

Episode 1 – Arid Garden

A note on the transcript for this episode – the voices of visitors have been captured as deidentified ‘Vox pops’ (the opinions of people recorded talking informally) or in a group style interview.

[00:00:00]

Sung in Spanish	Mira la jardinera	[look at the gardener]
	Ella va plantando	[she is planting]
	El jardin que ama	[the garden she loves]

[00:00:23]

Introduction: You're listening to Sonica Botanica: Stories and Sounds from the Gardens. Created by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens, Victoria. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which this episode was created and on which the Gardens are sited, and pay our respects to elders past, present and future. Episode one, The Arid Garden.

[00:00:00]

Sung in Spanish	El viento esta soplando	[the wind is whistling]
	Las plantas van bailando	[the plants are dancing]

[00:00:51]

Robert Field: I was born into cactus. My father had started collecting, oh probably 40 years beforehand.

I'm Robert Field. I'm the second generation of the Field family involved in cactus growing.

History is just amazing. My father had started at a very youthful age, getting his first few plants. Mostly they'd come from the Botanic Gardens here. But to buy extra cactus, he had to import them from overseas.

He was invited by, ah, Robert Blossfeld, ah, in 1935 to share in an expedition to look for cactus. And there being a guarantee of over a thousand plants, to anyone who subscribed to that expedition, that was really a carrot in front of the donkey's nose.

[00:01:44]

Andrew Laidlaw: The story of Blossfeld's expedition and Ralph and Robert, cause they're all those characters interwoven into this story, wasn't well-known in the Gardens.

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My name's Andrew Laidlaw and I've worked at the Botanic Gardens for over 20 years, designing gardens which allow people to connect to plants.

A lot of the South American material came in on the, on the Blossfeld expedition.

[00:02:07]

Robert Field: that expedition covered well over 6,000 kilometers. And a lot of discoveries.

[00:02:12]

Andrew Laidlaw: Botanical people, we all know about Blossfeld, because there's lots of plants called Blossfeldiana, so it was a wonderful connection to know that Blossfeld - and we've got lots of those plants

[00:02:24]

Robert Field: I think it was over, over 1200 different varieties arrived. The bulk of the collection that's come down to Melbourne, are nearly all Blossfeld plants.

[00:02:32]

Andrew Laidlaw: Again, a great circling of, of, ah, botanical interest.

[00:02:42]

Bret Pritchard: The Arid Garden was in desperate need, um, of a re-development. Myself and Andrew Laidlaw, the, the landscape architect just planned a visit to see his collection ...

I'm Bret Pritchard, I'm a horticulturist at the Royal Botanic Gardens. I've been here for, I think it's close to 22 years now.

... maybe get a few plants off him if possible but really to sort of just get some inspiration and ... just to see this collection that we'd heard about.

[00:03:08]

Andrew Laidlaw:] And we were blown away by, who he is and his relationship to his plants.

[00:03:13]

Robert Field: I'd got to the stage where it was becoming hard work rather than enjoyable work. And bearing in mind you know the last time I looked at my birth certificate, it was getting about time to do something pretty special about it.

[00:03:25]

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Andrew Laidlaw: When we were with Robert, one of his great laments was what's gonna happen to the garden.

[00:03:29]

Bret Pritchard: It was getting away from him. He was sort of worried about the future of the collection, I guess, in terms of selling up the property...a very big chance that someone wouldn't just come in and bulldoze the whole collection, they just wanted it for the land.

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Andrew Laidlaw: It occurred to both Bret and I almost simultaneously that there was an opportunity for Robert to actually share this collection and to bring it down to the Botanic Gardens and allow everyone to really enjoy that experience of his living collection.

[00:03:55]

Robert Field: I knew that if we'd sold the farm or if I didn't wake up one morning, very quickly the collection, would just collapse, and be lost.

[00:04:04]

Andrew Laidlaw: It was a really lovely thing, that we all arrived at this point that maybe it could come to the Botanic Gardens.

[00:04:10]

Bret Pritchard: That's how it began. Just the right timing.

[00:04:13]

Andrew Laidlaw: Robert said, "I think I'm going to accept your offer of, you know, giving, giving you the collection" and [the] three of us shared a moment on the phone and it was kind of really beautiful.

[00:04:26]

Robert Field: Getting them back to the basic area where they, so many of them started from the Botanic Gardens here, it's a great feeling. So it was a positive move and I'm been glad ever since.

[00:04:38]

Andrew Laidlaw: And in some ways it became Robert's legacy.

[00:04:56]

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Sung in Spanish	Mira la jardinera	[look at the gardener]
	Ella va plantando	[she is planting]
	El jardin que ama	[the garden she loves]

[00:05:04]

Pip Wright: I, I can't stop thinking about what must this collection have looked like before it was transported? How on earth would you transport it?

