to the soil which helps to retain moisture and keeps the roots of your vegetables from getting too hot. Home-made mulch, sugar cane mulch, lucerne hay, pea straw and some of the proprietary brands of mulch are all good but a word of warning - do not apply them so thickly that natural rainfall cannot reach the soil. Probably 4-5 cm is sufficient depth to provide some protection whilst still letting water through. It is important to harvest crops like beans, cucumbers, zucchini and the like whilst they are still young and tender. If you leave them on their vines too long, the plants think that they have completed their life-cycle and will go into seed production. If you keep picking, the plants will keep producing.

One vegetable that you can continue to sow is the radish. The idea is to sow just one row at a time. From seed to maturity is approximately 4-5 weeks so if you plant just one row each week, you will maintain a nice supply for the kitchen over the summer months. There is nothing nicer than a lovely fresh radish to eat as is or sliced in a salad.



DINNER WITH THE GOVERNOR by Evelyn Mason

Several weeks ago I received a phone call from John, assistant to the Governor of NSW, inviting me to dinner. *Pull the other one* – was my immediate reaction! But I kept my thoughts to myself and asked: “*Why me?*”

Apparently they knew that Ku-ring-gai Horticultural Society is one of the oldest horticultural societies in NSW and they were holding a dinner for representatives of community groups that worked specifically for the benefit of the well-being of the community. Needless to say, I was interested, so I ran it past the Society’s Committee and got the go-ahead.

Thursday evening two weeks ago, I drove into Government House, was allocated a parking space in the forecourt and ushered into a vestibule where I had to line up and sign the visitors book before practicing my curtsying! Next, a brief introduction to the Governor, Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC

KC and her husband, Mr Dennis Wilson, the latter, I found out later, having a great interest in grevilleas. The 30 guests mingled in the lounge area overlooking the delightful gardens. Canapes and ‘bubbles’ were offered and conversations were initiated amongst the guests. Then it was time to move into the formal dining room. The enormous table seated 34. Place names designated the seating position of each guest and by some chance I was seated next to the only person in the room I knew from my professional life, the current CEO of Arthritis NSW and Qld.

Conversations were lively until the first course arrived. Suffice to say each course was delicious and had its allotted wines, all from NSW. The chef was invited to attend and explain how he cooked the seared lamb loin, something I will try one day (sealing it in a bag with all the spices and herbs and poaching for 2 hours, then putting under the grill just before serving). I hope I got that right!

Her Excellency spoke briefly and thanked all of us and our organisations for the work we do to make our communities a richer place to live. I found out that I was the only representative of a gardening group! There was a sad reminder of the recent passing of Queen Elizabeth when we had a toast to the King. The photos on the walls and in the frames were of King Charles and the Queen Consort but the royal badges each Government House official wore still had the ER insignia. This is truly a period of historic transition.

As promptly as the evening started, it ended and we were in our cars driving home, feeling quite special. It was quite an honour for our Society to be recognised in this way. Thank you, Your Excellency, on behalf of the Ku-ring-gai Horticultural Society.



The view from the terrace of Government House

SUCCULENT CHRISTMAS TREE by Maureene Smith

I have seen these table top Christmas trees for sale recently and, having quite a few succulents, I decided to make my own. Using chicken wire to shape a cone about 14cm high and 8 cm wide at the base, I filled it with thoroughly moistened sphagnum moss, squeezed out so it is not dripping.

I then stood this in a large pot saucer and proceeded to cover it with succulents, starting from the bottom with the largest. Varieties that worked best were echeveria, crassula, haworthia, aeonium and sempervivum. I used a knitting needle to make a hole in the moss and wound my way to the top with the succulents, using smaller plants as I went.

A couple of tips ... the longer the stem you have on your succulent, the easier it is to keep it in place. Even so, you may have to stuff in a little extra sphagnum moss here and there. If you don’t have enough small succulents, just take off some of the outer leaves. Another way to secure them is to spear them with a piece of wire, like florists do with Gerberas to keep their heads upright.

I don’t know yet but I think an occasional misting will be sufficient to keep it looking great through Christmas. Succulents are pretty tough.



HYDRANGEAS by Christine Rethers

This is the time of year when our hydrangeas are starting to look their best. It is also the best time to go looking in the nurseries for hydrangea plants that catch your eye. They will keep well in a pot as long as you keep the water up to them and they can then be planted in the garden later on in autumn or early winter. It used to be that the choice when buying hydrangeas came down to ‘mop-tops’ (*H. macrophylla*) or ‘lace-caps’. There are in fact over 75 species of hydrangea let alone what must now be hundreds of hybrids. It used to be that the choice of flower colour was between blue, pink or white whereas now reds, purples and many shades in between are now available. The old-fashioned hydrangeas were large plants, up to almost 2m in height. but we can now buy all sizes including miniatures no more than 40-50cm. And all this has only happened in recent times.