My name is Pip Wright and I am a[n] enthusiast of cacti, succulents, and let's face it, all plants.

I don't know how you would move any of these guys.

[00:05:25]

Vox pop (Northcote High student, Edie): I feel like you would have to like, put a mould around it or like, spray it with ... a foam or something.

Vox pop (Visitor): I'd drop them from a helicopter. [laughter] I'd get someone else to do it!

[00:05:34]

Bret Pritchard: It was definitely a steep learning curve. Um, the first trip, you'd probably say it wasn't a success, but, you had to start somewhere and learn from your mistakes and we learnt from quite a lot of mistakes on that trip. We had to physically carry the plants out. And then we quickly realized that, oh, we've already filled up the bottom layer, but now their spikey.

[00:05:57]

Vox pop (Visitor): What a task, what did they use?

Vox pop (Northcote High student, Ned): Um ... tongs,

Vox pop (Northcote High student, Maya): Or a hazmat suit

Vox pop (Northcote High student, Edie): Lady-like gloves. You know, like the gloves that you wear with gowns? Yeah just one of those made out of rubber instead.

[00:06:11]

Bret Pritchard: We had to lay them down, there was no way to keep them in an upright position, we can't really put a[nother] cacti on top of another cacti cause their gonna just, mark them.

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So then, we had to forage around. And we managed to just put together some hessian and whatever, whatever we could do to pack at least another layer on top.

[00:06:33]

Robert Field: We think every move out twice before we're doing a positive move in the garden, because I'll be the one to suffer. They have no respect for even their owner.

[00:06:41]

Bret Pritchard: We got better and better as we went along, we ended up getting some of the big trays from the ah, nursery, [and] putting them in the back so you could have a multi-layered sort of situation.

[00:06:51]

Vox pop (Northcote High student, Maya): You'd have to pack them tightly because you don't want a cactus flinging at you when you're driving.

[00:06:55]

Bret Pritchard: Some of the really tall heavy ones, that was a different sort of scene where we would get a really large ladder; put that up against the, um, the cacti; tie them on with ah, what do you call it, ratchet straps? Then you'd cut it at the base and then just slowly walked back with the ladder until you got it down and then carry it through.

[00:07:15]

Pip Wright: I love with some of the taller specimens, um, the frames around them? I don't know the scientific name, but I've been calling them 'hugs'. I see these large tall specimens, and I see these beautiful iron frames around them and it just looks like they're giving each one its own personal hug. For me, that just conjures up the care? The care taken to ensure that every single specimen is going to thrive.

[00:07:40]

Bret Pritchard: I've probably never sweat so much in my life. And swore and been in so much pain but ... it was really fun.

[00:07:47]

Robert Field: It given me a great thrill all the way along, because I can see that, there's a, a great love of the plants, by, uh, the people in the workforce here,

[00:07:58]

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Andrew Laidlaw: The size and beauty and their capacity to be moved, as tough as it was, actually was the beginning note of this garden.

[00:08:10]

Sung in Spanish	El viento está soplando	[the wind is whistling]
	Las plantas van bailando	[the plants are dancing]
	Con esa jardinera	[with the gardener]

[00:08:23]

Robert Field: I think people by nature, somewhere along the line, we all tend to be a collector of something.

[00:08:29]

Vox pop (Northcote High teacher, Lauren): I used to collect um, like currency.

Vox pop (Visitor): Oh, I've started collecting shells again.

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Maya): Different coins from different places.

Vox pop (Visitor): I've collected stamps.

Vox pop (Visitor): My house, my collects plants. He has 2000 ... plus.

[00:08:41]

Pip Wright: I don't know if any collector ever sets out to collect.

[00:08:45]

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Edie): I've wanted to have the stamina to collect something, but I've never actually collected anything.

[00:08:50]

Pip Wright: I think all collections happen accidentally.

[00:08:53]

Vox pop (Northcote High School teacher, Lauren): [I] stopped for 15 years, grew up and now I'm getting back to it. [I] love shells!

[00:08:57]

Robert Field: Even though I've gone through different stages, you know, at one time it was bottle tops, or of course in latter years [it] become coins and stamps and things like that.

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[00:09:05]

Bret Pritchard: Records and music, that's, that's my main thing.

[00:09:08]

Robert Field: Shocking the stuff [that] we hoard.

[00:09:10]

Bret Pritchard: And when it comes to music, I'm actually borderline, um obsessive, yeah.

[00:09:15]

Pip Wright: Ah, I would not charge admission for any of my collections, it's very much an indoor in a backyard collection, but it comes from family memories of when my grandfather used to take me and my brother to, to Garden World to the cactus garden. And instead of getting lollies our big treat was we're allowed to choose three cacti or succulent each so we'd walk out these tiny little containers.

[00:09:37]

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Ned): Years ago my uncle got me this little one that looked like a brain and it sat in this skull container that was about this big, and it doesn't require water or anything. It just sits in the sun and grows.

[00:09:48]

Pip Wright: If you're around people who love anything that grows really, you pick stuff up.

[00:09:53]

Vox pop (Visitor) I got a whole box of succulents from a friend, all different ones.

[00:09:58]

Robert Field: When you'd meet someone who'd knew a lot about them, it was a totally different language, you would talk.

[00:10:02]

Pip Wright: So I went to a friend's house and his grandma had the most spectacular, um, propeller succulents or airplane succulents, and she gave me a cutting and she's long since deceased now, but those, those succulents have been there for decades and now to have a little piece of that in my garden... in terms of collection, I think it's, it's emotional.

[00:10:23]

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Vox pop (Visitor): A life-long hobby, where you can't possibly know it all, you never will know it all, the experts don't know at all.

[00:10:30]

Robert Field: You can get wrapped up in a hobby!

[00:10:39]

Andrew Laidlaw: This garden has a history of plant collection it's a botanic garden[s]. In 1870 William Guilfoyle arrives and he designs it as one garden. But in that garden, he designates areas that are very dry and hot. And these were areas that he planted lots of succulent material.

[00:10:58]

Pip Wright: It's interesting because you can look at an arid landscape and see the lack of something or you can look at an arid landscape and see the abundance of something.

[00:11:07]

Bret Pritchard: The fact that they can put up with extreme heat, drought and cold, to be honest, you know a lot of them grow up in the, in the mountains and a lot of them are covered in these white fuzzy fur, which protects them from both heat and cold.

[00:11:21]

Pip Wright: Honestly, perfection is a cactus or a succulent. Seeing its perfect form, seeing the patterns and the interplay.

[00:11:30]

Bret Pritchard: And a lot of people might not realize just how incredible cacti flowers are, but they're some of the best in the world I think. I just love the forms and the shapes and the weirdness of them.

[00:11:40]

Vox pop (Visitor): I just like them all, they just all, I just like the way nature's done weird, weird things that I would never think of doing.

[00:11:46]

Pip Wright: if you look at um, in mathematics, the Fibonacci sequence. So many succulents in particular, uh, have certain spiral patterns that conform perfectly to the Fibonacci

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sequence, and you just think, well, obviously the plants are not mathematicians, there's this inherent structure and beauty.

[00:12:04]

Robert Field: The internals of a cactus are fascinating. Physically it's just so strong and yet so light. Stronger than steel weight for weight.

[00:12:13]

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Ned): Biomimicry is taking traits from a plant or animal or natural feature and translating it over to a made product.

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Maya): I looked at the golden barrel cactus. I felt like there were lots of different aspects of the cactus that you could, um, produce in your own design.

[00:12:32]

Pip Wright: And I think sometimes we just completely forget that nature has come up with everything we could imaginably conceive of, before we'd ever imaginably conceived of it.

[00:12:43]

Robert Field: There's nothing new under the sun [laughs].

[00:12:45]

Pip Wright: How do you order nature? How do you display nature in a way that makes sense from a scientific and taxonomic way, but then also make it beautiful.

[00:13:02]

Bret Pritchard: Gardening for me, is almost like working with a three dimensional canvas and, um, you can really play with cacti, the different shapes and sizes and the furry ones and the smooth ones. There's just such a variation in them.

[00:13:17]

Pip Wright: Just seeing how open it is looking at the vista up through Guilfoyle's Volcano, I think that the, the conversation between the Arid Garden and Guilfoyle's Volcano is spectacular.

[00:13:28]

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Andrew Laidlaw: You know, I was lucky enough to be, to do the Volcano in 2010. And I always would look out over the old Arid Garden and knew one day we would connect those stories together.

[00:13:39]

Pip Wright: You start to understand the layers and the thoughtfulness and the design, creating a space that looks quite organic.

[00:13:46]

Andrew Laidlaw: And that's when I started with the cell structures and I looked at these succulent cell structures, which kind of spoke to me as either the path or the rocky edge and so I was able to then bring a landscape interpretation to that. Um, and it's just a starting point, but it has connection to the story.

[00:14:01]

Pip Wright: Seeing these highly beautifully organic specimens in a really structured environment ...

[00:14:07]

Andrew Laidlaw: And that was all driven by our access to that plant material.

[00:14:11]

Robert Field: It's the diversity of, of all the different forms that have intrigued me.

[00:14:16]

Bret Pritchard: It was pretty amazing to see such variation in the plants that we're able to grow here. And when you're visiting them in their natural environments, you'll find a few particular species that grow well and you'll see that kind of species over and over again. Whereas you look around here ...