One thing that has not changed is their requirements. They need to be located in a relatively sheltered position away from the hot afternoon sun. Morning sun is okay but a dappled position under deciduous trees is the ideal. They are dormant to semi-dormant in winter so the new growth doesn’t start until the beginning of spring. Flowering in our part of the country starts around November and can continue up to the end of autumn. With this in mind, it is best to pick a spot that suits the plant’s needs as hydrangeas can be very long-lived.

When you are planting a new hydrangea, make sure that you prepare the spot very well by digging in plenty of compost and cow manure before planting. Once planted and well watered in, a nice layer of mulch will finish the job.

Quite often the flowers will stay on the bush for several months, slowly turning to almost an antique shade whilst still remaining attractive.

Eventually the leaves will drop off and the plant will become dormant again which is when it can be pruned. Pruning an hydrangea can be a contentious topic. Some like to take the plant down each year by a third to a half, cutting just above a nice fat pair of buds. My preference is to only prune those stems that have flowered that summer and leaving any that have not flowered. However, as the plant ages, some of the stems that have flowered several times become thick and woody and a proportion of the old stems should be taken out at ground level each year. This will encourage new growth to push through from the base and so renew the bush. Pruning can take place at any time the bush is dormant, from May to about the middle of August.

Hydrangeas tend not to suffer from many pests or diseases. Towards the end of summer you can sometimes see powdery mildew on the leaves but as these leaves are going to fall off anyway within a month or so, I tend not to worry about this. Care during the summer months mostly involves keeping the plants well watered as they will fade quickly if they dry out too much. If you would like to play around with the colour of your flowers, products are available which change the pH of the soil and thus the flower colour. For example, if your soil tends towards a low pH and is therefore acidic, the flower colour will be blue whereas a high pH or alkaline soil will produce pink flowers. If you haven't tried hydrangeas before, now is the best time to go and see what is available in the nurseries.



Hydrangea paniculata



Hydrangea macrophylla



Hydrangea quercifolia (Oakleaf)

YOUR DECEMBER/JANUARY GARDEN by Christine Rethers

► By now, most of your spring-flowering bulbs will have died back and it is time to make the decision whether to dig them up or leave them in the ground. In the Sydney area, it is usually safe to leave daffodil, jonquil, freesias and bluebell bulbs in the ground unless they have become very congested when it is best to lift them and divide them up into smaller clumps before replanting them in soil that has been refreshed with compost and some fertiliser. However, hyacinths, crocus, tulips do not flower well in Sydney's climate the second time around so they can either be discarded or planted in a pot if you would like to try to get another year out of them. Anemones and ranunculus are also best planted fresh each year as they often disappear completely over our warm summers.

► Pruning of spring-flowering shrubs such as Weigelas, Brunfelsia and Spirea (May bush) should be done now. Find the oldest and thickest stems and take them out at ground level. They will send up new growths again and refresh and renew your shrub. If you wish, you can cut back the long growths but if you do, you will lose the lovely weeping habit of these shrubs. However, this is sometimes a necessity where they are blocking a footpath or other plants in that part of the garden. While you are about it, a good feed and mulch of compost and cow manure as well as a good watering will set up your plants for the summer.

► If you have a nice display now of bedding plants such as petunias, lobelia, daisies, marigolds and nemesias, don't forget that you can prolong their flowering by frequent dead-heading. Some such as petunias, nemesia and daisies will also benefit from a good trim to keep them compact. However, as these are generally all annuals, their life cycle is limited so once they are way past their best, it is time to pull them out and compost them. If it is still warm enough, you could try a second planting but generally leaving the soil fallow for a month or so is not such a bad thing as long as it doesn't fill up with weeds.

► In summer, watering becomes very important but there is a right way and a wrong way to go about this. The wrong way is to stand with the hose or watering system, wet the top of the soil and then move on. I call this 'fairy watering' The right way is to take a bit of time to deep water each plant. This takes longer but is much more beneficial to your plants. The advantage here is that you do not need to water as often. To know how often is necessary for your garden, just take a trowel and check to see how dry it is say 5cm down.

► Take care when mowing your lawn at this time of the year. It is best to leave it a bit longer as this will protect the soil from drying out as quickly in the hot sun. In addition, a lawn of sunburnt grass is not a pretty sight.