[00:14:30]

Pip Wright: It's the United Nations of cacti and succulents [laughs]

[00:14:36]

Sung in Spanish	El viento está soplando	[the wind is whistling]
	Las plantas van bailando	[the plants are dancing]
	Con esa jardinera	[with the gardener]

[00:14:53]

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Bret Pritchard: There was no big fanfare, [the, the] we had this big temporary fence around it. And one Monday we just took the fence down and people started walking through.

[00:15:03]

Vox pop (Visitor): It's very exciting, I think there are a lot of textures, a lot of different colours, and the longer you stay in here the more you uncover something really wacky.

Vox pop (Visitor): It's amazing, everywhere you look.

Vox pop (Visitor): [I was] I was immediately struck by the variety of the plants that are here, and the way that things are laid out so that you could actually go on a journey of exploration by just wandering through.

Vox pop (Visitor): It looked like a lot of fun to play, actually, a lot of little areas to explore.

[00:15:32]

Vox pop (Northcote High School, Edie): It's like you're three, [you] just wanna touch all of them 'cos it's a new experience.

Vox pop (Visitor): I have a ball to experience this garden, it's just amazing.

Vox pop (Visitor): They're just beautiful!

Vox pop (Visitor): It's so nice to go to a garden with another person.

Vox pop (Visitor): It's amazing. Absolutely.

Vox pop (Visitor): Because she'll point out something [that I don't], that I don't see. And I think that's pretty cool to share that.

Vox pop (Visitor): They just fascinate me, that's all.

[Music interlude]

[00:15:56]

Andrew Laidlaw: I'm actually thrilled by, um, going into that space. I have a very comfortable feeling in there because I feel it's working. It makes sense because of our climate and where our climate is heading.

[00:16:09]

Bret Pritchard: People just come up to me and are blown away by it. Um, but to be honest, the best thing was seeing Robert and his wife Donette, um, seeing them come in and the fact that they just loved it.

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[00:16:26]

Robert Field: To see how people are reacting to seeing the collection, they recognise and they love that thought that I've given the plants for future generations to be able to enjoy. It sort of brings tears to my eyes I suppose. It's a great feeling, I don't know why it sort of makes me sort of well up a bit.

[00:16:46]

Pip Wright: It's impossible not to come away richer, and better and feeling that that was a wholly good experience. And I feel a little bit more connected to nature, but I also feel a little bit more connected to how humans interpret and understand nature.

[00: 17:13]

Sung in Spanish	Mamita la jardinera	[Mother gardener]
	Viene regando flores	[is watering the flowers]
	Mamita la jardinera	[Mother gardener]
	Viene regando flores	[is watering the flowers]
	Ay Diós, jardinero soy yo	[OMG!*, I am a gardener]
	Ay Diós, jardinero soy yo	[OMG!, I am a gardener]
	Ay Diós, jardinero soy yo	[OMG!, I am a gardener]

* My Goodness! / Oh My God / by jingo!

[00:17:23]

Bret Pritchard: If I was a kid and I saw this, I'd be in amazement! You can imagine being a kid and seeing these weird looking plants. Um, I would think it was just like I did when I first saw it, another world kind of.

[00:18:13]

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Maya): They're all different textures, like some of them are furry and spiky, and some of them have got like, tiny spikes and some of them have got great big long spikes that look terrifying.

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Edie): [These are older than me, these are like, 10 times my age.]

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Ned): They have really nice white flowers, and [they] have really long, thick spikes.

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Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Edie): When they tried eating it or getting to the moisture it had, the sap would burn them and if got in their eyes it could blind them. I'd say it was very surreal

Vox pop (Northcote High School student, Maya): The horizon with the sun just going over the mountain, and then you have the lone cactus just in the corner. It's majestic.

[Musical interlude]

[00:18:56]

Robert Field: It's a great pleasure, in just standing like a, uh, like a blow fly on the wall just observing what's going on around me. Uh, seeing how people are enjoying photographing, stepping down and looking at the plants, really taking it in. It's a great feeling to know the collection is going to be maintained and keep going.

[children's voices exploring garden in background]

[00:19:45]

CREDITS: You've been listening to The Arid Garden, Episode 1 of Sonica Botanica. Sincere thanks to Robert Field, Andrew Laidlaw, Brett Pritchard, Pip Wright, Northcote High School Students Edie Simpson, Ned Partridge, Maya Healy and their teacher Lauren Jacobs, and vocal soloist, Leo Salvo. Special thanks to Donnette Field, Northcote High School and the visitors to the Arid Garden who shared their impressions and observations.

Sonica Botanica is created and produced by Patrick Cronin and Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria. All interviews were recorded onsite at the Arid Garden. Music, audio editing and sound design by Patrick Cronin. Thank you for listening.

[End of transcript]